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Imposing freedom

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Well, that didn't work

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Obama and Mubarak talked of respect, not freedom

IN THE month of June an attractive black American politician visited a university in Cairo and made an astonishing speech. "For 60 years," said the visitor, "my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in the Middle East—and we achieved neither. Now we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people." The year was 2005 and the orator was Condoleezza Rice, George Bush's secretary of state.

For someone in her position to make such a speech in such a place was testimony to the huge impact the attacks of September 11th 2001 had on American thinking about the Middle East. The advent of al-Qaeda persuaded the neoconservative ideologues of the Bush administration that terrorism carried out in the name of Islam was bred in part by the lack of democracy and pluralism in the Arab world. Henceforth America's national interest lay in persuading the autocratic regimes it had previously supported, such as Egypt's, to turn themselves into democracies.

Four years on from Ms Rice's speech, the Bush administration's dream that democracy could be imposed on the Arabs by an outside force lies in tatters. Whatever becomes of Iraq in the longer term, the bright hope that the Americans' removal of Saddam might transform that country into a democratic example for other Arabs to follow has flickered out. The invasion, and the civil war that followed it, killed far too many Iraqis for anyone else in the region to wish such a chaotic, bloody and destructive experiment on themselves.

The installation of democracy was never the main part of America's motivation for unseating Saddam. The need to rid America of an unpredictable enemy, suspected plausibly of pursuing weapons of mass destruction, loomed much larger in Mr Bush's pre-war speeches and deliberations. His "freedom agenda" came to the fore later, after it was discovered that the much-hyped weapons did not exist. But this later effort to talk, bribe and bully friendly Arab regimes into political reform was serious. And the reasons for its failure, even in the case of supposedly malleable American "clients" such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, reveal a great deal about the immobility of Arab politics.

Drip, drip, drip

The pressure Mr Bush put on the Arab regimes to embrace democracy was not brutal, but it was significant. In 2002 the president spoke up in support of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, an Egyptian-American writer and political activist who had been imprisoned on what looked like trumped-up charges. In 2005 Mr Bush called on President Hosni Mubarak to allow freer voting in the Egyptian elections due that year. In places where America wielded more direct influence over events, such as post-invasion Iraq and, via Israel, the Palestinian territories, elections became the order of the day. At America's behest Iraqis went to the polls three times in 2005: first for a National Assembly, then for a referendum on a new constitution, and last to elect another National Assembly under the new constitution's rules. To Israel's astonishment, the Americans also advised letting Hamas contest the Palestinian elections of January 2006, which the radical Islamist movement then disobligingly went on to win.

It wasn't all just scolding and nagging. Money spoke too. Mr Bush leant on the rich countries of the G8 to set up a Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, intended to promote democracy in the region. In Washington, DC, the American taxpayer and federal bureaucracy were enlisted in the freedom agenda's cause. Liz Cheney, a well-connected deputy assistant secretary at the State Department (her father was vice-president), created the Middle East Partnership Initiative, a project that would use American grants and advice to spread political and economic freedom and women's rights. Arab presidents who visited the White House during this period had to endure stiff lectures on the importance of a free press. And so forth.

All this pressure irritated America's Arab friends. The kings, emirs and presidents who depended on American aid, markets and military muscle had suddenly to talk the language of pluralism, knowing full well that the advent of real democracy in their countries could swiftly put them out of their jobs. Nonetheless, they considered it prudent to bend a little.

From Alexandria in 2004 a conference of Arab politicians, intellectuals and civil-society organisations, meeting under the auspices of Egypt's president, issued a declaration expressing support for democratic reform, freer speech and human rights. Mr Mubarak promised freer elections in 2005 and introduced a constitutional change to make them possible. In that year's parliamentary elections the main opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, did strikingly well, taking a fifth of the seats in the People's Assembly, the lower house, and would probably have done better still but for heavy police interference on polling day. In 2005 Saudi Arabia held elections (men only) for new local councils (though half the representatives were to be appointed, not elected).

Still, cosmetic and procedural changes such as these were not allowed to interfere for long with the stark realities of power. Two months ago the Saudis announced that the second round of municipal elections was going to be delayed by two years. In Egypt there was never any prospect of a rival candidate being allowed to defeat Mr Mubarak, who has been president since 1981. No Egyptian expects him to leave office before he dies. (Mr Mubarak has refused to appoint a vice-president.)

