

# The Authoritarian Illusion

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THE BELIEF that non-democratic regimes incubate anti-Western extremism, making their aggrieved populations vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist groups, is the principle assumption behind the democracy project, which argues that it is in America's compelling interest to promote democratic regimes wherever possible. Given its impact on policy, this assumption deserves scrutiny. While it is true that several authoritarian societies have bred anti-Western extremism, many others have not. Sympathy for democracy does not constitute sufficient grounds for a sweeping policy of worldwide democratization.

The United States does not require a fully democratic world in order to achieve security. Indeed, the threats we currently face are generated by causes that transcend regime type. Moreover, an ambitious policy of democratization may have high opportunity costs, because the vast resources that would have to be allocated could not be used for attacking the factors which *are* generating anti-Western extremism.

Favoring democratization is, of course, not a new feature of U.S. international policy. The United States has a lengthy history of close alliances with and support for democracies. But it is

well known that the United States also formed durable, peaceful relationships and even partnerships with many authoritarian regimes. This mixture of regime types among America's allies was true both in desperate times and distant regions and in more ordinary times and regions of core interest, including within NATO.

It was also matched by a mix of regime types on the roster of America's perceived adversaries. This is not surprising given that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American foreign policy leaders traced major security threats to factors that cut across regime type. Some non-democratic regimes were expansionist, including Nazi Germany, the USSR, North Korea and Saddam's Iraq. But many more were not.<sup>1</sup> It is no coincidence that even the Reagan Administration—seen today by democratizers as an exemplary precursor to their current effort—continued to work closely with many authoritarian regimes against the USSR. Rhetorically, the administration advanced Jeane Kirkpatrick's well-known distinction between widely varying non-democratic regimes. Kirkpatrick explicitly argued that this variation permitted the United States to prioritize since it could afford to view quite a few of these regimes

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Mark Peceny, Caroline Beer, and Shannon Sanchez-Terry, "Dictatorial Peace?" *American Political Science Review*, 96/1 (2002), pp. 15–26.

relatively benignly and only some of them with urgent concern.<sup>2</sup> Consistent with this, Reagan's celebrated 1982 Westminster speech cast the global struggle as one between freedom and un-freedom. This is not only much vaguer than democracy versus authoritarianism; it is different. Consistent with at least half a century of rhetoric, Reagan pitted democracies against *expansionist* totalitarianism, not against all non-democratic regimes uniformly.

### *Authoritarian Radicalization*

WHILE THE 1990s saw an increase in support for democracies around the world, it was after the September 11 terrorist attacks that the democratizing agenda received a massive boost. Senior Bush Administration officials and neoconservative theorists have argued that non-democratic regimes serve as incubators of grievances, which then can be politicized by anti-Western extremists. Charles Krauthammer, even while recommending selective democratization for now, says that ultimately "the spread of democracy is . . . an indispensable means for securing American interests."<sup>3</sup> President Bush declared in a November 2002, speech to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) that accommodating non-democratic regimes in the Middle East may have created allies in the short term but "did nothing to make us safe" over the longer run, because these regimes were breeding "stagnation, resentment and violence ready for export." Bush's 2004 State of the Union speech was even more specific: "As long as the Middle East remains a place of tyranny and despair and anger, it will continue to produce men and movements that threaten the safety of America and our friends." This might be called the "authoritarian radicalization" thesis. And it is not, as it happens, held only by neo-conservatives. Sen. John Kerry (D-MA)

has broadly endorsed the notion that the lack of democracy and political reform are among the root causes "breeding this virulent new form of anti-American terrorism."

In the wake of 9/11, many conservatives disdained claims about economic and other "root causes" of terrorism. But the authoritarian radicalization thesis amounts to a theory of the root causes of terrorism in all but name. It draws on older arguments. During the Cold War, it was regularly argued (usually by critics of containment) that U.S. alliances with anticommunist dictators ultimately subverted rather than enhanced U.S. security since these regimes inspired radical backlashes among local populations.

