



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
for International Peace

Arab Reform Bulletin نشرة الإصلاح العربي

Arab Reform Bulletin

November 2005, Volume 3, Issue 9

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United States: The Congress and Democracy Promotion

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The role of the Congress in shaping U.S. policy on democracy promotion in the Middle East is multifaceted. Not only does the Congress provide funding for democracy promotion, but it also helps formulate a strategic vision, monitors the administration's work, and recommends structural revisions in the administration to help achieve the goals set. Recent Congressional efforts, however, reinforce rather than redress critical flaws in the administration's approach to democracy promotion.

The Advance Democracy Act of 2005 is the most important bill to come out of the Congress on democracy promotion since the 1983 initiative to establish the National Endowment for Democracy. Initially introduced in March 2005 by Republican Senator John McCain and Congressman Frank Wolf with support from key Democrats, such as Senator Joseph Lieberman and Congressman Tom Lantos, the bill obtained greater significance when it was incorporated into the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for fiscal years 2006 and 2007 (H.R. 2601). The bill passed in the House of Representatives on July 20 by a vote of 351 to 78, and is still pending approval in the Senate. There have also been numerous other draft bills related to democracy promotion during 2005.

The Advance Democracy Act materialized in the context of changing U.S. rhetoric on democratization and the acknowledgment of U.S. shortcomings in democracy promotion. As such, the bill's introductory observation is that the continued lack of democracy in some countries is inconsistent with the universal values on which the United States is based and that this situation poses a national security threat to the United States and its friends.

The House International Relations Committee placed this initiative within the general goal of strengthening democracy promotion inside the Department of State. By using democracy promotion as a tool for furthering other U.S. foreign policy interests, however, the Congress has repeated the administration's errors. The Congress avoided this mistake in 1983 when it

refused to place the Reagan administration's democracy programs within the United States Information Agency. Instead, it called for such programs to be administered by a non-governmental organization, leading to the establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The Senate also passed a bill that no one involved in intelligence activities since 1963 should be employed in the NED to avoid any suspicion that the Endowment would be a front for the Central Intelligence Agency.

The current bill attempts to shape State Department democracy promotion efforts on both the structural and programmatic levels. On the structural level, it calls for a change in the title of the Undersecretary for Global Affairs to Undersecretary for Democracy and Global Affairs (Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made this change on July 29). It also calls for the establishment of an office within the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor to promote transitions to full democracy in countries that have been categorized as undemocratic. Second, it creates regional democracy hubs at U.S. missions abroad. Third, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research is tasked with documenting financial assets held by leaders of countries determined to be undemocratic or in transition. Fourth, it stipulates the establishment of a bipartisan Democracy Promotion and Human Rights Advisory Board, which would make democracy promotion one of the criteria on which Foreign Service officers are evaluated for purposes of promotion.

On the programmatic level, the initiative mandates that the Secretary of State prepare an annual report on democracy and calls for the establishment of a website for global democracy and human rights. As part of an outreach program in foreign countries, it encourages Chiefs of Mission to spend time in universities defending U.S. values and discussing policies that promote democracy. Linking democracy promotion to public diplomacy on behalf of U.S. goals, however, is a critical flaw in the initiative.

At first glance, the Advance Democracy Act of 2005 appears to be an improvement of the administration's policies because it emphasizes the need to formulate specific strategies for democracy promotion. But an overall assessment shows that it is burdened by some of the same shortcomings symptomatic of administration policy. Treating democracy promotion as a tool of U.S. foreign policy rather than as a goal of policy will lead to its getting lost amid other U.S. security, strategic, economic, and even ideological interests. Creating a structure analogous to the NED inside the State Department—which the Act funds at \$50 million for 2006 and \$60 million for 2007, not much below the \$80 million for 2006 authorized for the NED—will only compound such confusion.

Democracy promotion is a good in itself and should not be put at the service of other goals such as improving the U.S. image or gathering support for other U.S. policies. For this reason it is best pursued by organizations such as the NED rather than from within the State Department.

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