

How Racial Injustice Undermines Democracy Promotion

Written by Khaleb Pierre and Juheon Lee

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KHALEB PIERRE AND JUHEON LEE, OCT 9 2024

The Black Lives Matter movement was founded in 2013, following the death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. However, it was after the death of George Floyd in 2020 that the movement garnered global attention. The videos of Minneapolis police officers and subsequent protests spread via social media, which sparked international solidarity and conversations on human rights violations within the United States. Among supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement worldwide were leaders and government officials of countries that had frequently been accused of human rights violations by the U.S. For example, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying wrote "I can't breathe" on X, which was a response to U.S. State Department Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus' criticism of China's crackdown on Hong Kong. Whether Chinese officials genuinely cared about universal human rights is unknown; however, it is clear that racial injustice and disparities in the U.S. were easily used against one of America's long-time foreign policy goals: promoting democracy worldwide.

Support for the Black Lives Matter movement has declined since its peak in 2020. However, racial disparity in law enforcement continues and the lives of Black Americans have not been improved significantly. Videos of the mistreatment of Black Americans are still spreading via social media. This is not just a U.S. domestic problem because such racial disparities will continue to feed into propaganda against America's promotion of democracy worldwide.

In 2019, Larry Diamond wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that democracy in the world has been declining since the early 2000s and that the U.S. has failed to promote democracy at home and abroad. His diagnosis of the world's democracy was in stark contrast to what he had expected about two decades ago. This view chimed with other research that has pointed out two types of failure in American democracy promotion. The first is the failure of U.S. foreign policies in protecting democracy and human rights worldwide, despite its manifested foreign policy principle of promoting democracy. The second is failure at home to be the world's strongest democracy and gain enough support from the public to spread American democracy worldwide.

The advance of democracy worldwide went hand in hand with the growth of U.S. power, and the U.S., more than any other country, has contributed to the promotion of democracy around the world. However, critics argue that the U.S. government has recently been unable to protect democracy and human rights worldwide and has given up its leadership position of caring about statecraft and economic interests. The U.S. government is still allied with an autocratic government in the Middle East and has ceded space to authoritarian powers in Asia and Africa. Moreover, its democracy promotion programs have not been focused on confronting dictators. Such policies have often been labeled as hypocrisy as the government has failed to live up to its principles—committing itself to supporting democratic self-government and human rights—which has been publicly proclaimed since at least President Wilson, who led America to World War I to "make the world safe for democracy."

Perhaps the most significant event that underscored American hypocrisy was the Iraq War and antiterrorism policies since the September 11 attacks. According to Diamond, the world's democracy has been losing its leading proponent, the U.S., since the early 2000. Despite the U.S. government's rhetoric of advancing freedom worldwide, many suspect that democracy promotion was a cover-up for military intervention during the Iraq War. The Gallup survey on the U.S.'s position in the world supports this suspicion. The world's satisfaction with the U.S.'s position started to drop in the early 2000s, which coincided with the global decline of democracy. The recent failure of U.S.

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wars in Afghanistan has also made people worldwide skeptical about the U.S.'s foreign policy principle of promoting democracy.

For a long time, the U.S. public largely supported the desire to extend American values to other countries and advance the U.S.'s political and economic interests abroad. Scholars have pointed out that the U.S.'s reputation as a champion of democratic values has been tainted by domestic problems, and many Americans have seen a decline in democracy in their country and have, thus, lost their confidence in promoting American democracy worldwide. Such problems include racism, money politics, political gridlock, and economic inequality, which has made many Americans think that the government should focus more on solving the country's domestic problems rather than spending resources on other countries. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2001, 29 percent of Americans agreed that democracy promotion should be a top foreign policy priority, but this number has fallen to 18 percent in 2024. A survey experiment conducted in 2013 found that Americans' support for democracy promotion is generally not strong and becomes stronger only when it is not perceived as too costly or at a high risk of failure. More recently, the riot at the U.S. Capitol, as well as the death of George Floyd, were shocking to the world, let alone to many Americans—raising the question of whether American democracy remains a beacon for how to make democracy work.

