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# The United States after unipolarity: American democracy promotion and the 'Arab Spring'

## Report

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# ➤ American Democracy Promotion and the 'Arab Spring'

Oz Hassan

## INTRODUCTION

**In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks the United States increasingly sought to promote democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). However, although this strategy came to be largely associated with the invasion of Iraq, and the belief that a benign domino effect would spread throughout the region, there was far more nuance to the policy President Obama inherited. President George W. Bush's democracy promotion legacy is one of institutional construction within the US foreign policy bureaucracy, creating the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA), and the Broader Middle East and North Africa initiative (BMENA). Furthermore, it was President Bush who codified his democracy promotion strategy in *National Security Presidential Directive 58*, entitled *Institutionalising the Freedom Agenda*, and who signed the ADVANCE Democracy Act of 2007 into law.<sup>1</sup> By the time that President Bush left office hundreds of millions of dollars had been spent on promoting democracy in the MENA, and the US had declared with the force of law that it would prioritise, along with other foreign policy goals, the promotion of democracy and human rights around the world.**

At a superficial level, the so-called 'Arab Spring' appears to vindicate President Bush's Freedom Agenda and suggests that President Obama should continue to follow the path laid out by his predecessor. However, upon closer inspection such an assertion is highly problematic. The 2011 revolutions, rather than vindicating the Freedom Agenda, are in fact the ultimate expression of its failure. The Freedom Agenda was designed to *gradually* reform the region over a period of generations working with 'friends' and 'partners'. The objective was to incrementally transform the region in a stable manner compatible with the pursuit of American interests. These include the free flow of oil and gas, the movement of military and commercial traffic through the Suez Canal, infrastructure construction projects, the security of regional allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, and cooperation on military, counter-terrorism, and counter-proliferation issues. The Arab Spring introduces uncertainty in the pursuit of these interests. It is not clear whether democratic consolidation will take place in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and even if it does, it is not clear that democratisation is compatible with America's other interests in the region. The early days of the 'spring' have foregrounded these issues, with Egyptian protesters storming the Israeli embassy in Cairo, Egypt allowing two Iranian warships to transit through the Suez Canal, a Shi'ite uprising in Bahrain generating fears that Iran could gain influence affecting neighbouring Saudi Arabia, alarm that Islamists could come to power throughout the region, and increased volatility in the price of oil. Such regional instability and uncertainty is hardly the hallmark of a successful policy. Yet, as the Obama administration attempts to navigate a policy through the changing Middle East mosaic, it is becoming highly evident that this policy has a remarkable continuity with its predecessors.

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<sup>1</sup> This acronym stands for *Advance Democratic Values, Address Nondemocratic Countries, and Enhance Democracy Act*.

## DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND THE BUSH LEGACY:

The formal declaration of the Freedom Agenda by the Bush administration came on 6 November 2003. Addressing the twentieth anniversary of the National Endowment of Democracy (NED), the president announced that:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe – because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.

The 'big idea' being espoused was not simply that freedom and democracy should be promoted in the Middle East, but rather that it was in America's national interest to undertake such a task. Tyrannical regimes, it was argued, were providing the conditions for terrorist organisations seeking weapons of mass destruction to recruit and flourish, which posed an existential threat to the US. Thus the administration was arguing that the internal character of states was of concern for American security, and that America's wider regional interests had aligned with American national values.

As the Freedom Agenda became institutionalised, the policy came to embody both *radical* and *conservative* strands. The radical dimension of this policy insisted on political democracy, through military regime change if necessary, and was targeted against those that opposed American power and influence in the region. Beyond Iraq, this was expressed in the *Iran Democracy Program* and the *Syria Democracy Program*, which sought to utilise MEPI funds and personnel to bolster internal dissidents and exile groups wanting US-supported regime change. The conservative dimension of the policy, however, attempted to broaden the US approach to Middle East reform by focusing on factors

outlined in the *2002 UN Arab Human Development Report*. This had highlighted a 'freedom deficit' in the MENA and argued that a strategy needed to be in place to deliver 'freedom from fear' and 'freedom from want', in conjunction with educational improvements and women's empowerment to the people in the region. As such, MEPI was constructed to address these issues within its democracy promotion strategy, and was strategically placed within the Department of State's Bureau for Near East Affairs as the central hub for interagency discussions under the Freedom Agenda.

