United States: Congressional Politics and the Pursuit of Democracy

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Democratic victories in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate in November are causing something of an earthquake in U.S. Middle East policy. While it is clear that the White House is under significant pressure to shift course regarding Iraq and to consider a more robust peacemaking effort in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is less clear how the shifting political balance will affect U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East. The foreign policy priority of the new Congress, when it takes office in January, is likely to be pressing President Bush to implement the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, which he is under no obligation to do. Democracy in the Middle East is a more distant goal; Americans know from our own national experience that no democracy can be born overnight or even over a decade.

Relations between Capitol Hill and the Executive Branch are likely to be awkward for some time, one factor that will make it more difficult for President Bush to win support for his freedom agenda should he choose to continue to emphasize it. House of Representatives Speaker-elect Nancy Pelosi’s choice of outspoken critics of the Iraq war—Jack Murtha of Pennsylvania for Majority Leader (later defeated in favor of Steny Hoyer of Maryland) and Silvestre Reyes of Texas as chairman of the House Intelligence Committee—suggests that all the post-elections talk of bipartisan cooperation is indeed just talk.

The new Congress is likely to give the Middle East plenty of attention, not only because of Iraq but also because senior members who have demonstrated a strong interest in the region are rising to positions of greater prominence. In the House of Representatives Tom Lantos, the only Holocaust survivor in Congress, will ascend to the chairmanship of the House International Relations Committee (HIRC), which has jurisdiction over the scope and content of foreign aid programs. Lantos’s personal experiences underscore his dedication to human rights and individual freedoms and he will continue to be outspoken on such issues. The
ranking Republican on the HIRC will be Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, the current chair of the Middle East Subcommittee, whose hopes to be the next HIRC chairman were dashed when her party lost control of the House. The new Chair of the Middle East Subcommittee is expected to be Democrat Gary Ackerman of New York. Thus the HIRC leadership will continue to be dominated by Jewish and pro-Israel members, the group within the Congress that cares the most about political developments in the Middle East.

The next chairman of the House Appropriations Committee—the body that actually cuts the check for foreign assistance—will be David Obey of Wisconsin, who has served as committee chairman once before. Obey cosponsored an unsuccessful initiative earlier this year—building on a similar action by Lantos in 2005—to cut assistance to Egypt due to Cairo’s harassment of opposition leaders such as Ayman Nour. Nita Lowey of New York, a strong supporter of Israel, is expected to chair the Foreign Operations Subcommittee, which approves the budget for the Department of State and United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Funding for democracy programs at State and USAID is likely to continue, though perhaps disguised as something else if Democrats want to distance themselves from President Bush’s freedom agenda.

In the Senate, the new chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee will be Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, who may still harbor presidential aspirations. Six months ago, Biden joined with the Council on Foreign Relations to sponsor a specific plan for Iraq that emphasized peaceful incentives, and has now promised to conduct extensive hearings on Iraq in order to help promote non-military options. The chairman of the Near East Subcommittee remains to be named, but the current Chairman, Richard Lugar of Indiana, will be the panel's ranking Republican member.

Thomas Jefferson, drafter of the Declaration of Independence and the third President of the United States, was prescient when he said, “My God! How little do my countrymen know what precious blessings they are in possession of, and which no other people on earth enjoy.” Although most members of Congress have a personal commitment to the principles of the U.S. constitution and desire to share the blessings of democracy, it is unclear whether one or two will choose to champion the issue of democracy in the Middle East. Their constituents were clear in wanting the United States out of Iraq as soon as possible, and most will give priority to that call.

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