

Obama and Democracy Assistance: Challenges and Responses

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Barack Obama, Presidential Candidate, [Barack Obama's Photo Stream](#) (CC)

The commitment of the Obama administration to democracy assistance has become an issue of considerable debate. Whilst his predecessor, President George W. Bush, claimed it was America's mission to promote democracy with the goal of 'ending tyranny in our world,' President Obama has largely avoided the term.

Indeed, Obama's Inaugural Address and his first State of the Union speech made no explicit reference to democracy assistance, whilst his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, called for a foreign policy that promotes the 'three Ds' of defence, diplomacy, and development; a triumvirate conspicuous by the absence of the D of democracy.

The delayed appointments of key democracy assistance officials—it took until July 7 before Obama nominated a candidate for Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor—further suggested that democracy assistance was not a high

priority for the Obama administration. However, rather than signalling a decline in America's commitment to democracy assistance, this article contends that such behaviour is indicative of a considered and astute response to overcoming the tarnished legacy of democracy assistance that Bush bequeathed to Obama. Moreover, it is a response which promises to deliver a more sophisticated and coherent brand of democracy assistance.

As of January 20, 2010, Obama has been President of the United States of America for one year. Ordinarily, this would be a rather short time from which to draw any meaningful conclusions about new foreign policy directions. However, the Obama administration has so far proved far from ordinary and has been characterised by a string of major foreign policy statements on U.S.-Muslim relations, the detention of foreign prisoners at Guantánamo Bay, the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, commitment to democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, and in relations with a range of traditionally unreceptive states including Iran, Syria, and Honduras.

In contrast, the approach to democracy assistance has certainly been more understated, but this does not necessarily mean that it has been any less significant. In fact, this first year presents an ideal opportunity to analyse the beginnings of a careful rehabilitation of democracy assistance by the Obama administration, first by tracing Obama's record on democracy assistance prior to assuming the presidency, and then by outlining the challenges he inherited—and the responses he initiated—on three key themes: credibility, continuity, and change.

The Obama Record on Democracy Assistance Prior to Presidency

Obama has traditionally supported democracy assistance as a key foreign policy principle. During his 2008 campaign, Obama asserted that 'democracies are our best trading partners, our most valuable allies, and the nations with which we share our deepest values.'¹ Obama has also argued that democratic states are better equipped to fight terrorism, stop the spread of weapons, and deal with public health crises.²

Furthermore, Obama's legislative record also demonstrates that he supported and originated legislation designed to increase funding for democracy assistance. For example, in 2005 he introduced the DRC Relief, Security and Democracy Promotion Act, and also co-sponsored the Advance Democracy Act. In short, it is clear that Obama has consistently endorsed democracy assistance as a core foreign policy strategy during his early career in elected office. However, it is also apparent that if such a commitment is to be maintained during his presidency, Obama will need to overcome three key challenges.

Obama's Challenges: 1—Credibility

Perhaps the principal challenge that the Obama administration faces is to re-establish the credibility of U.S. democracy assistance after the exaggerated hyperbole, inconsistency, and mistakes of the Bush administration. Indeed, Bush's persistent association of democracy assistance with the Iraq War and regime change did much to malign the concept and help to foster a perception in many parts of the world that democracy assistance was a mere euphemism for aggressive U.S. interventionism. As Eric Hobsbawm acerbically comments, 'one should always be suspicious when military powers claim to be doing favours for their victims and the world by defeating and occupying weaker states.'³

Furthermore, the contradiction between Bush's 'Freedom Agenda' and his continuing positive relations with undemocratic governments such as those in Saudi Arabia, China and Egypt, further amplified concerns about the underlying rationale of America's pro-democracy position. The harm caused by the Bush appropriation of democracy has been recognised within the democracy assistance community. Lorne Craner, head of the democracy assistance agency International Republican Institute, has stated, 'if I could trade for the anonymity we had in the '90s,' before Bush came to power, 'I would do it in a minute.'⁴

The Bush legacy has undeniably resulted in a situation where the very concept of democracy assistance is often cast in a negative light even before the actual substance of a programme is examined. As Thomas Carothers notes:

The sad, mildly ironic reality of the Bush approach to democracy promotion is that it may represent the worst of both worlds: It has soured people all around the globe, and many in the United States as well, on the very legitimacy and value of U.S. democracy promotion, despite having involved only a limited engagement in democracy promotion.⁵

Obama's Challenges: 2—Continuity

U.S. democracy assistance has traditionally been a bi-partisan affair. Title IX of the Foreign Assistance Act 1966, which represented the very beginnings of overt U.S. democracy assistance, was advocated by both a Democrat, Donald Fraser, and a Republican, Bradford Morse. Since then, democracy assistance has been consistently supported by both parties with very little variation from one administration to the next.

