

Does Obama believe in democracy for all?

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, AUG 6 2009

I have been running a few ideas through my mind and with a colleague about President Obama's attitudes to democracy promotion and I think I have reached an understanding that I want to share with you. The paradox that has been taunting me is this dilemma between the idealistic tenets of the mission that dictates America and its political system should be replicated around the world and the realism of accepting your neighbours for who they are not what you want them to be.

Since taking office I think President Obama has identified more with this second camp than I would have thought. On January 22, 2009, new Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton declared that there were three legs to US foreign policy "defense, diplomacy, and development". By using 'development' over 'democracy' the Obama administration appears to be distancing itself from the language and actions of the Bush and Clinton administrations. The key to determining whether this is mere language and not policy change is to see whether institutions such as USAID, which have historically performed democracy promotion in the last two administrations, are changing their rules of engagement. Is there a policy shift away from the lofty goals of the Clinton and Bush administrations towards a more pragmatic and realistic-achieving policy of development? It is important to note that what a development strategy has over a democratic one is that it does not have an end-goal already worked into the strategy; the implication of a development strategy is that it is a process intended to continue indefinitely. It is argued that a shift away from democracy towards development may provide a more realistic approach to US policy.

In defending America's move towards development I am suggesting that the interface and dialogue between the international and the local actors needs re-examination to consider the theoretical possibility that a stable modernised state is a more realistic short- to long-term priority than the quest for democratic consolidation. To achieve this change can the Obama administration develop a non-hegemonic interface with the local that encourages self-directed modernisation? However, there are dangers to this policy change. For example, in a democratising state it is realistic to expect there to be breaches of human rights but there is also an emerging moral and legal framework that can criticise these actions. In part, this framework is enforced by external state imposed conditionalities on receiving aid. By instituting a development policy only, it is possible that there will be no external support for such a framework, thus explicitly rejecting the need for a human rights agenda. Look at the Obama administration's response to the changes in the 2009 Afghan law change regarding Shiite women's rights. Although Obama has considered the law 'abhorrent', it will not impact on America's new policy of minimising its strategy in Afghanistan away from democracy promotion.

Here in lies the paradox for me. On the one hand, as detailed above, there is an apparent move away from democracy promotion towards development. On the other hand, democracy promotion is THE essential element to US interactions with the world. It was forged out of the initial development of the colony and then the emerging United States. This historical mission is not just a political legacy but a moral (cultural) one as well. Remember the words of James Winthrop in 1630 "For we must consider that we shall be as a City on a Hill". He was talking about the New world being a morally better place than the Old World.

Bearing this in mind, is it somewhat disingenuous to suggest that one man, one President can remove a lifelong mission? And it is from here that my conversations with a colleague have helped me. He suggested, and I paraphrase, 'Why can't both be in operation at the same time?' I think he hit the nail on the head. Obama is not

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removing the aims and objectives of the American Mission or its attached promotion of democracy it is just lengthening out the possibility of achieving a peaceful and democratic world. Accepting states as they are today in no way condemns their future modernisation and democratisation.

Your thoughts?

About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but other times it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.