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The West's Favored Autocrats

By *Lawrence Davidson*
August 18, 2016

The United States has been, and continues to be, selective about which foreign strongmen it does and does not support. Among the latter, there have been Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Bashar al-Assad of Syria, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela (who was not as autocratic as publicly portrayed), Fidel Castro in Cuba, and Vladimir Putin in Russia. These are just a few of those recent rulers who have drawn the wrath of the “democratic” exemplars in Washington. That wrath often includes economic strangulation and CIA plots.

In the meantime, another group of autocrats is well tolerated by the U.S. Among this group are Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Egypt's General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and various European rightwing politicians such as Viktor Orban of Hungary. Each of these strongmen shows little tolerance for dissent and a ready willingness to exploit racially tinged nationalism.

Why the Double Standards?

What is behind Washington's double standards – its contrasting reactions to one set of regimes as against another? Often American politicians will talk about promoting democracy and claim that the dictators they support have a better chance of evolving in a democratic direction than those they oppose. It might be that these politicians actually believe this to be the case, at least at the moment they make these declarations. However, there is no historical evidence that their

claims are true. This argument is largely a face-saving one. Other underlying reasons exist for the choices they make.

Here are a few of those probable reasons:

The friend/enemy of our friend/enemy is our friend/enemy.

In this scenario the primary friend of the U.S. is Israel and the primary enemy is Russia. The secondary friend/enemy countries are the decidedly undemocratic Egypt and Syria. Egypt became a friend of the U.S. once Anwar Sadat made a peace treaty with Israel in March of 1979. Syria, on the other hand, has always been hostile to Israel and it has remained an enemy state. No democratic motivation is to be found here.

Cold War positioning rationale.

After World War II Turkey became a “strategic asset” by virtue of its proximity to the Soviet Union and its willingness to house U.S. air bases and missile launchers. The repeated interference of the Turkish military in civilian politics was of no consequence to Washington. Present-day East European governments, increasingly autocratic in nature, seem to be considered by many in the Pentagon as “post Cold War” assets on the border of a Russia that never ceased to be an enemy. For a whole subset of Americans (militarists and neoconservatives) the Cold War never really did end.

Resource assets rationale.

Autocracies such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait fall into this category. The U.S. assumes a role of a supportive ally in exchange for stable and affordable worldwide oil prices. Sunni suppression of Shiite and other minorities in these countries is immaterial. What happens if such resource-rich regimes do an about-face and are no longer cooperative with the United States? Well, you have your answer in Iran. Here the U.S. was once completely supportive of the Shah, but he was replaced by hostile ayatollahs in 1979. So friendliness has given way to tactics of economic isolation and CIA plots. Again, democracy has little to do with anything in these cases.

The classic left vs right rationale.

Finally, there is the historically entrenched U.S. tradition that economically cooperative autocratic regimes are acceptable allies. “Cooperative” here means rulers who engage in friendly capitalist behavior: tolerate private enterprise and safeguard the property of foreign investors. Such an economic stance pre-dates the Cold War and has always been more important than political freedoms. Those who act this way, such as Chile under Augusto Pinochet or Argentina under its brutal regime of military rule, get a free pass when they suppress democracy and civil rights. However, other regimes, such as those in Cuba under Castro and Venezuela under Chavez are treated differently. In the case of Venezuela, democracy was in fact practiced, but because of its socialist-leaning economic policies, Washington tried very hard to destroy the country’s government. For those interested in the evolution of this classic U.S. foreign policy, its history is explained in detail in my book, *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America’s National Interest*.

Democracy and the “Other”

By prioritizing traditional alliances, control of resources and economic ideology, the U.S. turns a blind eye to other aspects of autocratic behavior that contradict its own avowed values, thereby setting up a vivid display of foreign policy hypocrisy. An example is the issue of democracy and the “Other.” Since the 1960s the United States has been struggling with its racist impulses. That is, most of its population knows that discrimination against the “Other” is wrong. They can recognize it in the country’s voting laws, in the behavior of its police, and in the attitude of a political candidate like Donald Trump. Official steps, even if they are agonizingly slow and subject to periodic reversals, are taken to dampen down, if not overcome, such public biases. You would think that such a sensitivity would carry over into foreign affairs. Yet the opposite is true.

Many of the autocratic leaders the U.S. favors have risen to power, at least in part, through instilling fear of the “Other” – those who threaten the fantasies of an eternal national character, pure blood, and the status of a God-chosen people. For instance, Washington’s premier ally in the Middle East, Israel, is a state that, at best, can be described as an officially discriminatory democracy where bias against the “Other” (in this case the Palestinians and other non-Jews) is legally sanctioned.

In the case of Europe, the present rising popularity of the right wing and its authoritarian leaders is directly derived from a fear of the “Other.” This, in turn, has been stimulated by a refugee crisis that the United States and its allies helped to create. The destruction of Iraq was a catalyst that let loose forces that have also overwhelmed Syria and Libya and set in motion the deluge of refugees moving out of the Middle East and North Africa toward Europe. The U.S. government accepts the anti-democratic rightwing autocrats who now exploit a fear of hundreds of thousands of displaced persons for which Washington is, in large part, responsible.

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War did not put to rest the West’s militaristic ideological forces. Indeed it gave them a boost. Those pushing “neoconservative” foreign policies are still well represented within U.S. government bureaucracies. Their policies are based on fantasies of “regime change” and remaking the world so it comes under the permanent influence of the United States. Democracy, however, is not now, nor has it ever been, the end game of this process.

Instead, U.S. foreign affairs have been designed to spread capitalist economic practices that facilitate the prosperity of its own “ruling” class. Along the way, the U.S. seeks resource reliability for itself and its trading partners, security for its traditional allies and strategic advantage over old enemies. In all these pursuits the United States has long ago contented itself with what Jonathan Freedland once called the “sonofabitch school of foreign policy.” In other words, Washington doesn’t care if its cooperating allies are murderers, corrupt thieves, racists and the like. They might be bastards of the first order, but it is OK as long as they are “our bastards.” Such is the company we keep.