



Washington's Tolerance of Death Squad 'Democracies'

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The U.S. government has had a long, dishonorable history of forging and sustaining close relations with murderous dictatorships – as long as they supported Washington's foreign policy. Such authoritarian US allies as the Shah of Iran, Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, the Saudi royal family, and a succession of South Korean and Guatemalan military rulers (among others) were confirmation of that cynical approach throughout the Cold War. US administrations (especially Ronald Reagan's administration) also looked the other way or even offered quiet support as the dictatorships in Chile and Argentina executed brutal, indiscriminate crackdowns.

Matters have not improved all that much since the end of the Cold War. Washington lavishes weapons on Saudi Arabia and Egypt, despite their continuing, flagrant human rights abuses at home. Indeed, the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations have even aided Riyadh's genocidal war of aggression against the people of Yemen through arms transfers and other measures.

The human rights violations that such autocratic regimes have committed are extensive, and they sometimes reach legendary levels. For example, pro-U.S. military dictatorships in Guatemala were responsible for some 93 percent of human rights abuses (mostly murders) that occurred during fighting that took the lives of 200,000 people over a 36-year period from the early 1960s to the mid-1990s. Washington's guilt in that slaughter was enhanced because the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had orchestrated a successful coup in 1954 to remove a democratic (albeit, leftist) government and put such monsters in power. The same was true of the coup that US and British intelligence agencies conducted the previous year in Iran to put the Shah back on the throne. Again, the outcome was a horrific record of imprisoning, torturing, and murdering political opponents. Today, a similar result is taking place in Egypt as Abdel Fattah El-Sisi conducts a reign of terror, with US leaders acting as enablers.

The willingness of multiple American administrations to collaborate with overtly nasty dictatorships has attracted considerable attention and condemnation over the decades. A more subtle form of Washington's guilt, though, has received somewhat less attention and criticism. Several ostensibly democratic regimes that Washington has supported have abused, terrorized, and murdered civilians with nearly as much alacrity as their outright authoritarian counterparts.

During the late 1980s, the Reagan administration enthusiastically endorsed and assisted the government of Jose Napoleon Duarte in El Salvador. Washington's primary motive was to block the prospect of Soviet influence expanding from the new Sandinista regime in Nicaragua to the rest of Central America. As part of that strategy, the administration poured extensive military and economic aid into El Salvador. However, despite the democratic façade, rogue security forces, as well as death squads affiliated with the government, continued the approach of the country's prior, authoritarian governments, wreaking havoc and killing thousands. Yet Reagan had effusive praise for Duarte as a democratic model for all of Central America.

A more recent and even more unsettling example has been the track record of the Philippines' current elected president, Rodrigo Duterte. Under Duterte's rule, death squads (with the government's blessing and assistance) have run amok. Estimates generally range from 6,000 to 30,000 victims. According to Duterte and his allies, the individuals who were executed without trial were slimy drug traffickers, so the lack of due process really shouldn't matter. Even if one endorsed such an amoral rationale, there is strong evidence that the regime has used the "drug trafficker" excuse as a cover to eliminate political critics. Yet, the Philippines has remained a functioning democracy. Indeed, an election for a new president has just taken place – although the victory of a ticket consisting of Marcos's son and Duterte's daughter is unsettling. Throughout all of this, Washington's complaints against Duterte have been modest, and they have focused far more on his periodic geopolitical flirtation with Beijing than on his horrid human rights record.

Washington's latest democratic death squad client is Ukraine. For years, opponents of the post-Maidan Revolution governments of Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelensky have had an unfortunate tendency to mysteriously disappear or turn up dead. However, the situation has grown much worse since the February 2022 Russian invasion. After an extensive investigation, the *Gray Zone*'s Max Blumenthal and Esha Krishnashwami concluded that "while Zelensky spouts bromides about the defense of democracy before worshipful Western audiences, he is using the war as a theater for enacting a blood-drenched purge of political rivals, dissidents and critics." Given the extraordinary number of mayors and other officials who have been killed for allegedly collaborating with Russia in just the first few weeks of war, that conclusion appears valid. Zelensky even purged two senior national security advisors for alleged treason. At the very least, the number of "traitors" seems to be extraordinarily (and suspiciously) high.

The coordination between Ukraine's intelligence service, the SBU, and ultra-nationalist, (even neo-Nazi) armed vigilante groups appears to be disturbingly close. Yevhen Karas, the founder of one of those organizations has confirmed the close relationship that his gang and other extreme right factions have enjoyed with the SBU. The SBU "informs not only us, but also Azov, the Right Sector, and so on," Karas boasted in a 2017 interview.

The latest developments in Ukraine suggest that Washington is once again backing a regime that hides behind a democratic façade while it countenances flagrant abuses by government security agencies and allied death squads. It clearly is not the first time that U.S. leaders have been willing to play such a cynical game, and it likely won't be the last. The US government's supposed commitment to democracy and the rule of law is routinely suspended whenever a geopolitical ally is involved.

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