For example, where the Republican Ronald Reagan created the National Endowment for Democracy to encourage democratic reform around the world, the Democrat Bill Clinton enshrined democracy assistance as one of four key pillars of U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, even under Bush, if you exclude his rhetoric and the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq (which were arguably enforced regime change rather than genuine democracy assistance), the actual substance of programmes remains comparable to the Clinton administration with a similar focus on institution building, civil society and electoral support.

Unfortunately though, the Bush rhetoric *is* difficult to exclude and, for many Democrats, democracy assistance is now a damaged brand forever associated with the Republican Freedom Agenda. Thus, a challenge emerges with how Obama can preserve continuity and maintain democracy assistance as a bi-partisan approach. Establishing consensus, particularly in areas such as funding during a global recession, is critical if democracy assistance is to remain a preserve of U.S. foreign policy.

Obama's Challenges: 3—Change

In the Italian historical novel *The Leopard*, the Sicilian prince asks his nephew Tancredi why he is joining a rebellion against their king. Tancredi famously replies, 'If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.'⁶ And so too is the challenge for Obama. Certainly, the mistakes of the Bush administration have made continuity of a pro-democracy foreign policy exigent, but it is equally true that the criticisms of the Bush policy have deflected attention away from some of the more central and pressing challenges surrounding democracy assistance. If changes cannot be realised in such areas, then the necessity of continuity will quickly diminish.

The problems that require change are manifold. On a global level, democracy appears to be in decline. According to recent findings from Freedom House, political rights and civil liberties have suffered a net global decline for a third successive year; the first such regression since the survey began in 1972.⁷ Democracy has stagnated or regressed in countries such as Cambodia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, whilst states such as China and Russia are rolling back democratic advancements and becoming increasingly hostile to the rhetoric and actions of democracy assistance. Some commentators have expressed fears that the world is polarising into different camps and entering 'an era of rivalry between Western liberal states and dangerous autocracies.'⁸

At the very least, it is becoming clear that whilst it has proved possible to achieve the forms of democracy, securing the substance is much more difficult. Indeed, contrary to the Bush rhetoric, it is evident that every move away from authoritarianism was not in fact a 'democratic revolution.'

Moreover, autocratic leaders have become astute in circumventing democracy to give the appearance of democracy whilst maintaining a firm grip on power; developing what we may term pseudo-democracies.⁹

This 'backlash' against democracy poses serious questions as to how the U.S. should conduct its democracy assistance policies. It would be relatively easy to move away from Bush's fixation on elections, however, it will be much more difficult to implement the substantial changes that will make U.S. policy viable in fostering democracy. In recent years, studies have focussed on the need for a more balanced democracy assistance approach with various calls for greater attention to state institutions,¹⁰ civil society,¹¹ or, more recently, the role of political parties¹² and media.¹³ All of these elements are vital in allowing space for indigenous democratic practices to flourish.

However, it is also apparent that a significant degree of the problems faced in transitional countries are not because of a lack of technical know-how, but due to a politicisation of key institutions such as the media and electoral commissions. There is a patent need to deliberately engage with the power relations in a target country and to do this in a consistent manner which is linked to future foreign assistance. Thus, a challenge emerges in how to develop an effective relationship between 'positive' assistance projects and 'attendant critical diplomatic purchase.'¹⁴

Obama's Responses: 1—Credibility

Although modest in rhetoric, the first year of Obama's presidency has nevertheless illustrated several positive signals in respect of democracy assistance, not least in addressing the issue of credibility. The Obama administration has recognised the need for temperance and restraint when speaking about democracy assistance. For example, Obama has asserted that 'instead of mere rhetoric,' his administration 'will focus on achieving concrete outcomes that will advance democracy.'¹⁵