What made this programme particularly conservative, however, was its emphasis on safeguarding the socio-economic privileges and power of the established autocratic allies in the region. The grand liberal strategy that the Bush administration espoused came with some strong caveats. Senior Bush administration officials were quick to quell notions that a rift with long-term allies such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt had emerged after the launch of the MEPI, arguing that democracy promotion was to be done in 'partnership' and designed to offer 'positive reinforcement for emerging reform trends'. In part, this conservative dimension reflected how MEPI personnel were uncertain about how exactly to 'promote democracy'. Further still, it reflected MEPI personnel's unfamiliarity with regional and internal politics. With most of the personnel being drawn from the 'children' of the NED, and having largely dealt with democracy promotion in Russia and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union, they relied on the Bureau for Near East Affairs for information. This information was however not often forthcoming, as there was considerable mid-level opposition from the Department of State, and also the Department of Defense, who highlighted the conflict of interests emerging between democracy promotion and other long term perceived national interests.

Balancing other interests with the strategic objective of promoting democracy presented the administration with a serious problem to navigate, and consequently key figures in the administration turned to the one-size fits all approach of the 'Washington Consensus'. Democracy promotion came to mean calling for elections, opening markets following the prescriptions of neoliberal economics, and pushing

for free trade integration within larger interdependent markets; all in the hope of generating gradual and stable transformation into 'market democracies'. Between 2004 and 2006, the Bush administration was particularly vocal about pushing for elections. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice publicly confronted close allies Egypt and Saudi Arabia to hold fair elections, release political prisoners, and allow free expression and rights for women. This situation radically changed throughout 2006, when the Bush administration failed to foresee the electoral victory of Hamas in the Palestinian parliamentary elections. This was compounded by a pattern of Islamic groups, hostile to Washington and Israel, winning significant gains through elections, which included the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Shi'ites backed by militias in Iraq. Under such conditions, the Bush administration speedily overturned what was already a thin dedication to pressuring autocratic regimes to hold elections. Where Condoleezza Rice had once pronounced the need to move towards democracy, by 2007 there was near silence on pressuring for domestic reform and the void was filled with appreciative comments about Egypt's support in the region and Saudi Arabia's 'moderate' behaviour.

Consequently, the Freedom Agenda rapidly dropped its emphasis on elections, but retained a focus on open markets and free trade. Economic initiatives became the central pillar of the agenda, and what remained was an incoherent set of policies held together by a neoliberal core; economic reform was the order of the day and not directly challenging or necessitating serious political reform from partners and allies in the region. This was certainly a key feature of the MEPI funding programme under its 'economic pillar', but equally, under MEFTA. For US Trade Representative Robert B. Zoellick, MEFTA was perceived to be a key element of America's 'competitive liberalisation strategy', which would make an assault on protectionism and lead to countries eager for greater access to US markets vying for Washington's attention and approval. By the time President Bush left office, it was clear that the Freedom Agenda was pursuing an 'economics-first' strategy in which the administration was envisaging a gradual modernisation process giving rise to

democratic peace. Alternatively, MENA regimes were hoping that a modernisation process would allow them to construct Beijing modelled liberal autocracies. Rather than challenging the political power of friendly regimes, the Bush administration was working with them, in 'partnership', to carefully and slowly liberalise their autocracies and create the conditions for potential future reform. The Freedom Agenda's conservative strand was relying on gradual economic sequencing to produce democratisation. That is to say, the Freedom Agenda recognised the growing potential for legitimisation crises in the region, but sought to steadily prevent their coming to fruition for the sake of regional stability, security, and an eventual long-term transition to democracy. Thus, rather than the "Arab Spring" vindicating the Freedom Agenda, events have demonstrated how the agenda was unable to stave off legitimisation crises. What's more, Bush's strategy further exposed the region, and in particular Tunisia and Egypt, to the forces of the 2008 global financial crisis, exacerbating legitimisation crises rather than preventing them. The conservative strand of the Freedom Agenda was designed to 'slowly' transform the region in 'partnership' with autocratic allies to precisely avoid the scenes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and to avoid the level of strategic uncertainty that the post-Tahrir era represents.

