

United Colors of Democracy

That revolution looks great on you

***Ted Galen Carpenter***

Americans have a long, depressing history of idealizing foreign political movements and revolutions. Even some followers of Thomas Jefferson fawned over the French Revolution, mistaking it for an ideological cousin of America's own campaign for liberty. It was not until the onset of the Terror and its overtime use of the guillotine that admirers in the United States belatedly recoiled in horror.

Now we have two new examples of Americans projecting democratic values onto murky foreign upheavals. One occurred in Honduras, where the military ousted left-wing President Manuel Zelaya and sent him into exile. American opinion leaders immediately took sides. The Obama administration stressed that Zelaya was democratically elected and demanded that he be restored to office. Conservatives asserted that Zelaya's opponents were the real democrats. This was not an old-fashioned Latin American coup, they insisted, noting that the army chiefs acted only after both the Honduran supreme court and national legislature urged them to do so. Zelaya, American critics charged, was a Hugo Chavez clone who unconstitutionally sought to extend his term and create a dictatorship.

Both American factions deserve awards for naïveté. Given the long history of military coups in Central America, it strains credulity to believe that the Honduran military acted merely at the behest of civilian judges and legislators. And one should not assume that those civilian factions were spurred by pure motives rather than engaging in a mundane power struggle.

The Obama administration's attitude was even more obtuse. The president's position was reminiscent of Bill Clinton's Haitian policy in the mid-1990s, when the U.S. threatened to invade if the military junta didn't restore elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Never mind that Aristide was both erratic and autocratic. Never mind that his followers routinely tortured and murdered political opponents. Never mind that his corrupt economic policies made the situation in a desperately poor country even worse. The fact that he won an election seemed to be all that mattered to his hero worshipers in the United States. Obama administration officials appear to regard the Honduran situation in much the same way, conveniently ignoring Zelaya's abuses.

While there was a split along ideological fault lines in the United States regarding the Honduran turmoil, there was pervasive enthusiasm about the anti-government demonstrations in Iran. Here were pro-Western democratic reformers struggling against religious zealots who blatantly stole a presidential election.

As is often the case, the narrative contained a kernel of truth. Iran's regime is certainly one of the more stifling on the planet, and there seemed little doubt that the hardline clerics maneuvered to keep Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in power. (The announcement of final results barely four hours after the polls closed, when 40 million paper ballots were cast, was compelling evidence of fraud, as was Ahmadinejad's startling ability to carry long-standing reformist strongholds.)

Yet the many Americans cheering the demonstrators who took to the streets to challenge the results painfully oversimplified the situation. To start, the "reformist" presidential candidate, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, was not exactly a secular democrat. During the 1980s, he served as Ayatollah Khomeini's prime minister and ordered the imprisonment or execution of thousands of regime critics. In the recent political struggle, Mousavi and many of his followers appeared moderate only when compared to Ahmadinejad and other Islamic fire-breathers.

Republicans who pressed President Obama to endorse the demonstrations predictably equated the Iranian opposition with Eastern Europeans who resisted the Soviet occupation of their countries during the Cold War. But Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, and most other prominent dissidents were genuine democrats, albeit often with rather left-leaning economic views. The political makeup of the Iranian opposition was decidedly cloudier. Key players who backed Mousavi included former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, as well as approximately 40 percent of the Guardian Council, the assembly of senior mullahs. Virtually none of those individuals could be mistaken for committed democrats. On balance, the tumult was at least as much a split within the clerical hierarchy as a true democratic rebellion, a point that largely eluded Americans who urged the Obama administration to get involved.

This was hardly the first time that the U.S. had viewed allegedly democratic movements in other countries through the prism of American values. In April 2005, President George W. Bush described Ukraine's Orange Revolution, led by Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, as "a powerful example of democracy for people around the world." "The ideals of the new Ukraine are the ideals shared by Western civilization," he asserted. That praise was relatively restrained compared to his assessment of the achievement in Georgia.

In a May 2005 speech in Tbilisi, Bush hailed Georgia's democrats for creating the template for Crayola revolutions: "Before there was a Purple Revolution in Iraq or an Orange Revolution in Ukraine or a Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, there was a Rose Revolution in Georgia." He continued, "Your courage is inspiring democratic reformers and sending a message that echoes around the world: Freedom will be the future of every nation and every people on Earth." Georgia, he added, was "building a democratic society where the rights of minorities are respected; where a free press flourishes; where a vigorous opposition is welcomed and where unity is achieved through peace."

Four years later, the bloom is definitely off the Rose Revolution. There is mounting evidence implicating President Mikheil Saakashvili in political corruption and human-rights abuses. In September 2007, Irakli Okruashvili, an opposition leader and former defense minister, reported that Saakashvili had instructed him to have a Georgian economic oligarch assassinated. More generally, he accused the government of "dishonesty, injustice and repression." In response, Georgian authorities arrested Okruashvili.

Even if lurid tales of assassination plots remain unsubstantiated, other abuses do not. A 2008 report by the International Crisis Group concluded that Saakashvili's government "has become increasingly authoritarian." A 2007 Human Rights Watch report accused the regime of "taking serious steps" to undermine human rights and the rule of law. Saakashvili's administration has brutally suppressed opposition street demonstrations, jailed dozens of political critics, and just before the crucial January 2008 election, shut down opposition media outlets, including the country's main television station. International observers refused to certify the May 2009 parliamentary elections as either free or fair. Even Freedom House, an early admirer of the Rose Revolution, concedes in its new *Freedom of the World 2009* report that Georgia ranks as only "partly free" and that the trend arrow is pointing down.