A closely related but not widely discussed issue about the failure of U.S. democracy promotion is how American domestic problems are readily exploited by authoritarian leaders for their own propaganda. One of the most recent examples is El Salvador's authoritarian leader, Nayib Bukele. After the assassination attempt of former President Trump in July 2024, he posted one word on X: "Democracy?" Authoritarian leaders have used American domestic problems to highlight American hypocrisy and invalidate criticism of human rights violations.

The most common target for authoritarian leaders has been racial disparity in the U.S. This is not surprising to many Americans because, during the Cold War, leaders of communist countries called out racial injustices in the U.S. For example, the Soviet Union frequently brought up how Americans lynched African Americans in response to human rights violations presented by U.S. officials. When Cuban leader Fidel Castro visited Harlem, New York in 1960, he tried to draw the world's attention to racial disparity in the U.S. As prevalent as these racial injustices were when leaders discussed them, they continue to be a talking point by government officials in countries that are in conflict with the U.S. During the Korean War, North Korea distributed propaganda leaflets that asked Black soldiers to lay down their arms and fight for their rights. The problem is that racial injustices in America feed into leaders' propaganda against the U.S.-led promotion of democracy and human rights and such messages are spreading faster and wider via social media. More importantly, to global audiences, such messages of condemning American racism are not completely wrong.

When the Unite the Right rally took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, following the controversy over the Charleston church shooting and the removal of Confederate monuments, the North Korean government issued a white paper that said that the racial violence that took place in Charlottesville is a "typical example of the acme of the current administration's policy of racism." North Korea added that genuine freedom did not exist in America and that "it can never camouflage its true identity as the gross violator of human rights." More recently, in 2023, when Private Travis King, who is Black American, crossed into North Korea, the North Korean media reported that "inhumane maltreatment and racial discrimination" in the U.S. military and U.S. society were the reasons for King's defection. North Korea also reminded us of the 21 captured American soldiers during the Korean War who refused repatriation to the U.S. Clarence Adams, one of the soldiers stated, "It was racism at home rather than Chinese propaganda that inspired my decision," and this was used by Chinese officials for propaganda pamphlets.

The Black Lives Matter movement, which spread worldwide, also provided authoritarian leaders with a good chance to highlight American problems. About a week after the death of George Floyd, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei wrote on X, "The people's slogan of #ICantBreathe, which can be heard in the massive protests throughout the U.S., is the heartfelt words of all nations against which the U.S. has committed many atrocities." Other Iranian officials also took the opportunity to spread their narrative on the brutality of U.S. actions. In 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin disagreed with U.S. criticism of how his government treated a pro-democracy group in his country and said how the mistreatment of African Americans has caused disorder, destruction, and violations of U.S.

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laws. By comparing the Russian pro-democracy group with Black Lives Matter protesters, he added that his government would not let such things happen. Chinese Official Zhao Lijian stated that “Racism against ethnic minorities in the U.S. is a chronic disease of American society.” People’s Daily also stated, “While criticizing China for ending chaos, some U.S. politicians label themselves as beacons of democracy and human rights. Such double standards reveal their hypocrisy driven by ulterior political motives.” China experts say that such remarks are powerful enough to make more Chinese people support the Chinese government’s efforts to counter America.

A debate about racism and human rights happened during the UN General Assembly meeting on March 1, 2021. When Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, discussed racism in Burma and China, China’s deputy UN Ambassador, Dai Bing, asked who gave the U.S. “the license to get on a high horse and tell other countries what to do.” Bing said, “If the U.S. truly cared about human rights, they should address the deep-seated problems of racial discrimination, social injustice, and police brutality on their own soil.” In October 2022, the UN Rights Council rejected a motion led by the U.S. to hold a debate about human rights abuses in China against Uyghurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang. This rejection was a huge victory for China, and it was not a coincidence. Racial injustice in the U.S. has undermined its moral authority on human rights. In August 2022, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination concluded that the U.S. had failed to implement international antiracism legal standards. Last year, Human Rights Watch also pointed out the world’s highest incarceration rate and overrepresentation of Black and Brown people in U.S. jails.

As much as authoritarian countries’ condemnations of American racial injustice and disparity sound valid to their audiences, such condemnations are not from sincere motives. Therefore, the U.S. needs to regain its moral authority by addressing its own problems. Until the U.S. sufficiently deals with its own race-related problems, it will continue to undermine democracy promotion worldwide.

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