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Why We Should Support Democratic Revolution in the Islamic World

Robert J. Bunker

Recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen have caught senior U.S. policymakers off guard like a herd of deer frozen in the headlights of a big rig barreling down the highway. The State Department contingency plan now appears to be to pretend to play the middle in the media—between the democratic yearnings of the mob and the longing looks of friendly despots—while privately clinging to principals of realpolitik. Calls for democratic freedoms and reforms to be implemented in Egypt, the true center of gravity for the Arab region, are being made but they are no more than hallow exaltations.

The U.S. has the bad habit of backing corrupt despots and the ruling families and elites that support them. Who can forget the Ngo family in South Vietnam, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran, and General Manuel Noreiga in Panama? As long as this general or that ruler is willing to back our foreign policies in the region of concern, we turn a blind eye to inequality, authoritarianism, torture, rigged voting, and other abuses. If they should dare to cross us, however, then all bets are off and they may just find themselves dead or rotting in a jail cell for the rest of their lives. International relations is much like a knife fight—outside help is always welcome, little thought is given to the baggage that may come with offers of support, and you had always better watch your back. Ultimately, these friendly despots and their cronies are ‘not our friends’ and definitely not ‘legitimately elected leaders’. We also tend to get morally tainted by our relations with these types; not that our silver-tongued diplomats would give this a second thought. Realpolitik requires sacrifices and morality quickly becomes relative and squishy to the policy being implemented or crisis now at hand.

A golden opportunity is now unfolding in the Islamic World. A series of autocratic states are teetering like dominos due to popular uprisings that seek to embrace democratic principles of governance. This is not the ‘democracy at the tip of the sword’ ushered into Iraq by means of foreign invasion or the misguided attempts at nation-building in Afghanistan but, rather, indigenous revolt of the many who are sick and tired of living in police states ruled by the few. Accepting the status quo means having no future for themselves and their children. Democracy and freedom have a powerful allure and can create their own martyrs in the streets and on the barricades. Even the U.S. governmental accountants should be pleased—how often do you get to spread democracy to other nations so cheaply?

When you really consider it, the Islamic World really does not have the best role models as states go. It tends to have autocratic police states like Egypt at one extreme and theocratic police states

like Iran at the other. The democratic and secularized (to varying degrees) states, such as Turkey and Indonesia, are the exception and definitely not the norm. Palpable fear exists from the U.S. State Department and other elements of our government that popular revolt in Egypt may not ultimately result in democracy but rather religious totalitarianism. No one should forget that the Muslim Brotherhood is attempting to inject its policies and the vision of what Egypt should look like into this widening revolt. From the perspective of the older diplomats, it is far better to have a Shah in power than throwing the dice and possibly ending up with an Ayatollah. Little wonder then that the democratic revolution in Egypt is presently getting little more than lip service and sound bytes from our leaders.

As this editorial is being penned, Tunisia has passed the tipping point while Egypt now teeters and Yemen smolders. The forces of totalitarianism are now striking back with counter-terrorism troops deployed to beat down the demonstrators, a nobel prize winner has been placed under house arrest, the undertaking of sham governmental reform is underway, and, in an extreme move, the Egyptian government has now unplugged the entire nation from the internet to counter the use of all forms of social media and the world wide web by the democratic insurgents. How this struggle will end in Egypt is anyone's guess. Rather than embracing the the past by turning its back on the democratic demonstrators marching in the streets and continuing to support Hosni Mubarak and the corrupt elites who shield him, the U.S. should take a very different path. It should engage in democratic realpolitik at a much higher level and should utilize far more of its considerable power behind the scenes and through proxies to ensure democratic revolution in the Islamic World. The intent of such subterfuge, of course, is to hedge our bets and not to be caught in the process of targeting the regimes of those despots who pretend to be our friends, yet never were, and who would never tolerate the form of government and freedom in their own land under which our nation was formed and still holds sacred. Hosni Mubarak was never our friend, yet we should still call him so, at least until the Egyptian people, hopefully with our secret aid and support, usher him and his corrupt autocratic regime out the door. That is democratic realpolitik of the future—we covertly aid democratic revolutions in autocratic Islamic states when a target of opportunity arises, do it on the cheap, and don't get burned if the attempt should fail—anything less is now unacceptable.

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