

COMMENTARY

What to Expect from US “Democracy Promotion” in Iraq

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The US plan for “promoting democracy” in Iraq is an integral component of its overall interventionist project in the Middle East. US rulers are deeply divided over the invasion and occupation of Iraq and they face an expanding foreign policy crisis. Nonetheless, there is consensus among them, and among transnational elites more generally, on political intervention under the rubric of “democracy promotion.” Such political intervention is not just a Republican, much less a Bush regime, policy. As such, it plays a key legitimating function and can be expected to become a central component of overall US strategy in Iraq in the coming months and years.

Washington’s plan for “political transition” in Iraq involves the election of constituent assembly in December 2004, in the wake of the alleged “restoration” of Iraqi sovereignty in June 2004,¹ to be followed by general elections in December 2005. The US government had already allocated by early 2004 at least \$458 million dollars for a program to “promote democracy” in Iraq.² The contours of this program are not yet clear. But judging by the general pattern of US “democracy promotion” around the world, we can expect that this program will involve funding by Washington through numerous channels—both overt and covert—of political parties and other elite forums in Iraq, as well as a series of organizations in Iraqi civil society, among them, trade unions, business councils, media outlets, student and women’s groups, and professional associations.³

These “democracy promotion programs” are part of a larger “four step” plan for the entire Middle East, announced by Washington in 2003, using its

¹ At the time of writing (April 2004), the US State Department maintained that on June 30, 2004, sovereignty would be turned over to an expanded Iraq Governing Council (IGC), the unelected Council of 25 appointees hand-picked by the US occupation authority.

² “Iraq: One Year Later: Transition, But to What?” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 March, 2004.

³ For more detailed history and analysis on US “democracy promotion” and background to the present commentary, see William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, U.S. Intervention, and Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and *A Faustian Bargain: U.S. Intervention in the Nicaraguan Elections and American Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

occupation of Iraq as leverage.⁴ The first of these steps was a resolution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict (the “road map” has, of course, since collapsed). The second was a “Middle East Partnership” to “build a civil society” in the region. Such “civil society” programs typically attempt to groom new transnationally-oriented elites, and in this case, to incorporate the Arab masses into a civil society under the hegemony of these elites. The third was the region’s further integration into the global economy through liberalization and structural adjustment. And the fourth was preventing the rise of any regional military challenge to the emerging US/transnational domination. The overall objective was to force on the region a more complete integration into global capitalism.

The US has three goals for the political system it will attempt to put into place in Iraq. The first is to cultivate transnationally-oriented elites who share Washington’s interest in integrating Iraq into the global capitalist system and who can administer the local state being constructed under the tutelage of the occupation force. The second is to isolate those counter-elites who are not amenable to the US project, such as nationally- (as opposed to transnationally-) oriented elites and others in a position of leadership, authority and influence, who do not share US goals. The third is to establish the hegemony of this elite over the Iraqi masses, to prevent the mass of Iraqis from becoming politicized and mobilized on their own independent of or in opposition to the US project, by incorporating them “consensually” into the political order the US wishes to establish.

The type of political system Washington will attempt to establish in Iraq has little to do with democracy and should not be referred to as such, as the terminology itself is ideological and intended to give an aura of legitimacy to US intervention. It does not involve power (*cratos*) of the people (*demos*), much less an end to class and foreign domination or to substantive inequality. This political system is more accurately termed polyarchy (a term I have borrowed from Robert Dahl and modified)—a system in which a small group actually rules on behalf of (transnational) capital and mass participation in decision-making is limited to choosing among competing elites in tightly controlled electoral processes.⁵

US policymakers began to promote polyarchy in the 1980s and 1990s around the world through novel mechanisms of political intervention, abandoning the dictatorships and authoritarian regimes that they had relied on for much of the post WWII period to assure social control and political influence in the former colonial world. This shift in policy took place in the context of globalization and in response to the crisis of elite rule that had developed in much of the Third World in the 1970s. Behind the new policy was an effort to hijack and redirect mass democratization struggles, to undercut popular demands for more fundamental change in the social order, to help emerging transnationally-oriented elites secure state power through highly-contested transitions, and to use that power to integrate (or reintegrate) their countries into the new global capitalism.

