

Barack Obama's Democracy Promotion after One Year

Written by Nicolas Bouchet

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NICOLAS BOUCHET, FEB 25 2010

Introduction

Does President Barack Obama believe that the United States has a special responsibility and a self-interested need to promote democracy around the world? Or is he insensitive to the democracy tradition in American foreign policy? The early months of his presidency in particular saw rising concerns in the democracy promotion 'community' that the new administration would have little time for this issue. The seminal moment was the Senate confirmation hearing of Hillary Rodham Clinton as Secretary of State on 13 January 2009 when she said that the three pillars of US foreign policy should be the 'three Ds' of defence, diplomacy and development.[1] This left many wondering whether the fourth 'D' of democracy was being jettisoned, along with much of the foreign policy legacy of George W. Bush. The first year of the Obama administration has been an intriguing one for observers of American democracy promotion. They have had to engage in a something akin to kremlinology to divine the president's true beliefs. Statements, appointments, funding decisions and budget requests have been parsed for clues. Foreign policy initiatives have been analysed in terms of whether they show continuity with or a break from previous policies regarding democratization abroad.

This article looks back on Obama's first year in office through the prism of the democracy promotion tradition in US foreign policy. The first section looks at the concerns that the president does not belong in this tradition and whether his appointments and early funding requests in particular justify such concerns. The second section reviews major pronouncements by Obama and key figures in his administration so far in terms of democracy issues in foreign policy. It finds a new democracy promotion rhetoric taking shape to replace that of the Bush years, focusing on the nexus between development, democracy and human rights. The third section reviews how the Obama administration reacted to three key democratization crises abroad (in Iran, Honduras and Afghanistan) during its first year in order to see what this reveals about its approach to democracy promotion. The article concludes that, like his predecessors, President Obama cannot easily break from the democracy tradition.[2] The record so far indicates that what the Obama administration is doing, like previous administrations, is reinterpreting this tradition in light of its own strategic priorities and diplomatic style, and turning the democracy promotion prism towards a better alignment with how it views America's role in the world.

Turning away from the democracy tradition?

In his inaugural address Barack Obama did not once use the word 'democracy' – the first president not to do so since Ronald Reagan in 1981. Similarly, the new president mentioned 'freedom' three times compared to Bush who used it 24 times in January 2005.[3] Since then critics from various points of the American ideological spectrum have expressed their concern that President Obama follows a misguided realism that rejects democracy promotion in order to engage in key bilateral relationships with countries like Russia, China or Iran that lack democratic credentials. For example, Joshua Muravchik describes Obama's strategy as 'peace through moral equivalence', which explains the quiet over democracy and human rights.[4]

To a great extent such concerns are reactions to the change in tone that followed the handover of power in Washington. From the start the new administration performed a rhetorical U-turn from the Bush approach with the

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clear aim of overturning the legacy of the previous eight years – in foreign policy in general and in democracy matters especially. In effect Obama embarked on a worldwide campaign of detoxification of America's image, and a large part of this was the abandonment of all talk of the 'freedom agenda' that Bush had trumpeted as part of the War on Terrorism and targeting Middle Eastern countries in particular. Toning down drastically the democracy rhetoric was also in line with warnings about the negative impact of a mismatch between inflated American claims and limited or contradictory actions. Thus Michael McFaul pointed out, now a senior member of the National Security Council (NSC), that grandiose rhetoric and schemes had achieved little and that the United States should 'talk less and do more' in democracy promotion.[5] There was therefore very little talk in Washington (at least in public) about democratization as a goal of foreign policy in first half of 2009.