The thesis proposes that authoritarianism is inherently radicalizing and that democracy is inherently moderating, thus generating a policy prescription for global democratization. The 2002 National Security Strategy makes it a national priority to promote "modern government, especially in the Muslim world", in order to undermine the "fertile ground" that exists for "the conditions and ideologies that promote terrorism." Bush has proposed a further doubling of the NED budget, telling the NED that the United States has adopted "a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East." And he has declared his hope that Iraq will democratize the region through a contagion effect.

But there are compelling reasons not to translate this thesis into a sweeping agenda. These reasons concern the high degree of diversity that exists among non-democratic regimes; the risks that can accompany pushing dictators from office; and the potential opportunity costs of a democratization policy.

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<sup>2</sup>Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards", *Commentary* (November 1979).

<sup>3</sup>Krauthammer, "Democratic Realism", Irving Kristol Lecture, American Enterprise Institute, February 10, 2004.

Diversity within the category of “authoritarian” is enormous, with implications for U.S. foreign policy. The intention here is not to find virtue in authoritarianism, only to emphasize that while some non-democratic regimes appear to be incubators of radicalization, most do not, just as most have not warred with America. No clear pattern connects non-democratic regimes to extremist, violent or anti-Western ideologies.

In the 1970s, radical ideologies and movements flourished in non-democratic Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Iran. Since the 1980s, this degenerative dynamic was apparent in Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, military-ruled Pakistan and the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. Some of these regimes tolerated or even subsidized propagandizing and proselytizing with an extremist content that was often disseminated through institutions and activities usually described optimistically as “civil society.”

Yet this roster of regimes does not come close to exhausting the list of all non-democratic regimes even in the Muslim world. And while proponents of the authoritarian radicalization thesis point to trends in Saudi Arabia or Pakistan to make their case, they are unable to explain why other indisputably authoritarian regimes in the region such as Morocco, Tunisia, Kuwait and Jordan have been able to contain Al-Qaeda-style movements.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, nearly two dozen predominantly or substantially Muslim societies in Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa or in southwestern and Central Asia have been authoritarian for decades, yet extremism is notable for its weakness there. Studies warn that radicalization could happen in these regions, but it has not.<sup>5</sup> References to the “poisonous cultural effects of tyranny” notwithstanding, authoritarianism seems to generate political extremism in some Muslim settings but not in others.<sup>6</sup>

A mixed pattern also characterizes Latin America, where several military regimes may have inspired leftist insurgencies in the 1960s and 1970s but other regimes did not. Perhaps most unexpectedly, totalitarian regimes do not seem to generate popular radicalism over the long term. Marxist-Leninist states and, ironically, Ba’athi rule in Iraq, may leave citizens ideologically exhausted and cynical rather than motivated and ripe for recruitment. Overall, the authoritarian radicalization thesis seems especially weak in post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa, one of the most pervasively non-democratic regions, but also one in which extremisms of any kind have found few followers.

Another universe of cases must be considered as well. The authoritarian radicalization thesis, to be taken seriously, also has to be tested against the non-democratic regimes that dominated Europe for centuries. Some of these regimes could be said to have incubated communism, socialism or fascism. But mass politics under other European authoritarian regimes moderated with time rather than becoming radicalized, with Britain as the paradigmatic example. Most of the world’s most stable democracies—the very societies which are now said to be threatened by the existence of

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<sup>4</sup>Indeed, there is a case to be made that the Middle East’s “liberal autocracies” may be better positioned to introduce reforms without running the risk of radicalization. See Ray Takeyh and Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Democratic Impulses versus Imperial Interests”, *Orbis* (Summer 2003).

<sup>5</sup>Experts have been predicting radicalization in these countries—see, for example, Princeton Lyman and J. Stephen Morrison, “The Terrorist Threat in Africa”, *Foreign Affairs*, (January/February 2004)—but it has not taken place.

<sup>6</sup>David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 160.

authoritarian regimes elsewhere—they themselves evolved from historic non-democratic regimes which gave way to societies among the most politically moderate the world has ever known. In other words, authoritarian regimes are capable, over time, of creating liberal institutions that can lay the groundwork for a transition to democracy without significant external intervention.

This also shows that authoritarianism is not a sufficient condition for extremism. It may also not be a necessary one. Al-Qaeda-type beliefs have found support among at least some Muslims in democratic Turkey and western Europe. By that same standard, militant Islamist networks appear to have steadily grown in Pakistan in the 1980s and 1990s under both authoritarian and democratic rule alike. For that matter, Northern Ireland has had democratic rights but for decades has also harbored a subculture of resentment, violence and radicalism that generated a steady stream of terrorists.