## **OBAMA'S SPRING TIME POLICY**

Upon coming into office it was clear that the Obama administration wanted to distance themselves from the Freedom Agenda and its association with the Iraq war. As such, President Obama was eager to suggest that the radical side of the Freedom Agenda would be replaced with a more pragmatic 'open handed' approach. Moreover, many critics argued that the Obama administration seemed to abandon democracy promotion altogether because of its 'toxic' association with the President Bush. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was willing to assert the need for a 'comprehensive plan' for 'diplomacy, development and defense' in her Senate confirmation hearing, but 'advancing democracy' was only represented as a 'hope'. Nonetheless, on closer inspection, the Obama administration had expanded the conservative

side of the Freedom Agenda through increased MEPI funding and appointing Tamara Coffman Wittes as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs. Indeed, appointments such as Anne-Marie Slaughter as Director of Policy Planning, Susan Rice as UN Ambassador, and Samantha Power and Michael McFaul to the National Security Council suggest that democracy promotion was far from being removed from the Obama agenda. Where there was an intellectual shift with their predecessors, it was most prominently demonstrated in the administration's attempts to stress *dignity* and *development* as a means of countering Islamist organisations in the region, but also for enabling a stable modernisation process to take place. Thus, the language of 'dignity and development' replaced talk of 'democracy promotion', and the Obama administration initially attempted to replace 'market driven modernisation' with 'development driven modernisation' to underpin a gradualist strategy. However, in the aftermath of the 2011 revolutions the Obama administration would increasingly come to see the Bush administration's approach as the preferred policy agenda.

On May 19, 2011, President Obama took centre stage in the Department of State's Benjamin Franklin room, to announce an apparently 'bold new approach to foreign policy' and US relations with the MENA. He argued that the 2011 revolutions in the MENA were caused by a denial of dignity, a lack of political and economic self-determination throughout the region, the role of new media, and the region's young demographic. He argued that Tunisia and Egypt were entering years of transition and that this process of transition will have ups and downs potentially challenging America's core interests, but that the administration would continue to 'keep our commitments to friends and partners'. Further echoing George W. Bush, President Obama argued that the status quo was not sustainable and that the US has a stake in the stability of nations and the self-determination of individuals in the region. As a result he reinforced the premises of Bush's liberal grand strategy for the Middle East, arguing that the US should 'not pursue the world as it is, but use this [the Arab Spring] as a chance to pursue the world as it should be'. In this context, the president began attempting to lay out his liberal grand strategy for the region under the headings of political reform,

human rights, and economic reform. He argued that since the Arab Spring, the US has shown that it opposes the use of force to oppress the people of the region, supports universal rights, and political and economic reform. The supposed new strategy would be to help support reform across the region starting with the Tunisian and Egyptian transitions to democracy, and noted the serious problems in Libya, Syria, and Iran, whilst also condemning partners such as Yemen and Bahrain for their use of force (and by implication Saudi Arabia). The president, at considerable length, detailed how the US would support change in the region through economic development for nations that are transitioning to democracy, asserting that:

America's support for democracy will therefore be built on financial stability, promoting reform, and integrating competitive markets each other and the global economy... starting with Tunisia and Egypt.

The president continued to argue that the problem with the region was its 'closed economies' and that the region needed 'trade' and 'not just aid'; 'investment' and 'not just assistance'; and that 'protectionism must give way to openness'. Nonetheless, it was announced that:

- The World Bank and IMF were to construct a plan to present to the G8 Summit about what would be needed to stabilise and modernise the economies of Tunisia and Egypt.
- Egypt would be relieved of \$1 billion in debt and allocated \$1 billion in loans for infrastructure.
- The US would help to recover assets that had been stolen by members of the former regimes in Tunisia and Egypt.
- Enterprise Funds would be set up to invest in Tunisia and Egypt – modelled on the funds that helped transitions in Eastern Europe.
- OPEC would create a \$2 billion facility to help support private investment.
- The US would work with allies to refocus the European Bank for reconstruction and development so it provides the same support for democratic transitions and economic modernisation in the MENA as it has in Europe.