However, Barack Obama's record in the Senate and positions during the 2008 campaign suggest that he is not congenitally opposed to the idea of democracy promotion.[6] His senior advisors and key appointments contain many figures that can be described as liberal internationalists of various stripes, including veterans of the Clinton administration, who are no strangers to democracy promotion as a goal and instrument of US foreign policy. Apart from Secretary of State Clinton and Vice-President Joe Biden, most notable are Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice, Director of Policy Planning for the State Department Anne-Marie Slaughter, NSC Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs Samantha Power and Ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder. It should be noted also that the co-head of Obama's foreign policy team during the election was Tony Lake, Bill Clinton's first National Security Advisor and the author of the strategy of 'democratic enlargement'. Some even go as far as detecting a distinctively hawkish hue to the administration.[7] Later mid-level appointments at the State Department and different agencies of the government suggest the same broad orientation.[8]

Barack Obama's first budget also provided some early policy pointers about its attitude towards democracy promotion. Despite the economic situation in the United States, the president has begun making good on his campaign promise to double US foreign aid.[9] According to an analysis by Freedom House, the FY2010 requests included \$2.81 billion under the heading 'Governing Justly and Democratically', representing a \$234 million increase (+9% over FY2009 estimated levels) across all regions.[10] But Freedom House also noted a proposed cut in funding for the State g president asked in March 2009 for a \$143 million increase for USAID's operational expenses up to \$808 million in FY2009, the request also included a large cut in the Millennium Challenge Corporation, one of Bush's flagship initiatives, to the tune of \$669 million or 40%.[11]

As a result of the overwhelming focus of Bush's freedom agenda on the Middle East, observers have looked to the region to see whether Barack Obama is truly committed to democracy promotion. According to an analysis by the Washington-based Project on Middle East Democracy, the FY2010 request for the Broader Middle East and North Africa region contained \$1.5 billion under the heading 'Governing Justly and Democratically' (up from \$1.1 billion actual spending in FY09).[12] This represent 14% of total American foreign assistance to the BMENA, the highest share ever. Most 'Governing Justly and Democratically' spending requested (86%) is destined to Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, but there are increases for other countries in the region – from \$191 million actual spending in FY09 to \$219m requested for FY10. The 2010 budget request also included \$86 million (+72%) for the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), one of Bush's flagship programmes. According to the Project on Middle East Democracy the 2010 budget sent mixed signals on US democracy promotion. On one hand, the overall requests were up (including a large request for USAID in Lebanon, Morocco and Yemen) but requests were down by more than 40% for Egypt and Jordan, as well as down by almost 30% for civil society programmes in the Arab world in favour of rule-of-law programmes run by and with governments. Critics have taken these cuts, especially in the case of Egypt, which is seen as pivotal in the Arab world, as evidence of a realist downgrading of democracy in relation to other US interests. Against this, it should be noted that a USAID audit found that more than \$180 million of democracy assistance to Egypt in the previous four years had produced few measurable results, mostly due to Egyptian government efforts to stymie them.[13] Furthermore the cut in funding for civil society programmes in Egypt were due to restrictions imposed by the Egyptian government, which has forced US agencies to work with government-sponsored partners instead.[14]

The administration's strategy towards and spending requests for Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan also indicate that it does not turn a blind eye to democratization issues when dealing with pressing national security matters. The new

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strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan Obama announced last March called for an increased US civilian effort that in support of capacity-building in democracy and governance. [18] The president has also been a strong supporter of the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act (also known as the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act) that he eventually signed into law in October, and which aims to triple nonmilitary aid to Pakistan to about \$1.5 billion a year for the next five years. Among other goals, the act authorizes the US government to support efforts to consolidate democracy, including strengthening parliament, helping reestablish an independent and transparent judicial system, and working to extend the rule of law in all areas.[19] When the president sent Congress a budget supplemental request for FY2009 last April in order to fund diplomatic, intelligence and military operations in relation to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, he also stressed the need to also support 'responsive and accountable governments'. The supplemental therefore included request for additional democracy and governance activities under the Economic Support Fund and USAID: \$295 million for Afghanistan and \$262 million for Iraq, as well as \$30 million for the West Bank & Gaza and \$20 million for Georgia.[20]

Developing a new democracy promotion rhetoric

The actions outlined above tend to counter the criticism that Barack Obama rejects the democracy tradition in US foreign policy. Furthermore, there is also growing evidence that his administration is developing a new democracy promotion rhetoric after having put as much distance as possible between itself and the Bush era. The president's speech in Cairo on 4 June contained his first major pronouncement on democracy. He declared:

I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.[21]

