

The enduring failure of democracy promotion abroad

By Daniel Larison | The Week – 19 hrs ago

The American quest to spread freedom to autocrat-ruled nations is widely popular among [foreign policy](#) wonks. Too bad it doesn't work

Since the end of the Cold War, [democracy promotion](#) has been one of the default elements of U.S. foreign policy. Spreading democracy became a particularly important part of the Bush administration's rhetoric in support of its so-called "freedom agenda," which was at the same time far more selective and inconsistent than its universalistic assumptions would suggest. And since the beginning of popular uprisings in North Africa and the Near East last year, democracy promotion has also figured more prominently in the public rhetoric and policies of the Obama administration. But let's face it: While there may be exceptions, democracy promotion during the last decade has generally produced dismal results for the nations affected by it.

It is easy enough to point to well-known examples in which the "freedom agenda" immediately backfired: In places like Iraq, Lebanon, and Gaza, democracy-hocking meddlers empowered sectarian parties, militias, and terrorist groups. However, that doesn't fully account for its failure. The best way to appreciate the failure of U.S.-led democracy promotion over the last 10 years is to look closely at its supposed success stories in Georgia and [Libya](#).

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Georgia was the first former Soviet republic to experience a "color" revolution in 2003, which brought President [Mikheil Saakashvili](#) to power the following year. Hailed by President Bush as a great democratic reformer intent on aligning his country with the U.S. and the West, Saakashvili steadily concentrated power in his hands over the last eight years and created a one-party state. Saakashvili became a symbol of the imagined success of the "freedom agenda." But as so often happened under Bush, the Georgian government was embraced as a democracy because of its pro-Western orientation, and not because of its political reforms.

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According to the most recent Freedom House [report](#), Georgia is still not considered an electoral democracy, and last year the country [received lower ratings](#) on the protection of political rights and civil liberties than it did when Saakashvili's predecessor was still in power. Despite all of this, U.S. support for Georgia continues, based on the illusion that this is an expression of solidarity for a small democratic state. This mostly uncritical American support for the Georgian government has contributed to the deterioration in Georgia by making it easier for Saakashvili and his party to consolidate power.

The Georgian government has also been accused by Amnesty International of using official investigations to intimidate members of the main opposition group created and supported by the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Ivanishvili's Georgian citizenship was stripped last year on the technicality that he held two foreign passports. The reality is that he was deprived of his citizenship to block him from running for office by a government that perceives him as a potential threat to the ruling United National Movement's hold on the presidency.

And consider Libya. Western intervention was not justified primarily in terms of democracy promotion, but one of the main arguments for U.S. involvement was that the failure of the Libyan uprising would demoralize protest movements throughout the region. Supporting the "Arab Spring" directly informed the decision to support regime change in Libya. As it turned out, this also led Western governments to back a non-transparent, unaccountable council made up mostly of exiles as the legitimate national government, which is currently as ineffectual as it is undemocratic.

In the last few weeks, the harmful effects of the Libyan war on Mali have become even worse. The Tuareg rebellion was already destabilizing the region thanks to the men and weapons that flooded into the country from Libya. Last month, the rebellion triggered a military coup against the country's democratically-elected president because of the soldiers' frustration with the inadequate support they were receiving in their fight with the rebels. An intervention partly justified in terms of supporting the "Arab Spring" set off a chain of events that wrecked one of the more genuinely democratic states in Africa. As the Cato Institute's Benjamin Friedman observed, "Thus far, the military intervention in Libya has reduced the number of democracies by one."

The general public is not all that interested in democracy promotion as a priority of U.S. foreign policy. That is understandable since democracy promotion abroad has relatively little to do with the vast majority of Americans. What makes less sense is why democracy promotion continues to command such broad support across the political spectrum among foreign policy professionals and politicians when it has failed so often.