Indeed, there is an apparent realisation that democracy assistance does not occur in a vacuum and that perceptions are influenced by broader foreign policy actions. Although not universally welcomed in the U.S., Obama's immediate order to close Guantánamo Bay within a year (although he did not succeed in this), his measured comments on election results in Iran, the careful diplomacy in handling the coup d'etat in Honduras, an expressed willingness to engage with hostile governments, and talk of the Iraq War as a continuing national responsibility rather than a shining example of U.S. democracy assistance, have all made substantial inroads in repairing America's global reputation. Obama has acknowledged the value of such a position, declaring that 'our greatest tool in advancing democracy is our own example.'¹⁶

Moreover, the very election of Obama, with his ability to connect to a wide range of people and his measured yet inspirational style, has brought a freshness to the image of U.S. foreign policy that has proven a welcome antidote to the antagonistic and reductionist style of his predecessor. Obama may have made few explicit references to democracy assistance, but this is arguably a deliberate strategy in which actions speak louder than words.

Obama's Responses: 2—Continuity

Despite some initial concerns about Obama's commitment to democracy assistance, his support was clearly outlined in his Cairo speech in June, 2009. Here, whilst outlining his views on democratic governance, Obama stated that, 'these are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.' His spoken intentions were followed by a \$234 million increase in the State and Foreign Operations budget for Governing Justly and Democratically (GJD), an increase of some 9 percent.¹⁷

His capacity to exchange reduced rhetoric for continued, concrete and improved strategic support for democracy assistance is both a striking and satisfying response. Moreover, Obama's strong predilection towards bipartisanship promises that democracy assistance has not only been saved from potential abandonment, but that the foundations for a sustained and substantial engagement are in place.

Obama's Responses: 3—Change

Elected on a message of 'change,' this should probably be the challenge that Obama finds easiest to excel in. His measured response in terms of the style in which democracy assistance is presented has already had an impact in restoring U.S. credibility, however, efforts to initiate more fundamental change to the substance of U.S. democracy aid represents a greater challenge. Nevertheless, initial signs are again encouraging. In January 2009, Obama stated that 'elections aren't democracy' and that his administration's democracy programmes will be viewed 'through a lens that it is actually delivering a better life for people on the ground and less obsessed with form, more concerned with substance.'¹⁸

This broader perspective of democracy has been developed elsewhere. For example, when fielding questions in Paris in April, Obama stated that democracy 'does not just depend on going to the ballot box. It also means that you're not going to be shaken down by police because the police aren't getting properly paid. It also means that if you want to start a business, you don't have to pay a bribe.' This acknowledgement that sustainable democracy extends beyond elections to security and solid socio-economic conditions is in tune with academic thinking and offers a positive alternative to Bush's simplistic notion of democracy being defined largely by elections.

However, as Freedom House has commented, 'these are encouraging words... but more needs to be done.'¹⁹ In particular, an innovative approach to dealing with the growing number pseudo-democracies is yet to materialise; a challenge that will likely define whether the Obama record on democracy assistance will ultimately be judged in a favourable light or not.

Conclusions

Despite a somewhat subdued start for democracy assistance under the Obama administration, it is clear that the approach is being quietly reformed rather than relegated from U.S. foreign policy. Both America and Obama have a long-standing commitment to democracy assistance and this looks set to continue through a well-managed policy of continuity and change.

In inheriting such a damaged democracy brand from the Bush administration, it was essential that Obama first embark upon a careful and measured rebuilding of the democracy assistance approach. Credibility has now largely been restored, as evidenced in his ability to secure increased funding for GJD. Furthermore, his statements about democracy suggest a broad, value-based vision which goes beyond elections and incorporates elements such as human security and socio-economic conditions.

Of course, it remains very early to make any definitive judgements about democracy assistance under the Obama administration, and a clearer indication will only emerge when democracy clashes more markedly with national security and economic interests. Nevertheless, the 'star value' of Obama, and his extraordinary ability to combine inspiration with moderation, provides a compelling vision for the continued recovery and revitalisation of U.S. democracy assistance. For the present at least, the Obama administration's commitment to democracy assistance can be viewed in a positive and highly encouraging light.

NOTES

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[19](#) Freedom House, [cited]. *Making Its Mark: An Analysis of the Obama Administration Fy2010 Budget Request for Democracy and Human Rights*

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