

# Liberty First, Democracy Later

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Sometimes President George Bush and those who side with his post-9/11 refocusing of American foreign policy speak of promoting democracy. On other occasions, the president and those who stand with him talk about spreading liberty. In the United States, we tend to hear these missions as synonymous. In the long run they no doubt converge. But in the here and now, in dealing with allies and adversaries, they point to different priorities, and distinguishing between them can contribute to a more effective foreign policy.

Recent visits to Kuwait and Israel brought home the difference. In early May, among Kuwaiti students, faculty, and university administrators, I heard considerable support for the U.S.-led coalition's removal of Saddam Hussein and efforts to bring democracy to Iraq. But I also heard doubts and anxieties about democracy promotion as a general U.S. strategy for the region. In no small measure this was because the president's policy seemed to imply to my Kuwaiti interlocutors the need for fundamental change in Kuwait itself. After all, notwithstanding its elected parliament and its breakthrough decision this spring to grant women the right to vote and run for office, Kuwait remains a constitutional monarchy.

A few weeks later in Israel a retired career army intelligence officer made a similar point. "Why should Israel be eager to see democracy promoted in the region?" he asked. Look at Jordan to the east. King Abdullah is Western educated. He maintains friendly, cooperative relations with Israel and the United States. He rules his people in a generally progressive spirit, with very likely more progressive results than if his kingdom were replaced by a democracy. And what about Egypt, the former intelligence officer continued. Sure, Hosni Mubarak is a dictator, but the dictator we know is preferable to the democracy we don't. Or rather he is preferable to the democracy the Israelis could reasonably anticipate. Mubarak has brought a quarter-century of stability to Israeli-Egyptian relations. Weakening his hold on power, given the poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and popular appeal of the militant Muslim Brotherhood among the approximately 70 million Egyptians, could well unleash anarchy.

Common to the Kuwaiti and Israeli misgivings is the equation of a policy of democracy promotion with the revolutionary goal of regime change. And this is natural enough. The Bush doctrine is indissolubly connected to Iraq, where an elective war forcibly removed a dictator and undertook the laborious work—on which the jury is still out—of creating democracy almost from scratch. Moreover, by its very name democracy indicates not merely an ethos or a set of procedures but rather a distinctive form of government. In contrast, liberty names a good that can be achieved gradually, one reform at a time, in a variety of regimes. In principle it is possible to secure a considerable range of individual rights in a stable, benevolent monarchy, and sometimes, as in Kuwait and Jordan, more liberty is

achievable in the short term than one could reasonably hope to secure through democracy. This is not to doubt the close connection between liberty and democracy. Indeed, they bring out the best in each other.

Over the long haul, the best way to make democracy stable and just is to practice toleration, establish an independent judiciary, encourage a free press, and build a market economy—hallmark liberal institutions all. At the same time, the experience of the last 250 years demonstrates that the best way to secure individual rights is to make government accountable to the people by grounding it in a regular cycle of free and fair elections. And liberty and democracy intertwine in the idea that participating in the choice of government officials is itself an important expression of individual freedom. At the same time, it is useful to keep in mind that instituting majority rule and expanding individual rights are separable undertakings.

Whatever is in our minds when we utter the phrases, democracy promotion proclaims a radical cure—regime change—while spreading liberty suggests incremental reform. Accordingly, concentrating on spreading liberty should be much less threatening to our friends than trumpeting democracy promotion. The same holds true for our adversaries. How, for example, can we effectively engage Iran's government when our grand strategy openly calls for its removal, as it surely does when we put democracy promotion first? Indeed, given the hand the Iranian mullahs are playing, it is, alas, reasonable for them to defy the international community, break their agreements, and accelerate the production of nuclear weapons. What else can provide a deterrent to the United States' declared intention, embodied in the goal of democracy promotion, to sweep the mullahs from power, dismantle their government, and create a new free and fairly elected one?

Concentrating on liberty involves a shift of rhetoric and a change of emphasis in practice. The focus of both, particularly in the wider Middle East, should be in the array of diplomatic and developmental means at our disposal to expand the range of individual rights, particularly liberty of thought and discussion; extending the rule of law; fostering religious toleration; and ensuring equality of opportunity for women in politics and in the marketplace. Proponents of democracy promotion should not be disappointed or alarmed. One advantage to putting the spread of liberty abroad first in the here and now is the long-term gains it promises in promoting democracy around the globe.

This essay appeared in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* on June 10, 2005.

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