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Washington Still Can't Pick Foreign Clients

By: Ted Galen Carpenter
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As Afghanistan's corrupt president, Hamid Karzai, slinks away into retirement and Iraq's hapless prime minster, Nouri al-Maliki, desperately tries to keep his job despite the onset of civil war, Washington's faulty judgment about foreign clients is again on display. It is hardly a new development. U.S. political leaders are about as successful at selecting such clients as they are at picking entrepreneurial companies to back financially. Time and again we encounter the foreign policy equivalent of the Solyndra fiasco.

Indeed, the debacle involving Maliki is not even the first time that Washington has woefully misconstrued the political situation in Iraq. During the prelude to the U.S.-led invasion and occupation, Bush administration officials assumed that Ahmed Chalabi was the undisputed leader of the Shiite majority and the George Washington of his country. U.S. policymakers seemed to believe that Chalabi would become Iraq's new leader virtually by acclamation. How badly American would-be nation builders misread the situation became evident in 2005 in Iraq's first parliamentary election when Chalabi's party won barely 0.5 percent of the vote and failed to win a single seat in parliament.

U.S. leaders have not displayed much better judgment regarding political developments in other regions. Washington was ecstatic about Ukraine's supposedly pro-Western Orange Revolution in 2004 and the emergence of Viktor Yushchenko as the country's new president. In this case, at least the chosen U.S. client started out with considerable domestic backing. Once again, though, U.S. officials managed to pick a leader whose political support evaporated with stunning speed. In the 2007 midterm parliamentary election, his party won merely 14 percent of the vote. When Yushchenko himself ran for re-election in 2010, following a record of corruption rivaling that of the pro-Russian rivals he had denounced and displaced, he garnered a paltry 5.5 percent.

Washington repeatedly miscalculates the extent of domestic support that its preferred clients actually enjoy. Worse, U.S. enthusiasm often seems to peak when its proxies are on the brink of disaster. During a 1981 visit to Manila, Vice President George H.W. Bush lavishly praised Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos. "We stand with you sir … We love your adherence to democratic principle and to the democratic processes." Barely four years later, massive anti-regime demonstrations forced Marcos to relinquish power and flee the country.

But Bush's judgment of Marcos's prospects was astute compared to Jimmy Carter's shocking failure to understand the precarious position of Washington's close ally, the Shah of Iran.

On New Year's Eve 1977, Carter made an effusive toast to the Iranian tyrant during a state visit to Tehran. "Iran, because of the great leadership of the Shah, is an island of stability in one of the more troubled regions of the world. This is a great tribute to you, Your Majesty, and to your leadership, and to the respect and admiration and love which your people give to you." A little more than a year later, Iran's Islamic revolution ousted the Shah and forced him into exile.

One would hope that such a dismal track record of mistaken judgments over a period of decades would promote greater humility on the part of U.S. foreign policy officials. It is difficult enough to assess the political strengths of players in one's own country; it is vastly more difficult to do so in foreign countries where our knowledge of the politics and the underlying culture is far more limited. Unfortunately, there is little evidence of such humility. Washington remains deeply involved, trying to dictate, or at least heavily influence, outcomes in countries as diverse as Iraq, Egypt, and Ukraine. The current efforts are not likely to fare any better than previous ventures.

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