He also echoed some of the criticism of US democracy promotion by saying that elections are insufficient for a country to achieve the status of a democracy unless they are accompanied by a panoply of rights and institutions. Striving for a broader conception of democracy, Obama also gave prominence to religious freedom and women's rights in his speech. The new rhetoric about the place of democratization in US foreign policy has emerged further since Cairo. In a number of addresses, the president and others have developed with some consistency a rationale for democracy promotion that is both grounded in the American tradition and a clear break with the Bush era. Addressing the parliament of Ghana on 11 July 2009, Obama stressed the importance of democratic governments that fight corruption and govern effectively for solving Africa's problems.[22] In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly on 23 September, he stated that 'democracy and human rights are essential to achieving each of the goals that I've discussed today' – namely nuclear non-proliferation, peace and security, environmental preservation and just global economy.[23] And in his Nobel speech in Oslo on 11 December, the president argued that any just peace depended on human rights and that the United States would stand up for these as universal values.[24]

Obama's speeches have downplayed the grand democracy and human rights rhetoric that US presidents have tended to espouse. Yet they have remained at the level of broad aspirations. It has been left to others to flesh out this vision of democracy within a universal human rights perspective. Secretary of State Clinton has used several speaking opportunities to outline how the administration views the linkage between development, democracy and human rights, and the need to have a broader societal focus rather than addressing only governments when engaging abroad. During her Africa trip in August, she criticized the rulers of Nigeria and Kenya for corruption and echoed Obama's emphasis on how development for Africa required functioning democracies.[25] Thus it now seems clear that Clinton's 'three Ds' do not reject democratization but instead interpret it through the lens of development. Based on her words, however, democratization as a goal is not subsumed now within development. Rather the administration leans to a position that sees little to separate the two – it is showing both a developmental view of democracy and a democratized view of development. Thus Clinton is able to say in the same speech that development in itself 'is a strategic, economic and moral imperative – as central to advancing American interests and solving global problems as diplomacy and defence', and also that 'development also furthers a key goal of our

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diplomatic efforts: to advance democracy and human rights worldwide'.[26]

The development-democracy nexus was in fact flagged early by Vice-President Joe Biden in a section of his speech in Munich in February 2009 that received little attention at the time: 'To meet the challenges of this new century, defense and diplomacy are necessary. But ... they are not sufficient. We also need to wield development and democracy, two of the most powerful weapons in our collective arsenals.'[27] Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice, an influential adviser to the president has fleshed out one key dimension of this developing approach by stressing that the United States seeks to support the growth of states more capable of delivering solutions to domestic problems and also to common challenges abroad. The rationale is that if the United States is to enlist others in the quest to solve the international problems it fears most, it will also need to help them combat domestic political, social and economic problems. In her words, 'A fundamental imperative of U.S. national security in the 21st century is thus clear: we need to maximize the number of states with both the capacity and the will to tackle a new generation of transnational security challenges.'[28]

The test of events

American presidents that keep within the democracy tradition must also institutionalize their approach through strategies, bureaucratic structures, policies and implementation. One year is not enough to judge the Obama administration on this front, not least because it has been confronted with a demanding domestic economic agenda and two controversial wars. The political mood in Congress and the administration's vetting policy have also meant that many appointments requiring congressional approval were not made for several months, thereby delaying any potential efforts to develop new policies.[29] There is another dimension, however, that does not wait for presidents to fine-tune a democracy-oriented foreign policy. When Barack Obama gave his Cairo speech in June, his administration had not been tested by events around the world that would force it to take a position on a democracy crisis and respond with a policy. Only days later Iran's presidential election sparked a political crisis there that is still ongoing. Before the month was out, the democratically elected president of Honduras was deposed. And a few weeks later Afghanistan was embroiled in a highly controversial presidential election. These three countries and political situations highlight the different challenges for a democracy-oriented US foreign policy. As Thomas Carothers has pointed out, while the Obama administration was thinking through its approach to democracy promotion and trying to fill posts, events forced it to reveal its hand.[30]

The United States reacted with deep caution to the claims of electoral fraud in Iran's presidential poll in June and to the repression of protests since. This revealed an unwillingness to undermine efforts at diplomatic engagement with the Tehran regime, especially over its nuclear activities, by siding with the opposition despite its strong claim to have been cheated out of a victory.[31] As events since the election showed the persistence and degree of opposition to the Iranian regime, Obama and other American officials made mildly critical comments calling for an end to the brutal harassment of opponents. Meanwhile, critics have seized on the announcement that the State Department was not renewing its funding of some US-based NGOs monitoring human rights in Iran.[32] More recently, the United States has raised its rhetoric, with Clinton saying Iran was becoming a 'military dictatorship'.[33] This suggests a return to a familiar element of the democracy tradition in US foreign policy – i.e. using the issue of democratization as instrument of pressure in a strategic bilateral relationship – in view of the apparent lack of success so far in engaging the Tehran regime.

