Democratizing Our Autocratic Friends:

Why Is It So Hard?

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11 May 2010
**A Radical Scenario for the United States**

- **“Liberal” presidential administration**
  - Advocates democracy and freedom abroad

- **Promises to stop unconditional support for an autocratic ally**
  - Previously gave economic aid, military arms, and/or diplomatic support due to national security interests

- **Pressures the client dictatorship to enact radical reforms**
  - Legalize opposition, end corruption, enhance participation, reduce repression
Truman Administration and KMT Regime in China, 1948

REFORM OUTCOME: FAILURE
Kennedy Administration and Diem Regime in South Vietnam, 1962

REFORM OUTCOME: FAILURE
Carter Administration and Somoza Regime in Nicaragua, 1978

REFORM OUTCOME: FAILURE
Bush Administration and Arab Allies, 2003-2006

REFORM OUTCOME: FAILURE
Autocratic allies resist demands to enact radical democratic reforms

Such client regimes depend on US support and goodwill... and so should be most vulnerable to external pressure

Yet the US loses in bargaining situations it should intuitively dominate
Strategic interests always *neutralize* impulse to spread democracy... IE, successor regimes may endanger:

- Oil supplies to global markets
- War on terror
- Non-proliferation goals
- Israel’s security
If strategic interests trump all, then the US would never try to promote democratic reforms that open possibility of political change.

In fact, debates between “stabilizers” and “reformists” punctuate US foreign policy debates since World War Two.

“Freedom Agenda” just latest episode of reformists successfully arguing that reforming our authoritarian allies can be good for US interests abroad.
Supply-Side Arguments

- Institutional inertia in US foreign policy establishment
  - 180° policy turns take time to absorb
  - Policy principals often send mixed signals

- New domestic linkages “thicken” bilateral relationship
  - Examples for Arab allies: Congressional Friends of Jordan Caucus, US-Egypt Endowment, Saudi financial investments, specialized PR firms/lobbies
Demand-Side Arguments

- US pro-democracy shift not credible threat for autocratic rulers
  - “Rule” of Inverse Credibility: The greater the commitment to bolster regime stability early on, the less bargaining leverage the patron has to persuade its ally to reform in future

- Regime “memory”: pertinent for dictatorships where incumbents rule until death or coup
  - Elite policymakers in targeted regimes remember earlier US commitments, which erode the “teeth” of threats to withdraw support without reform (e.g., conditionality)
Implications

- Analysts often criticize Bush’s “freedom agenda” for its operational flaws
  - Inadequate funding
  - Wrong opposition actors targeted
  - Regional linkages ignored

- More basic dilemma: for US, it is difficult to democratize autocratic allies through means other than invasion everywhere
  - Arab “exceptionalism” not so exceptional in historical and cross-regional perspective
  - Are our democratic expectations too high?
Prospects for the Future: Can Foreign Policy Change?

- Genuine turns against authoritarian allies, absent geopolitical shocks, are infrequent
  - Stability breeds policy continuity
  - When new policymakers declare change, they are not lying to us (as commonly accused); they are lying to themselves

- However, some radical betrayals of autocratic clients have occurred before
  - Relations with Panama, late 1980s
  - South Korean democratization, mid-1980s