Seen in more theoretical abstraction, the policy shift represented an effort by transnational elites to reconstitute hegemony through a change in the mode of

⁴ See Robin Wright, “U.S. to Press a Four-Step Plan for Transforming the Mideast,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 April, 2003, p. A4.

⁵ See Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy*, *op. cit.*

political domination, from the coercive systems of social control exercised by authoritarian and dictatorial regimes to more consensually-based systems based on polyarchy. Transnational elites hope that the demands, grievances and aspirations of the popular classes will become neutralized less through direct repression than through ideological mechanisms, political cooptation and disorganization, and the limits imposed by the global economy. Polyarchy has been promoted by the transnational elite as the political counterpart to the promotion of neo-liberalism, structural adjustment, and unfettered transnational corporate accumulation. US "democracy promotion" intervention, in this regard, generally facilitates a shift in power from locally and regionally-oriented elites to new groups more favorable to the transnational agenda.

The countries most often targeted for US political intervention under the rubric of "democracy promotion" are:

1. Those Washington wishes to destabilize, such as, in recent years, Venezuela Haiti, and Cuba, and earlier Nicaragua. The groups and individuals that participated in the destabilization of the government of Jean Bertrand Aristide and that are now in power in Haiti were precisely those groomed and cultivated by US "democracy promotion" programs dating back to the late 1980s and undertaken continuously right up to the March 2004 US *coup d'état*. In Venezuela, the opposition to the government of Hugo Chavez has been working since the late 1990s closely with the US "democracy promotion" network.
2. Those where popular, nationalist, revolutionary and other progressive forces pose a threat to the stable domination of local pro-US elites or neo-liberal regimes. In these countries, neo-liberal elites are bolstered through political intervention programs. In El Salvador, for instance, "democracy promotion" programs that had been conducted throughout the 1990s and early 21st century were expanded in 2003 as presidential elections approached. These programs provided diverse forms of support for civic and political groups aligned with the ruling ARENA party and marginalized the FMLN.⁶ Programs such as these have been conducted in dozens of countries.
3. Those targeted for a "transition," that is, a US-supported and often orchestrated changeover in government and state structures. South Africa and Eastern European countries fell into this category in the 1990s, as does currently Iraq.

It is worth noting that the US and other Western powers since the 1980s have been promoting polyarchy in Latin America (the original testing ground for the strategy), Eastern Europe, Africa and some of Asia, but until now have preferred to see the assorted sheikhs, monarchies and authoritarian regimes remain in power in much of the Middle East.

Modus Vivendi of US Political Intervention

"Democracy promotion" programs involve several tiers of policy design, funding, operational activity, and influence. The first involves the highest levels of

⁶ For background on the case of El Salvador, see William I. Robinson, *Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change, and Globalization* (London: Verso, 2003).

the US state apparatus—the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and certain other state branches. It is at this level that the overall need to undertake political intervention through “democracy promotion” in particular countries and regions is identified as one component of overall policy towards the country or region in question. Such “democracy promotion” programs never stand on their own; they are always just one aspect of larger US foreign policy operations, and are synchronized with military, economic, and other dimensions. Of particular significance are economic policy levers Washington is able to apply to the intervened country in conjunction with “democracy promotion,” such as an assortment of aid programs as carrots and sanctions and embargoes as sticks.

In the second tier, the US Agency for International Development (AID) is allocated hundreds of millions of dollars, which it doles out, either directly or via the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and occasionally other agencies such as the US Institute for Peace (USIP), to a series of ostensibly “private” US organizations that are in reality closely tied to the policymaking establishment and aligned with US foreign policy. The NED was created in 1983 as a central organ, or clearinghouse, for new forms of “democratic” political intervention abroad. Prior to the creation of the NED, the CIA had routinely provided funding and guidance for political parties, business councils, trade unions, student and civic groups in the countries in which the US intervened. In the 1980s a significant portion of these programs were shifted from the CIA to the AID and the NED and made many times more sophisticated than the often-crude operations of the CIA.