Since the elections of 2005, moreover, the regime has cracked down hard on its opponents. Ayman Nour, a secular politician who dared to run against Mr Mubarak, was jailed for more than three years on questionable charges. The Bush administration complained loudly about his arrest, but he was released only this year, after Mr Bush himself had left office. In May, shortly after announcing his willingness to

stand again, Mr Nour was injured in an attack he blamed on the government.

The Muslim Brotherhood, likewise, has been punished heavily for its success in the elections (though its candidates were allowed to run only as "independents"). Many of its leaders have since been put under arrest. In 2007 new constitutional amendments banned political parties with a religious orientation and increased the extensive powers of the president. The emergency laws under which Egypt has been governed for most of the past half-century have been extended yet again. The government has stopped broadcasting parliamentary debates or reporting them in the official newspapers. Essam el-Aryan, a jovial though oft-jailed member of the Brotherhood, says police continue to mount repeated raids on members and to close down their businesses.

The wrong messengers

Why did Mr Bush's message of reform fail? One reason, a lot of Arab reformers say, is that he and his colleagues were—or at least became—the worst possible messengers. Thus Hossam Bahgat, founding director of a pressure group, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, admits to having been impressed and surprised when Ms Rice turned up at the American University in Cairo to say exactly what people like him had been longing to hear: that there would be no more American support for dictators. But when the American government then started to defend its own human-rights abuses at Guantánamo and elsewhere, he felt disgusted. "What we learnt from the Bush years was that reform was our own business," he says now.

In Arab eyes, the freedom agenda was also tainted by the war in Iraq. How could America claim to have Arab interests at heart while laying waste to one of the Arab world's biggest countries (and, cynical Arabs add, the one most dangerous to Israel)?

Consider the reaction of Nader Fergany, an Egyptian academic, democracy advocate and author of a report published by the United Nations Development Programme the year before the American invasion. The 2002 Arab Human Development Report was extraordinarily frank about the flaws and failures of the Arab world and the urgency of reform. Its author is just the sort of person you might expect to have welcomed Mr Bush's reform effort. But, like many Arab intellectuals, he is still fuming about the war six years on, and not much appeased by the new president's plan to withdraw. "The Americans are the Mongols of the 21st century," he declares, "and now Barack Obama is trying to put the icing on this dirty cake."

Tamara Cofman Wittes, who followed the progress of the Bush administration's democracy promotion in the Arab world closely from her perch at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, says in a recent book ("Freedom's Unsteady March", Brookings, 2008) that there were plenty of other flaws in the project's design and execution. But underlying all of them was America's own ambivalence. Might pushing reform too far estrange America's allies and damage its interests? And what if, in a serious democratic contest, Arab voters opted for radical Islamists hostile to the United States—as Algerians seemed poised to do in 1991, and so many Palestinians and Lebanese did when they cast their votes for Hamas and Hizbullah a decade and a half later?

Cairo revisited

Whatever the reasons for its failure, Mr Bush's freedom agenda is now dead. In June of this year it was the turn of Barack Obama to make a spellbinding speech at a university in Cairo. This speech will go down in the history books. It was an eloquent attempt by the new president to repair America's relations with Islam and make America's stance on Palestine look more even-handed in the eyes of Arabs. But in some ways this speech was less ambitious than Ms Rice's of 2005. Like Ms Rice, Mr Obama extolled the virtues of democracy. But this time he stressed the crucial rider. "Each nation gives life to this principle in its own way, grounded in the traditions of its own people," he said. "America does not presume to

know what is best for everyone.”

Nobody questions Mr Obama’s belief in the democratic idea. He did not shrink in Cairo from calling on rulers to govern by consent, not coercion, and to respect the rights of women and minorities. But it is clear that under his presidency the United States will no longer be forcing its political values down the throats of reluctant allies (or even, as in Iran, foes). “Respect” has displaced “freedom” as the word of choice in America’s discourse with the Muslim world. That may be wise, from America’s own point of view, and welcome to the Arab rulers, if not necessarily to the Arab ruled. But the new approach leaves the fundamental problem of political stagnation in the Arab world unresolved. After all, if the outside world cannot bring it, change will have to come from within.

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