

DEMOCRACY POLICY UNDER OBAMA Revitalization or Retreat?

Executive Summary

The Paper in a Nutshell

After an initial pulling back on democracy promotion, and a recalibration to a less assertive set of messages on the issue, the Obama administration has ended up engaging actively and sometimes robustly on democracy issues in many countries around the world and pursuing various initiatives to strengthen relevant multilateral institutions and normative frameworks.

At the same time, like all of its recent predecessors, the Obama administration downplays democracy concerns in its relations with numerous autocratic governments for the sake of countervailing economic and security interests. In addition, larger elements of the domestic and international political landscapes, including the poor functioning of the U.S. political system and the rise of alternative power centers in the world, inhibit the reach and impact of U.S. democracy promotion policies.

Key Themes

- President Obama inherited a democracy promotion policy badly damaged from its Bush-era association with forcible regime change, the decline in America's reputation as a global symbol of democracy and human rights, and fears of a broader democratic recession in the world.
- The Obama administration first attempted to recalibrate U.S. democracy policy through softer rhetoric—emphasizing universal rights and principles, rather than the imposition of American-style democracy—along with diplomatic engagement with countries like Iran and Russia.
- The president and his foreign policy team later began to speak out more regularly and forcefully on democracy and human rights and engaged in prodemocracy diplomacy in response to democratic breakdowns or breakthroughs around the world, from Honduras and South Sudan to Belarus and Côte d'Ivoire.
- The administration has nevertheless paid little attention to democracy in multiple countries where the United States has other interests at stake. These include the well-known Persian Gulf cases as well as less-noticed relationships with Central Asian and African autocrats.
- The administration also sought to buttress the multilateral framework for democracy through initiatives to engage rising democracies, promote open government, combat corruption, reform the Community of Democracies, engage more deeply with civil society abroad, and link democracy with development goals. These efforts have the potential to be useful but it is unclear whether they will have a lasting effect.
- The Arab Spring marked the administration's most important and high-profile democracy challenge. Democratic change in the Arab world marks a potential watershed for democracy's global state but also could jeopardize some U.S. economic and security interests in the region. The U.S. response has been correspondingly mixed, combining support for democracy where political change is occurring—in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen—with continued friendships with more resilient autocratic allies such as Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morocco.
- Most elements of President Obama's democracy policy—including both its prodemocracy efforts and its inconsistency—represent a broad continuation of the overall line of U.S. democracy policy over the past twenty-five years. The major difference is that today, in response to growing multipolarity, the United States has moved away from any single, overarching foreign policy narrative rooted in the idea of remaking the world in its own image.

Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers

Push autocrats to reform: Rather than overlook the domestic behavior of putatively helpful or strategically important autocrats, Washington should inject at least some serious prodemocratic content into its relations with these regimes.

Continue funding democracy assistance: Democracy support advances American values and has long been an area of bipartisan agreement. Congress and the White House should preserve as much of this assistance as possible during the coming likely wave of spending cuts.

Rethink relations with the Arab world: The United States must do more than proclaim rhetorical support for democracy in the Middle East. The administration should rethink its relations at multiple levels—diplomatic, military, and developmental—with the Arab world and institutionalize prodemocratic policy frameworks.

Engage with new actors: The United States should engage with rising democratic powers such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa, and Turkey, as well as influential civil society groups, to broaden and deepen support for democracy in an increasingly multipolar world.

Strengthen democracy at home: America's fractious politics and legislative gridlock have dealt a significant blow to the appeal of American democracy abroad. Lawmakers interested in improving democracy's long-term prospects should start by improving civility at home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Thomas Carothers is vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. A leading authority on democracy promotion and democratization, he is the founder and director of Carnegie's Democracy and Rule of Law Program.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

A full-length version of this study is available on the web at: CarnegieEndowment.org/carothers. For more information or to speak with one of our scholars, please do not hesitate to contact our government affairs manager, Scott Toussaint, at (202) 939-2307 or stoussaint@ceip.org.

ABOUT THE CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE:

Founded in 1910, the Carnegie Endowment is a leading, nonpartisan think tank specializing in foreign affairs. It is also the world's first truly global think tank with operations in Washington, D.C., Moscow, Beijing, Beirut, and Brussels.