The situation in Ukraine is only marginally better. The Orange coalition has degenerated into a comic opera rivalry between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko, with the latter periodically making common cause with Viktor Yanukovich, an old-style communist pol whom U.S. officials scorned as a Russian stooge. Corruption charges continue to dog Yushchenko's administration: his young son tools around the streets of Kiev in a six-figure sports car. The president's approval rating is now in the single digits, and Tymoshenko's is not much better. Once again, an American-lauded "democratic" revolution has become an embarrassment.

Such developments mock the breathless enthusiasm that the Bush administration and most conservatives expressed for the Rose and Orange Revolutions. It would be a mistake, though, to conclude that misplaced support for foreign "democratic" political movements is the exclusive fantasy of conservative Republicans. It is a bipartisan folly.

Before and during the Kosovo War in 1999, liberal politicians and pundits in the United States lionized the Kosovo Liberation Army. Sen. Joe Lieberman gushed, “The United States of America and the Kosovo Liberation Army stand for the same values and principles. Fighting for the KLA is fighting for human rights and American values.” In reality, the KLA was a motley collection of unreconstructed communists, Albanian nationalists, organized crime thugs, and Islamic extremists. Lieberman’s paean verged on the obscene. Unfortunately, his fondness for the KLA was only slightly greater than that exhibited by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, United Nations ambassador Richard Holbrooke, and the other Clinton administration officials directing Washington’s policies in the Balkans.

Perhaps the most notorious example of our policymakers linking America’s fortunes to sleazy foreign movements was our support for Ahmad Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress in the years leading up to the invasion of Iraq. Despite longstanding indications that Chalabi and company were corrupt political operators with disturbing ties to Iran, neoconservative cheerleaders treated Chalabi as the George Washington of Iraq. The INC exploited that gullibility to feed the U.S. government and the American news media bogus information about Saddam Hussein’s alleged ties to al-Qaeda and Iraq’s nonexistent weapons of mass destruction.

Chalabi’s lame excuse that he and his associates were “heroes in error” did not allay suspicions that the deception had been deliberate. His democratic credentials and his political support inside Iraq proved to be illusory. When elections were held for Iraq’s parliament, his party garnered barely 0.5 percent of the vote. So much for the political giant that Washington believed would lead Iraq into a new democratic era.

One would hope that policymakers might learn from these bruising experiences. But the Iran episode suggests that they continually fail to appreciate cultural differences or complexities. Consider the portrayal of Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution as a democratic surge. Lebanon’s political arena is a labyrinth of opaque and shifting alliances involving pro- and anti-Syrian forces; Sunni, Shi’ite, and Druze factions; and at least two major—often feuding—Christian groups. Sorting all that out taxes even the most knowledgeable experts. Yet the talking heads on Fox News saw fit to pontificate about Lebanon’s political struggle.

The attempt to portray events in Iran as a replay of the ouster of Soviet puppet regimes in Eastern Europe is erroneous on many levels. While Eastern Europeans may have welcomed an American embrace, few Iranians would. Washington was seen as the enemy of Eastern Europe’s imperial oppressor, the Soviet Union. Yet Middle Eastern populations—rightly or not—regard the United States as their region’s imperial oppressor.

Furthermore, whether or not foreign movements are genuinely democratic should have little bearing on U.S. foreign policy. Even if Mikheil Saakashvili were the second coming of Thomas Jefferson, it would have been unwise for the United States to go nose to nose with a nuclear-armed Russia when war broke out last year between that country and Georgia. In the same fashion, a victory by anti-Ahmadinejad forces would not necessarily solve the issue of Tehran’s nuclear ambitions. That program began under the Shah, not the clerical regime, and there is no evidence that a new, more moderate government would give it up.

Why are Americans so susceptible to being gulled? Cynics might argue that our leaders do not actually believe that most supposedly democratic upheavals are genuine, but portray them as such if the insurgent faction is amenable to Washington’s economic or strategic goals. They stress alleged democratic credentials to soothe an American public that would balk at embracing questionable movements or regimes on the basis of realpolitik. After all, throughout the Cold War, Washington routinely portrayed friendly autocrats, no matter how brutal, as members of the “free world.” At one point, Vice President George H.W. Bush hailed Ferdinand Marcos for his “commitment to democratic principles,” even as the Philippines groaned under martial law imposed a decade earlier.

Yet one should not underestimate the capacity of even jaded politicians to engage in self-delusion. How else does one explain George W. Bush’s embarrassing assertion that he had looked into the eyes of Vladimir Putin

and seen the soul of a good man?

Ordinary citizens can be even more susceptible to wishful thinking. Americans are understandably proud of the values symbolized by our revolution and enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. For more than two centuries, we have expected other societies to emulate that model. At times this has occurred. On too many other occasions, Americans have mentally shoehorned unsavory political movements into the category of liberal democracy. To win support from the United States, foreign factions have become adept at telling us what we want to hear. But for our psychological, as well as our political and strategic well-being, we might pause before automatically embracing the next gathering of dissidents in some far-flung capital as newborn democrats begging for our aid. ■

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