The organizations that receive AID and NED funds include, among others (the list is extensive): the National Republican Institute for International Affairs (NRI, also known as the International Republican Institute, or IRI) and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), which are officially the “foreign policy arms” of the US Republican and the Democratic parties, respectively; the International Federation for Electoral Systems (IFES); the Center for Democracy (CFD); the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE); and the Free Trade Union Institute (FTUI). US universities, private contractors, and organic intellectuals may also be tapped. For instance, the *Los Angeles Times* of March 20, 2004, reported that Larry Diamond of Stanford University, a leading intellectual associated with the new political intervention, was brought into Iraq in January to lecture on “democracy” to “700 Iraqi tribal leaders, many of them wearing Western business suits underneath their robes.”⁷ While these “private” organizations are likely to become involved in Iraq, the Pentagon will surely continue its own political operations inside the country, such as its sponsorship of the Iraqi Media Network, launched by Pentagon contractors with some \$200 million, a project that seeks to establish a network of pro-US, pliant media outlets and to influence national and foreign reporting on events in the country.

In the third tier, these US organizations provide “grants”—that is, funding, guidance and political sponsorship—to a host of organizations in the intervened country itself. These organizations may have previously existing and are penetrated through “democracy promotion” programs and incorporated in new ways into US foreign policy designs. Or they may be created entirely from scratch.

⁷ “Iraq: One Year Later,” *op. cit.*

These organizations include local political parties and coalitions, trade unions, business councils, media outlets, professional and civic associations, student groups, peasant leagues, human rights groups, and so on. Many of these groups may tout themselves as "non-partisan." They may well be with regard to local political currents but not with regard to the overall objectives of US policy. When elections are held the interventionist network invariably funds or creates electoral monitoring and "get out the vote" groups that appear as local "non-partisan" democratic civic groups but in practice play a central facilitating and legitimating role in the program.

We may see in Iraq another *modus operandi* of US political intervention, in which US operatives choose for strategic reasons to work through third-country groups. For instance, in its extensive political intervention activities in Nicaragua in the 1980s the US "democracy promotion" apparatus worked through a number of Venezuelan political and civic organizations. Proxy Venezuelan operatives actually conducted programs on the ground in Nicaragua. As Spanish-speaking Latin Americans, these operatives were able to achieve a level of legitimacy, penetration and influence impossible for gringos.⁸ In Iraq, therefore, the US may choose at some point to mount political intervention programs via Jordanian, Egyptian, and other Middle Eastern-based groups. Those monitoring political intervention in Iraq will want to look out for the creation of NGOs in the country (we are likely to see a dramatic NGO-ization). While many of these may be authentic Iraqi and foreign groups, others will undoubtedly be part of the US-mounted political intervention network.

Washington hopes to create through its "democracy promotion" programs "agents of influence"—local political and civic leaders who are expected to generate ideological conformity with the elite social order under construction, to promote the neo-liberal outlook, and to advocate for policies that integrate the intervened country into global capitalism. These agents are further expected to compete with, and eclipse, more popular-oriented, independent, progressive or radical groups and individuals who may have a distinct agenda for their country.

The US goal is to make the conquest of Iraq a Janus-faced project of consent and coercion, or more aptly, "consent backed up by the armor or coercion." "Democracy promotion" programs are not intended, as a matter of course, to replace military intervention but to complement it. US and international operatives hope that political intervention will lead to the establishment of internal consensual mechanisms of domination as the flip side of direct coercive domination by US armed force. The operation of local paramilitary forces and even death squads is not necessarily anathema to US-sponsored political transitions in intervened countries. Such forces may well develop in Iraq in some sort of a synergic relation with the civic and political network that US political intervention will cultivate.

It is important to emphasize that many individuals brought into US "democracy promotion" programs are not simple puppets of US policy and their organizations are not necessarily "fronts" (or in CIA jargon, "cut-outs"). Very often they involve genuine local leaders seeking to further their own interests and projects in the context of internal political competition and conflict and of

⁸ For details, see Robinson, *A Faustian Bargain*, *op. cit.*

heavy US influence over the local scene. Moreover, old and new middle classes, professional and bureaucratic strata may identify their interests with the integration or reintegration of their countries into global capitalism under a US canopy. These classes may be politically disorganized or under the sway of counter-elites and of nationalist, popular, or radical ideologies. They often become the most immediate targets of “democracy promotion,” to be won over and converted into a social base for the transnational elite agenda.

