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Revolution in Middle East: time for US to step back

By Doug Bandow

Chaos in Cairo's streets wrecked Hosni Mubarak's presidency in Egypt. The collapse of any dictatorship should please Americans. Several other Middle Eastern leaders may soon follow him into history's dustbin.



However, the process in Egypt and elsewhere has only started. The most difficult question for any revolution is how any it ends. Tragically, revolts against repressive regimes often lead to even greater tyranny.

Washington was little more than an interested bystander in Egypt. Jon Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies said, "Neither the protestors nor the government are relying on signals from the United States."

But the U.S. has no good options in such cases. Long identified with dictators, Washington now must separate itself from repressive regimes. Attempting to promote particular individuals or factions is likely to be counterproductive, however. Having chosen wrong for so long, U.S. officials are unlikely to choose right this time.

More important, the U.S. government has no credibility with democracy demonstrators. In Lebanon Druze leader Walid Jumblatt recently joined with Hezbollah to oust the government backed by Washington. He observed: "Why should we follow American advice in the name of democracy? They have nothing to teach us when they have supported dictators."

At the same time, Washington fears losing key allies. Potential Republican presidential candidate Michael Huckabee even criticized the Obama administration for doing too little to support Mubarak.

Although much ink has been spilled on the geopolitical importance of such authoritarian allies, they matter far less today than during the Cold War. Oil producers will want to sell their only valuable export in any case.

Even potentially radical groups like the Muslim Brotherhood would be unlikely to support attacks on the U.S., given the certainty of retaliation. Some Americans worry about Israel, but it is a regional superpower able to defend itself.

Thus, while adapting to fast-moving events in the Middle East, the Obama administration should not attempt to micro-manage politics in foreign nations. Americans should support democracy and a liberal society in the best sense of the word. But U.S. officials should not work to bolster or oust even authoritarian governments.

Washington has a long history of supporting foreign thugs to advance perceived geopolitical interests. Sometimes horrible choices must be made, such as allying with Joseph Stalin against Adolf Hitler. In most cases, however, the interests being advanced are not worth the moral price of underwriting brutal repression.

For instance, former Reagan official Daniel Oliver declared: "however great the interest of the Egyptian people in their own freedom and human rights, it is eclipsed, even if they don't realize it, by the national security interest of the United States." It is hard to imagine what cause short of national survival could warrant Americans seeking to keep the Egyptian people in chains for the benefit of America.

And such a policy would ensure enduring hostility, since the Egyptian people are unlikely to view their "freedom and human rights" as mere incidentals to be tossed aside at Washington's behest. Even when the U.S. government is successful in temporarily buying authoritarian friends, it inevitably makes enemies, many of whom have long memories. When such regimes ultimately collapse, as in Iran, the results are not pretty.

Attempting to forcibly reform, or even overthrow, repressive regimes seems more satisfying morally. But the outcome is not necessarily more positive. It is far easier to blow up a society than put it back together. In Iraq at least 200,000 civilian likely have died after America's ill-considered invasion.

In 2006 the U.S. government pressed for elections in the Palestinian territories, which propelled Hamas to power in the Gaza Strip. Washington then refused to recognize the result, adding hypocrisy to stupidity.

Abrupt changes of regime are more likely to result in violence and repression. While Washington should not oppose democratic movements even if they seem less likely to promote its geopolitical interests, the U.S. government should not actively spur revolution. American policymakers simply don't know how to get there or even where "there" is.

The world in which Washington can simply everyone else what to do is illusory. Even in pushing for the liberal ideal American officials risk doing more harm than good.

Better for the U.S. government to advocate respect for human rights and democracy and then shut up. The less said by Washington about what the U.S. government desires, the better.

People in Egypt and across the Middle East deserve liberation. Americans and other people of goodwill should promote the principles of liberty and national cultures in which those principles are most likely to ultimately flourish. But the U.S. government should recognize its limited ability to influence events, and even more important, to do so positively.

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