- Establish a comprehensive trade and investment initiative with the MENA; working with the EU to facilitate more trade from within the region, and build on existing agreements to provide integration with the US and EU markets.
- Help these transition countries 'tear down the walls' that stand in the way of progress and help them fulfil their 'international obligations'.

This is a very different understanding of the problems presented by the Arab Spring and their solution to those being constructed by the protesters of Tahrir Square. It was not a definition of freedom underpinned by economics that they were willing to die for, but human rights, social justice, and in some quarters adherence to the Islamic faith. For the US to create enough space for policy innovation, the Obama administration needs to understand how the concept of freedom is being constructed in Egypt, in large part, around the concept of 'citizenship'; instead of prescribing a definition of freedom in discord to the aspirations of Egyptians. The Obama administration should not attempt to substitute an economic understanding of freedom born out of the philosophies of Hayek and Friedman, but should instead seek to understand indigenous calls for 'rights', 'liberation', 'solidarity'. From the multitude of signs to the pamphlets being handed out in and around Tahrir Square, it is clear that a multitude of Egyptian definitions of freedom are emerging. All want to move away from the tyranny of the Mubarak regime, and some are more politically liberal and secular than others. Yet, the Obama administration would be better 'supporting' these positive trends, rather than 'promoting' an approach derived from the distant shores of Washington D.C. Indeed, it would appear that rather than the 'Arab Spring' and the ramifications of the global financial crisis giving cause for America's democracy bureaucracy to take pause for thought, they instinctively have drawn on their training in Eastern Europe to propose the 'cookie cutter' approach of the Washington Consensus. The 'new' policy is held together by a desire to hold onto the gradualist paradigm where possible, but where unavailable, ensure that the opportunity of a crisis is not missed and free trade and free market approach is adopted as the core of America's democracy promotion strategy.

With such poor policy innovation, it would appear that the Obama administration is replicating the same mistakes, failures, and missed opportunities of the Bush administration.

## CONCLUSION

Given the profound nature of the Arab Spring, which is radically transforming the region, it is problematic that there has not been a correspondingly profound shift in America's democracy promotion policy. This has not been because the US is pursuing sound policy programmes, but rather that there is a lack of policy innovation within the Obama administration. The US has lost the grand strategy 'gradualism' provided, and has little by way of an alternative strategy in response. US policy in the Middle East is in need of a new policy paradigm to replace that which has failed, but this is not easy because democratic openings in the region exacerbate a conflict of interest at the heart of US engagement with the region. Gradualism was characterised by a lack of clear policy delineation, between policies that sought to push regimes towards democratisation, and those that sought greater cooperation with them on economic and security issues. If democracy is perceived as a gradual but inevitable economically produced outcome, then why would mid-level officials feel the need to push for it over more immediate interests and security concerns? Pushing for a policy that is going to make cooperation with the 'partner' country you are posted to more difficult is somewhat anathema to a comfortable diplomatic positing. This has only been exacerbated by the rise of new global powers willing to build closer cooperative partnerships in order to meet their energy needs, irrespective of whether MENA regimes violate human rights on a systematic basis.

Nonetheless, rather than defining 'freedom' for the region in neoliberal economic terms, the US needs to understand how to better engage and support those protesting on the streets. It needs to listen to voices in Tahrir square that when questioned about American policies oppose the oppression caused by US support for Mubarak, but continue to hold America as an exemplar. Among the signs visible from walking around Tahrir during its protestor occupation,

there were constant calls for 'freedom'; and when you talk to the organisers of movements instrumental to the overthrow of Mubarak, they tell you how they studied the history of non-violent movements and cite amongst others Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X. When you hear Egyptians citing King's 'I have a dream' speech yards from Tahrir Square's Kentucky Fried Chicken, which was turned into a makeshift clinic for the injured and sick, it is clear the influence the US has in the region and the power of the US to continue to inspire the fight for greater freedom from tyranny. This is not the language of global capital, but of a definition of freedom that is based around indigenous understandings of citizenship, rights and social justice, and articulated in a narrative that draws upon the American story in an effort to write a new Egyptian story. America needs to understand Egyptian's vision of the future and support it; not seek to define and impose a way of life upon others. ■

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