None of this is to find virtue in authoritarianism. Non-democratic regimes are often ugly and corrupt, and people are usually better off living under democracy. But authoritarianism as a general category does not breed extremism. It is not even obvious that any specific authoritarian subtype does that. This has a central implication: Democracy is not a necessary condition for U.S. security.

### *Opportunity Costs*

**W**HY NOT pursue democratization anyway? There are two important reasons for the United States to pursue a highly selective democratization policy rather than an urgent and universalistic one. Jeane Kirkpatrick long ago offered the first of these. Her 1979 essay emphasized not only that non-democracies are highly varied, but also that America was—and remains today—unsure how to fine-tune

either regime changes or regime-stabilization. In combination, these points mean that when a dictatorship falls (including when pushed), it can be followed by a regime that is better, the same, or much worse, and we often cannot do much to influence which it will be. In Iraq in 1958, Cuba in 1959, Iran during 1978–79, and Nicaragua during 1979–80, non-democratic regimes were replaced by even worse ones. This is not a reason to abandon democratization. But it is a reason to pursue democratization carefully and selectively.

Finally, high opportunity costs should give us pause. If democracy really could undercut popular support for anti-Western extremism, the United States might well be justified in mounting a resource-, time- and attention-consuming project of worldwide democratization. But as we have seen, Al-Qaeda-style extremism has drawn strong support in some authoritarian-ruled Muslim countries but not in many others. This suggests that something (or things) other than regime type is crucial to fuelling violent anti-Western extremism. In that case, a costly democratization project could easily leave that “something” unaddressed. At the very least, acknowledging that the causes of violent extremism transcend regime type would free us up to ask what they might be.

Soviet-dissident-turned-Israeli-politician, Natan Sharansky offers a parallel. He had long believed that antisemitism in the USSR was caused by totalitarianism. If Russia democratized, he expected it to disappear. But the resilience of antisemitism in post-Soviet Russia—not to mention in western Europe—has forced Sharansky to conclude that the causes of antisemitism lay elsewhere, in places left undiscovered while he was mistakenly focused on regime type.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Sharansky, “On Hating the Jews”, *Commentary* (November 2003).

**T**HIS ANALYSIS has three implications. First, it suggests that democratization should not be raised to the level of urgent, universal principle and should instead be pursued selectively (as, it must be acknowledged, the Bush Administration has done so far). In 1979, Kirpatrick argued that pressures to democratize were characterized by too much of a double standard, since more was being done to undermine authoritarian regimes friendly to the United States than more brutal and hostile totalitarian regimes. The risk today is rather of a single standard, treating all non-democratic regimes as sources of security threats, when in fact non-democratic regimes are as varied as ever. What is needed now is a sharp distinction between non-democratic regimes that are incubators of radicalism and ones that are not.

Second, it means that alongside highly selective democratization, we need to investigate what causes we really do think are generating extremist ideologies. It is critical to remember that Islamic extremism, for example, has found fertile soil within most of Europe's advanced industrial democracies. This debate is today only in its infancy, but it is no less urgent than fighting

already-crystallized terrorist groups. Rather than focusing solely on regime type, it might concern Wahhabi proselytizing; or dangerously reduced levels of American public diplomacy; or the peculiar dynamics of authoritarianism or democratization in certain countries that either advances or retards radicalization. We will not come to firmer conclusions until we make this a central focus of our thinking.

Ironically, all this is actually good news for U.S. policy in Iraq. Even if U.S. intervention does not create a stable democracy there, U.S. security may well be substantially enhanced even if Iraq develops a relatively benign though authoritarian regime. Such a regime could easily maintain durably peaceful relations with the United States, would not support terrorism, and might well not incubate extremism. And Iraq was an inspired candidate for selective democratization, since it would be very difficult to result in a worse regime. Saddam was not a run-of-the-mill dictator but one of the pre-eminent genocidal rulers of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who posed a real threat to the well-being of his neighbors and the entire international system. In at least some cases, giving a tyrant a push is undeniably a good thing. □