

Washington Post
Sunday, June 10, 2007; A19

Bush Is Losing Credibility On Democracy, Activists Say

Governments Appear Quicker to Challenge U.S. Rebukes

By Robin Wright

President Bush waxed eloquent about democracy in Prague's majestic Czernin Palace last week, pledging to the assembled dissidents from 17 countries that the United States "will never excuse your oppressors" and, "We will always stand for your freedom." It was the centerpiece speech of his European tour.

But the scorecard for the Bush administration, four years after it began promoting democracy as the key to the United States' long-term security, shows it striking out, according to analysts and activists who originally endorsed the president's efforts. Democracy regression is visible from Hugo Chavez's Venezuela, a country that was the first democracy in Latin America, to Vladimir Putin's Russia, where the Soviet demise triggered political changes worldwide 15 years ago.

The Middle East, which first spurred the Bush democracy push, is witnessing the biggest setbacks. Lebanon, whose "Cedar Revolution" was heralded by the White House in 2005 as a model for orderly political change in the region, is the latest flash point. In 2007, the United States is sending planeloads of ammunition and war materiel to Beirut to prop up the troops of a beleaguered government.

The audience willing to listen has also dwindled. Among the participants at Prague's International Conference on Democracy and Security were Reza Pahlavi, a son of Iran's autocratic shah who was listed as an "opposition leader to the clerical regime of Iran," and Farid Ghadry, often referred to as Syria's Ahmed Chalabi. Many other invitees, including Richard N. Perle, were leading U.S. neoconservatives and Iraq war advocates.

"It was a very good speech, in fact, but Bush now lacks credibility," said Amr Hamzawy of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Governments and opposition movements alike, no one is listening -- governments because they were very quick to understand U.S. policy shifts devaluing democracy promotion, and opposition movements because the U.S. has done very little to act on its promises."

The reaction in Cairo to Bush's speech was telling. Bush barely nudged Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, saying the three took "brave stands" against extremists and "some steps" to expand liberty, "yet they have a great distance still to travel."

Nevertheless, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit lashed out at Bush for "unacceptable interference" and expressed "astonishment and upset" over his rebuke. The parliament's foreign relations committee also shot back, saying in a statement that Bush should have talked about Guantanamo Bay prisoners, "deprived of the simplest legal defense guaranteed by all human rights conventions."

Egypt's dissidents were upset, too. "I feel disappointed and betrayed by George Bush," former political prisoner Saad Eddin Ibrahim told journalists in Prague. "He said that he is promoting democracy, but he has been manipulated by President Hosni Mubarak, who managed to frighten him with the threat of the Islamists."

In a meeting with Bush after the speech, Ibrahim implored the president to tie hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. aid to Mubarak's reforms and release of political prisoners, notably former presidential candidate Ayman Nour, Ibrahim said in an interview.

The momentum generated by Bush's initial democracy push between 2003 and 2005 has fizzled in part because of the outcome of its own efforts -- elections Washington urged in Egypt, Iraq, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria, Qatar, Bahrain and Yemen, activists and analysts said.

The White House pushed harder than either Israel or the Palestinians for new Palestinian Authority elections last year, only to cut off aid and contact once the militant organization Hamas won, said Robert Malley, director of the International Crisis Group's Middle East program. "The outcome has not been to disavow democracy," he said, "but to undermine the democratically elected government."

Without the aid, seven out of 10 Palestinian households now live in poverty, an increase of 26 percent over the past year, the International Labor Organization, a U.N. agency, reported last month.

Bush's policy now appears "inconsistent, contradictory and self-serving," said Rami Khouri, director of the American University of Beirut's Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs.

In Iraq, Khouri said, the country's vote in January 2005 produced the "much-ballyhooed purple ink-stained finger" but cannot be equated with credible democratic transformation.

"What we thought would provide democratic choices ended up as an expression of demographic preferences" that deepened the sectarian and ethnic divide, Malley added.

In his speech, Bush said the State Department is directing U.S. ambassadors in every "un-free" country to "seek out and meet" democracy and human rights activists. "People living in tyranny need to know they are not forgotten," the president said.

But activists are increasingly wary of the Bush initiative and his representatives, they said. "At the beginning, American rhetoric on democracy was stirring and powerful," Khouri said. "But that moment has been lost, and it will be very hard to regain."