All things considered, the American stance reflects the fundamental fact that Washington effectively has no leverage on events in Iran and little obvious way of helping democratization actors there. While a louder condemnation of Iran's rulers would have been more consistent with a purely democracy-oriented foreign policy, it is hard to see what it would have achieved other than aligning the United States with one side in Iranian politics, probably more to the detriment of the latter than to its benefit.[34] Obama and his advisers have shown themselves to be pragmatists who realized they had weak hand to play, and in the nuclear issue a stake higher than just who rules in Iran, however much they may wish for a change of regime. Their handling of the Iranian case supports the realist argument that democracy promotion should not get in the way of an interests-based relationship between states, however antagonistic, and that the United States has at best little power to shape the political evolution of other countries.

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While Iran is a large and strategically important country almost entirely impervious to the workings of US democracy promotion, Honduras is the exact opposite. Small, poor and of little strategic importance, it lies in the United States' Central American 'backyard'. The initial US reaction to the ousting and deportation of President Manuel Zelaya by the army on orders of the Honduran Congress on 28 June was to denounce it as illegal.[35] The United States aligned itself with regional condemnation and efforts to broker a deal for reinstating the president. The administration suspended military aid as well as some funds under Honduras' compact with the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and it imposed travel restrictions on interim government officials.[36] The United States also threatened not to recognize the result of the November 2009 presidential election if Zelaya was not reinstated first. The position of the United States later shifted, however, as it undertook a separate diplomatic process that ultimately failed to reinstate Zelaya ahead of the election.[37] Washington still saw sufficient reason for lifting sanctions and recognized the result of the 29 November poll. While the election itself appears to have been relatively peaceful and free,[38] the shifting position of the United States left it at odds with most Latin American countries, which have not recognized the result.

The Honduran case shows that, even in a country where it wields considerable influence and where there is no real other strategic interest at stake, it is still difficult for the United States to adopt a clear and consistent democratization policy. Given the history of American meddling in the region, the Obama administration was sensible in adopting a cautious approach and moderate rhetoric. Yet a combination of pressures led it into a policy that confused its pro-democracy stance. Given the complex local politics, it is unlikely that a perfect solution could have been found for the November poll to be held under ideal conditions, but by dropping its initial policy and reverting to a more unilateral American type, the administration missed an opportunity from a purely democratization perspective. In the words of Kevin Casas-Zamora, American diplomacy 'shifted from indecision with the June 28 coup to indifference, to confusion, and finally to acquiescence'.[39] The Obama administration should be commended for avoiding a repetition of past US errors in Central America and not siding blindly with those who had removed a leftist and arguably anti-US leader from office. But it also ended up undermining its position and reputation on democratization in the region, apparently out of nothing more than impatience with the efforts of the Organization of American States to solve the crisis and out of frustration with the deposed president whose reinstatement it had committed itself to supporting.

In theory, Afghanistan is a mix of the extremes represented by Iran and Honduras. It is of great strategic importance to the United States and political importance to the Obama White House. Propping up President Hamid Karzai's government, Washington should have significant leverage over the country's politics. Obama has dropped Bush's democracy rhetoric for a narrower security agenda but he recognizes that there has to be a political solution in Afghanistan inasmuch as the US presence has to deliver legitimate and functioning governance institutions if it is to wind down its military involvement there.[40] Yet, as the scale of fraud in the presidential election of 20 August became apparent, neither Obama nor any senior administration figure issued a strong public condemnation.[41] The United States was reluctant to denounce Karzai while reportedly trying to pressure him behind the scene.[42] There was a clear unwillingness to acknowledge that the election represented a real setback for Afghanistan's democratization. The administration may have hoped that it could force a compromise between Karzai and his opponent, possibly even in a national unity government, or else have some say in his ministerial appointments.[43] Yet it failed to leverage Karzai's reliance on US power into real influence on the political process in Afghanistan, as was apparent when he formed a cabinet that still contained figures suspected of serious corruption and warlordism.[44]

