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A conservative split aids Obama on Egypt

By E.J. Dionne Jr.

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The democratic [uprising in Egypt](#) has brought into relief a gradual and little-noticed transformation in American politics. Over the past decade, ideological divisions on the role of democracy and human rights in American foreign policy have been scrambled.

In the meantime, President Obama has restored foreign policy realism to the White House, giving a liberal gloss to what had traditionally been a conservative disposition. This mildly liberal realism explains why Obama and his team [have been so cautious](#) in their dealings with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

The most striking change is among conservatives. In the past, the default position of much of the American right was to support foreign strongmen friendly to the United States, on the theory that whoever succeeded them would be worse for their own people and disastrous for American interests.

This view was especially powerful during the Cold War, when conservatives strongly criticized then-President Jimmy Carter for encouraging the fall of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, whose government was replaced by Daniel Ortega's leftist Sandinista movement. Carter was also condemned for undercutting the shah of Iran during the revolt that culminated in the rise of an Islamic government that still rules in Tehran.

The most celebrated expression of this conservative critique came from the late Jeane Kirkpatrick in a 1979 Commentary magazine article, "[Dictatorships & Double Standards](#)." The essay called her to the attention of Ronald Reagan, who later appointed her as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Kirkpatrick criticized Carter for being so fearful of opposing the "forces of democracy" that he was led in both cases "to assist actively in deposing an erstwhile friend and ally and installing a government hostile to American interests and policies in the world."

She added that "no idea holds greater sway in the mind of educated Americans than the belief that it is possible to democratize governments, anytime, anywhere, under any circumstances."

Yet now, many in the neoconservative movement of which Kirkpatrick was a proud member come close to the view Kirkpatrick criticized - that "it is possible to democratize governments, anytime, anywhere, under any circumstances" - and have long been urging Obama to distance the United States from Mubarak's regime.

[Robert Kagan](#), one of the leading neoconservative foreign voices, has been in the forefront of those arguing that the United States needed to be more prepared for a democratic rebellion in Egypt, and he was among the specialists brought to the White House this week for a discussion of the next steps on Egypt.

In an [NPR interview on Wednesday](#), Kagan offered the classic view of human rights advocates: that the United States should avoid a repeat of its excessively long-lived loyalty to the shah, which had the effect of "alienating the Iranian people for decades." Kagan also warned against the "illusory search for stability."

There is a great irony here for those liberals who passionately took issue with the neoconservative crusade to impose democracy by force but nonetheless share the view that American foreign policy should be more animated by democratic values.

And note that conservatives who take the old realist view - [Rep. Thaddeus McCotter](#) (R-Mich.), for example, declared that the "[Egyptian demonstrations are the reprise of Iran's 1979 radical revolution](#)" and called on the United States to "stand with her ally Egypt to preserve an imperfect government capable of reform" - now seem isolated.

The resulting split on the conservative side has been helpful to Obama, and he has won support for his cautious dealings with Mubarak from Republican congressional leaders.

If there was ever any doubt, it is now clear that Obama is more a realist than a human rights crusader, even if he has tried to square this circle in recent days by repeatedly invoking "universal" rights and values.

The existence of a pro-democracy conservative camp has made it easier for Obama to move away from Mubarak, since there is less risk of a conservative backlash if things go wrong in Egypt than there would be if most on the right were taking McCotter's view. At the same time, many Republicans still quietly harbor realist instincts and thus sympathize with Obama's careful approach.

Ultimately, Obama will be judged by results. If the Egyptian uprising eventually leads to an undemocratic regime hostile to the United States and Israel, the president will pay the price. This explains his caution. But for now, he has room to maneuver, thanks in part to the very neoconservatives whose Iraq policies he so strongly opposed.

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