The Battle for Iraqi Civil Society

Hence, promoting polyarchy in Iraq, as elsewhere, will be more than just theatrical activity to gain international legitimacy for a regime brought into being by foreign occupation. Washington hopes it can bring together a national elite that can act as effective intermediaries between the Iraqi masses and the US/transnational project for the country. This elite is expected to establish its effective control over the political society between created by the US occupation force and its ideological hegemony over the country’s fragmented and unruly civil society. The objective is to bring about a political order that can achieve internal stability as the necessary condition for the country to function as a reliable supplier of oil, an investment outlet for transnational capital, and a platform for further transnational economic and political penetration of the Middle East.

The US program will likely seek to privatize everything as it integrates Iraq into global capitalism and opens up the country’s resources and labor force to transnational corporations. But here it must count on local political, business, and civic intermediaries that will be cultivated by US “democracy promotion” programs and brought together into a functioning network attuned to the US/transnational program. These elites will pursue their own interests within the broader project and as a matter of course there will be multiple points of friction among them, and between them and their US overlords.

The “democracy promotion” program in Iraq will heavily involve the older generation of “jackals” (the Chalabis, Pachachis, and so on) and their organizations⁹—indeed, they are already deeply implicated in the US occupation—but it will also attempt to identify new leaders and prominent figures among diverse sectors and communities, and to bring them into the dominant project. Washington knows that it cannot count alone on the old class of exiles and assorted jackals as internal representatives of the transnational project. It must be able to identify and cultivate leaders that can garner a minimum of legitimacy among the country’s diverse and fractious ethnic and religious communities and social sectors.

To this end Washington will sponsor numerous consensus-building processes and forums in and outside of Iraq, with the participation of a broad range

⁹ On 20th century Iraqi politics with a good focus on the development under British colonialism and neo-colonialism of a local elite political class (including the origin of the term “jackals” to refer to these elites), see Tariq Ali, *Bush in Babylon: The Recolonisation of Iraq* (London: Verso, 2003). More generally on the events leading up to and following the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, see, among the expanding body of literature, Geoff Simons, *Future Iraq: U.S. Policy in Reshaping the Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2003). There are many valuable websites on Iraq. See, *inter alia*, www.occupationwatch.org.

of groups and individuals from Iraq and from third countries. These forums will include Iraq-wide and international conferences on "promoting democracy." US operatives will identify hundreds, perhaps thousands, of individuals it believes can be brought into the program. They will be invited to these conferences and to numerous gatherings in and outside of Iraq for "democracy training." Local media outlets funding by the program will give constant coverage and propaganda to those organizations and individuals drawn into the "democracy promotion" network, and will ignore, sideline, or malign independent organizations that compete with the US/transnational agenda.

What is crucial to reiterate is that weaving together a pro-Western elite capable of assuming the reigns of local power (no matter how limited, fragmented and controlled by Washington) is only half the US strategy. The other half is to try to control and suppress alternative political initiatives within civil society and prevent popular or independent political voices from emerging. As the US moves forward with plans to turn over "sovereignty" to a hand-picked and unrepresentative body "democracy promotion" programs will have the twin objective of: (1) fostering political and civic organizations in civil society that can build a social base for a new Iraqi government; and (2) suppressing and isolating those organizations and social movements that oppose the US program and put forward an alternative. In this regard, "democracy promotion" will seek to politically incorporate mass resistance by safely channeling it into formal, sanitized, and bureaucratized "politics" managed by the string of political, business, and civic organizations propped up by political intervention. This is how polyarchy is supposed to function to absorb threats and to reproduce the social order.

The Bush regime (along with other US and transnational elites) hopes a "transition to democracy" will provide a viable "exit strategy." But this is close to impossible, a veritable imperial pipedream. Establishing a functioning polyarchy is a near impossibility, given the rivalries, petty ambitions, and struggles for the spoils of local power among the jackals, the political, ethnic, clan-based and religious splits among them and within Iraqi society at large, the rise of counter-elites, the expanding resistance, and the dim prospects of pacifying a colonized and restive population. If the Iraq invasion and occupation is the most massive US intervention since Vietnam, it is also the most stunning—indeed, insurmountable—chasm that we have seen since Washington's Indochina quagmire between US intent, on the one hand, and the actual US ability, on the other hand, to control events and outcomes.

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