

OBAMA AND DEMOCRACY

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The Quiet Democrat

Time will tell if President Barack Obama's speech in Cairo on June 4 is remembered as a landmark in relations between America, the Middle East and Muslims around the world. **One thing it should achieve in the short term is to reassure those who think he is opposed to democracy promotion.**





EVER SINCE SECRETARY OF STATE Hillary Clinton's Senate confirmation hearing, when she appeared to demote democracy in favour of the 'three Ds': defence, diplomacy and development, many have assumed America would turn its back on supporting democratisation abroad. In telling his Cairo audience of his 'unyielding belief' in universal rights and freedoms, United States President Barack Obama said America would support them 'everywhere'. Until then he had acted as though following a conscious decision to talk less about democracy promotion, but not necessarily to do less. Democracy – the fourth D – is not absent from his foreign policy, just quiet.

For Larry Diamond of Stanford University, Obama's speech navigated between the 'unsustainable arrogance and assertiveness' of President George Bush's years and retaining a commitment to human rights and democracy. Activists will also draw comfort from comments in the run-up to the speech.

Interviewed by the BBC, the president said that human rights, democracy and the rule of law are principles that all countries could 'embrace and affirm as part of their national identity.' When she met Egyptian democracy activists in Washington, Clinton said the principles formed a 'core pillar of American foreign policy'.

DEMOCRACIES DO BETTER

The absence of loud rhetoric from Obama need not mean a lack of interest. It more likely shows that he understands the importance of distancing himself from Bush's style. Earlier this year, Thomas Carothers, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, noted that Obama was under pressure to retreat from democracy promotion because Bush's legacy was 'a long, painful delegitimisation' of the concept.

In Cairo, Obama placed the pursuit of democracy within a broader vision of supporting human rights in general, and – with an eye on the Middle East – women's rights and religious freedom in particular. Reportedly this came after considerable debate in the White House. He added that democracy

promotion must not focus on elections alone, which should hearten those who have long criticised the US for this.

Calling for America to burnish its image as a role model also echoes the complaints of specialists, who have long argued that the gap between rhetoric and actions undermines US democracy policies. As a recent Chatham House report on America's role in the world noted, Obama 'will need to spend considerable effort repairing the image and brand of America and reconnecting it with stated US values before it can reclaim its leading role in promoting positive change around the world'.

There are reasons to believe Obama will not erase democracy from the US foreign policy lexicon. For a start, its promotion has never simply reflected the preferences of any particular president. It is a foreign policy tradition with deep historical roots in the American experience.

So far, the president has not shown a fundamental difference with many of his predecessors – including Bush – when it comes to Washington's conventional wisdom that democracies are more peaceful, prevent terrorism, do not spread nuclear and chemical weapons, manage economic development better, or deal better with global problems. Even the neoconservative Max Boot called Obama's Cairo comments 'a Bush-like plug for democracy'.

OBAMA'S DEMOCRACY RECORD

As a Senator, Obama cosponsored the ADVANCE Democracy Act introduced by John McCain in 2005. On the campaign trail, he called for an increase in American aid to \$50 billion per year by 2012, partly to assist democratisation and reform corrupt governments. He said he would boost funding for the National Endowment for Democracy and democracy non-governmental organisations.

The candidate and his advisers floated ambitious ideas for rebuilding failed or failing states, and supporting dissidents and reformers. These included a Rapid Response Fund to provide comprehensive assistance packages to young democracies and post-conflict societies. Obama also advocated integrating US civilian and military capabilities to help promote democracy and development together.

Many of the president's appointments believe in liberal internationalism which champions democratisation. Many are veterans of President Bill Clinton's administration, which institutionalised democracy promotion in the US government to an unprecedented extent. As a presidential candidate Hillary Clinton called for more of this.

Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, has advocated helping dissidents in countries like Russia or Egypt and military intervention against severe human rights violations and genocide. Advisers given government positions – like Michael McFaul and Samantha Power at the National Security Council, Anne-Marie Slaughter at the State Department and Ivo Daalder as Ambassador to NATO – have written at length about the importance of democracy in international affairs.

Letter

Sir, The article 'Thinking, Not Talking' by Alex Vines published in the June issue is devoted to an awkward and premature comparison between the Italian and Canadian Presidencies of the G8 group of leading economies.

The author is bluntly affirming that 'there is little substance coming from pre-summit consultations, giving the impression of pomp and show, rather than seeking tangible global structural reforms and remedies.' This leads him to the conclusion that 'next year, with Canada in charge, is a better moment to appraise what this international group can achieve than this year's gathering in L'Aquila which increasingly looks like a summit of words and not ideas.'

I do not know on which basis Vines draws such drastic conclusions. Certainly he never approached this Embassy.

Instead of seeking assistance about the plans and strategies involved, the author preferred to jump to hasty conclusions, detracting from the substance of his analysis.

For instance, the article gives the impression that the Canadian G8 Presidency next year may become crucial in areas like climate change and nuclear non-proliferation. Unfortunately, the December Copenhagen Summit and the Spring 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference will take place before the Huntsville G8 Summit. Therefore, either breakthroughs in both areas are made before those meetings, or there will not be very much that the G8 Presidency may achieve afterwards.

**Giancarlo Aragona,
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DOLLARS FOR DEMOCRACY

While there have been budget cuts in some democracy programmes, the administration has also committed dollars without fanfare. The budget included a \$143 million increase – up to \$808 million – for USAID, one of the main agents of American democracy promotion. In the supplementary request, the president sent to Congress in April to fund diplomatic, intelligence and military operations in the current financial year, a proportion is again earmarked for USAID democracy and governance work: \$375 million in Afghanistan and \$482 million in Iraq.

When he unveiled the new Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy in March, Obama included governance support, and also backed a bipartisan Senate bill that would more than double aid to Pakistan over the next five years with a share for democracy programmes. In April, America released a further \$53.3 million in aid to Georgia, of which \$20 million will go to democracy support.

As ever, these numbers pale in comparison to security-related spending, but they are not insignificant. Used wisely, such sums can make a real difference. The drama of the Bush years masked the fact that much US democracy promotion is through low-key and incremental assistance programmes. The greatest threat to these in the Obama era will not be presidential neglect, but budgetary constraint.

A further clue to the administration's commitment will be provided at the Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies in Portugal on July 10 and 11. While it has not established itself as a significant institution since its launch in

2000, fluctuating American engagement has reflected changing priorities in Washington. After her high profile presence in Chile in 2005, the decision of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice not to attend the last ministerial conference in Mali in 2007 was interpreted as part of a step-back from democracy promotion. The level and nature of US participation in Lisbon, especially if Clinton attends, will provide an indication as to whether Washington sees value in supporting democratisation through an intergovernmental organisation devoted to it.

In Cairo, Obama put down a marker about democracy promotion, but he has not yet been confronted with a situation where he has to decide between democracy and US security and economic interests. This is where other presidents have come unstuck – for example, Bush with Egypt or Clinton with China. The first months of the Obama presidency saw no major new democratic crisis abroad that would force it to show its hand. Only such events will truly test how far he is willing to go to match words with actions. 

