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## Good Revolutions Gone Bad

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Yet another foreign democratic experiment that U.S. leaders once lauded seems to be something less than advertised. Followers of George W. Bush and Barack Obama disagreed about the wisdom of the decision to launch the Iraq war, but they agreed on two points. One was that post-Saddam Iraq is a legitimate member of the global community of democracies. The other is that Iraqi Kurdistan is an island of exceptional stability in that country and a democratic model for the whole region. Events during the past few

months, though, cast grave doubts on both assumptions.

The Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is increasingly corrupt and autocratic. Aside from periodic elections with competing parties, the new Iraq is beginning to resemble the old Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Maliki's bureaucrats routinely harass both foreign and domestic media outlets that dare to expose his administration's abuses.

Disturbing evidence of such repression has been building for at least the past two years, but matters escalated dramatically in February with the regime's shocking brutality. As with many other countries in the Middle East, demonstrations broke out in Iraq demanding, among other things, an end to the Maliki government's rampant corruption. Those demonstrations culminated with a "Day of Rage." Although the demonstrations even on that day were mostly peaceful, security forces killed at least twenty-nine participants.

They also rounded up dozens of journalists, writers, photographers, and intellectuals who had been involved in organizing the rallies. The Aldiyar Television station, which had telecast footage of the demonstrations, reported that security forces arrested seven employees, including a director and an anchorman, and closed the studio.

One of the many other journalists arrested in Baghdad was Hadi al-Mahdi, who [told](#) <sup>[3]</sup> *Washington Post* reporter Stephanie McCrummen what happened after soldiers detained him and several colleagues while they were sitting at an outdoor cafe. The soldiers loaded al-Mahdi and the others into Humvees and drove them to a side street, where they beat them severely. Then they took them to a former defense ministry building that now houses a unit of the army's increasingly feared intelligence unit. Mahdi was taken to a room alone, where he was beaten again with clubs, boots and fists. Not satisfied with such garden-variety brutality, they took his shoes off, wet his feet, and administered electric shocks.

This is the new Iraqi democracy for which the United States has spent more than \$800 billion and sacrificed some 4,500 American lives. It is an Iraq in which regime opponents are arrested and tortured, in which more than a third of the terrorized Christian community has fled, and in which religious zealots are forcing more and more women back under the veil.

Despite a very effective public relations campaign in the United States and other Western countries, matters are not much better in Iraqi Kurdistan. The self-governing region is increasingly little more than a corrupt economic and political partnership between the two dominant parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Those two parties were once bitter rivals, but they now work together to share the spoils and suppress any new factions that threaten their political duopoly.

The KDP-PUK propaganda apparatus works overtime to retain U.S. sponsorship. "Kurdistan is the only place in Iraq that the United States can be proud of," [states](#) <sup>[4]</sup> Airy Hirseen, a KDP leader.

But the government's treatment of peaceful demonstrators this spring ought to temper Washington's sense of pride and satisfaction about its democratic client. Day after day in February and March, thousands of people turned out in the central square in the regional capital, Sulaimaniya, demanding an end to joint rule by the PUK and KDP and calling for new elections. In April, the government's security forces cracked down, opening fire on the demonstrators, killing at least ten people and wounding dozens more. The subsequent dragnet took hundreds of regime opponents, mainly students and journalists, into custody. They languished in jail for days or weeks, telling tales of torture when they were finally released. *New*

*York Times* correspondents Tim Arango and Michael S. Schmidt concluded that while the Kurdistan demonstrations were inspired by the idealistic upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, they “ended up more like those in Bahrain and Oman, crushed by an authoritarian government.”

Kurdish officials certainly sound like spokesmen for such autocratic regimes. A KDP leader blamed a triad of troublemakers—terrorists, foreign agents, and Islamic militants—for the demonstrations. That allegation could not even pass the laugh test, given that most of the demonstrators were pro-Western, highly educated, secular professionals.

The graphic failure of the governments in Baghdad and Sulaimaniya to live up to the expectations and portrayals of their American sponsors is not surprising. Too many U.S. officials and opinion leaders tend to see foreign political factions through the prism of America’s own values and hopes. Yet such societies reflect very different histories and cultures, which are typically not conducive to democracy and individual liberty.

Unfortunately, Americans have a long, depressing history of idealizing foreign political movements. Many followers of Thomas Jefferson fawned over the French Revolution, believing that it was an ideological soul mate of America’s own successful 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 recoiled in horror.

The attitudes of American policy makers and opinion leaders in the post-Cold War era often replicate the naïve enthusiasm for the French Revolution. And that’s true not only with respect to professed democratic forces in the Middle East.

Before and during the Kosovo war in 1999, politicians and pundits in the United States lionized the Kosovo Liberation Army. Senator Joseph 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.” It was an astonishing statement. The KLA was a motley collection of unreconstructed communists, Albanian nationalists, organized crime members, and more than a few Islamic extremists. Lieberman’s paean to a shady foreign revolutionary movement verged on the obscene. Unfortunately, his fondness for the KLA was only slightly greater than that exhibited by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, UN ambassador Richard Holbrooke, and other Clinton administration officials who were directing Washington’s policies in the Balkans.

The same lack of healthy skepticism was all too apparent in Washington’s response to the so-called color revolutions that erupted during the presidency of George W. Bush. There was special enthusiasm for the Rose Revolution led by Mikheil Sashkashvili in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine led by Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko. In April 2005, Bush described the Orange Revolution as “a powerful example of democracy for people around the world,” and asserted that “the ideals of the new Ukraine are the ideals shared by Western civilization.” That praise was relatively restrained, though, compared to his assessment of the achievement in Georgia.

In a May 2005 speech in Georgia’s capital, Tbilisi, Bush hailed that country’s democrats for creating the template for color 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.” Georgians deserved special recognition, he believed. “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 itself 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.”

But the bloom has been off of the Rose Revolution for a long time. Mounting evidence implicates Saakashvili in political corruption and human rights abuses. Dozens of political opponents languish in his jails. Saakashvili's administration has brutally suppressed opposition street demonstrations, jailed dozens of political critics, and harassed or even shut down opposition media outlets, including the main television station. Such developments mock the breathless enthusiasm that Americans had for the Rose Revolution

Ukraine's Orange Revolution did not turn out any better. The “democratic” coalition degenerated into a comic opera rivalry between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko, which led to pervasive public disenchantment with both of them. Disgruntled voters spurned them, turning to Viktor Yanukovich, an old-style communist pol whom U.S. officials formerly viewed as a Kremlin stooge. Once again, an American-lauded democratic revolution became a farce and an embarrassment.

U.S. policy makers have a nasty habit of linking America's reputation and fortunes to sleazy foreign movements and leaders. One would hope that both officials and pundits would learn from these bruising experiences. But the pervasive enthusiasm for the murky “Arab Awakening” suggests that they are slow learners, at best.

Furthermore, whether or not foreign movements are genuinely democratic tells us little about what U.S. foreign policy should be. Even if Mikheil Saakashvili had been the second coming of James Madison, it would have been unwise for the United States to go nose to nose with a nuclear-armed Russia when war broke out in 2008 between that country and Georgia. Washington needs to base its foreign policy on America's security interests, not wishful thinking about foreign political movements or regimes. It is well past time that our policy makers learned that lesson.

*Image by The Egyptian Liberal*

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