Its relative public silence over the electoral fiasco in Afghanistan does not reflect well on the claims of the Obama administration to seek a democratic regime there. Neither does its inability to influence the course of Afghan politics when faced with Karzai's obstinacy. The Afghan case shows the limits and difficulties of leveraging American power into democratization influence. Here again the Obama administration took a realist route in dealing with the failure of the electoral process since it is committed on national security grounds to remaining in the country for the next years. Yet, unlike with the Iranian regime, Washington has tools of influence it could bring to bear on the Karzai regime. To the extent that it did not do so publicly and that any backstage efforts have borne very little fruit so far, the Obama administration is guilty of a mix of neglect and inefficiency in terms of democracy promotion in Afghanistan. Unable to threaten the removal or withholding of US troops and having decided it could not abandon him, Washington could not pressure Karzai into any democratic compromise. Despite its rhetoric of democracy, good governance and human

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rights, in Afghanistan Barack Obama has not been able to escape what Hilton Root describes as the 'alliance curse' – the age-old problem of being uncomfortably tied to autocratic clients for strategic reasons.[45]

Conclusion

It is wrong to say that Barack Obama rejects the democracy tradition in American foreign policy. His record, appointments and first-year budget requests show that democratization is not being jettisoned as a US goal. To varying extents, the president and his foreign policy principals are liberal internationalists. However there has been a stark rhetorical break from the Bush era, which accounts for much of the concerns in the democracy promotion community. If these concerns may have been more justified in the early months of 2009, since the Cairo speech there has been a clear and consistent effort by the administration to craft a new rhetorical framework that reflects its take on the democracy tradition. In speeches and pronouncements Obama and others have put forward a reasonably coherent argument that presents the promotion of development, democracy and human rights in one indivisible package. In this, the administration is playing its own variation on the well-known 'all good things go together' theme that has been at the heart of American democracy promotion historically.

This is not a novelty; most recent presidents have reinterpreted and adapted the democracy tradition to fit their strategic priorities and political inclinations. Here as in other areas, Obama has shown himself to be a liberal by belief but a moderate, pragmatic leader by temperament. Hence he is also a realist when it comes to the prospects for the United States to influence democratization abroad, and to the never-ending competition between this goal and other vital US interests. After one year it is still too early to see how a fully shaped democracy promotion strategy fits in Obama's foreign policy, but the three cases mentioned here provide an early indication of how it might. Obama's democracy promotion so far has been a low-key – even stealthy – affair conducted more by diplomacy than by exhortation and criticism. It is a realist approach that realizes democratization, however desirable, clashes with other strategic goals. What has offended critics seems to be the administration's unexpected frankness in saying so (as also in the case of relations with Russia and China). Those in the democracy promotion community who have criticized the United States in the past for rhetorical excesses and a naïve belief in its own power to affect change abroad without any trade-offs should be pleased that an American administration is now trying to correct this behaviour. Yet, however welcome, a realist and developmental, moderate and long-view approach will not in itself eliminate the tensions that are always inherent in democracy promotion. In the next three years, the Obama administration will still have to deal with messy short-term and immediate democratization situations where it will have to balance consistency and expediency, and improvise to a certain extent. Thus the Obama experience so far shows not just continuity with the American democracy tradition but also continuity with the tough challenges of incorporating it in foreign policy on a day-to-day basis.

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Nicolas Bouchet is a PhD candidate at the Institute for the Study of the Americas, School of Advanced Study, University of London

He is co-convenor with Dr Timothy J. Lynch of “‘Our National Character, Our National Purpose’: American presidents, democracy promotion and global order”, a one day conference held at the Institute for the Study of the Americas on 28 April 2010. For the conference programme and registration details, see: http://americas.sas.ac.uk/events/programmes/Democracy_Promotion.html

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About the author:

Nicolas Bouchet is TAPIR Research Fellow, German Marshall Fund of the United States.