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He's Our Son of a Bitch

Abstract

It is said that Franklin Delano Roosevelt defended the US tendency to support dictators by remarking, "He may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch." The recent events in Tunisia and Egypt indicate that almost seventy years later, this unfortunate phrase seems to continue to guide US foreign policy.

Keywords

Human rights, Tunisia, Egypt, Islam, Latin America, Communism, Democracy

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He's Our Son of a Bitch

by Robert Funk

It is said that Franklin Delano Roosevelt defended the US tendency to support dictators by remarking, "He may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch." The recent events in Tunisia and Egypt indicate that almost seventy years later, this unfortunate phrase seems to continue to guide US foreign policy.

The first question, then, is what determines whether a son of a bitch is "ours" or not. While in recent years the existential threat has revolved around the issue of terrorism and radical Islamic fundamentalism, for much of the twentieth century those who were considered allies stood shoulder to shoulder with the United States in the struggle against Communism. Cases come to mind in Africa (South Africa), Asia (Vietnam, the Philippines), and the Middle East (Iran), but nowhere was FDR's policy applied more readily or more regularly than in Latin America.

This raises a second question: after a century of supporting unsavory characters in favor of other supposed benefits (anti-Communism, stability, oil, access to canals, etc.), what lessons does the Latin American experience offer?

The benefits are short term; the costs are long-term. Perhaps the most recurrent lesson of US policy in Latin America is that the supposed benefits of supporting anti-democratic strongmen do not last a very long time, whereas the ill feeling amongst the population and the political fallout can last for many years. The most active period of US anti-Communist intervention in Latin America only lasted about thirty years. Yet throughout the region, it is the US support for authoritarian regimes, far more than its not unimportant efforts to support democratic movements in the 1980s, which remains in the public imagination. University students wear t-shirts emblazoned with images of Che Guevara, not Anastasio Somoza. This phenomenon is even more pronounced in the Middle East, where even the aspirational middle class that yearns to pursue postgraduate studies at elite American universities cannot appear to be pro-American because of US association with autocratic regimes and support for Israel.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend. The problem with having allies is that it almost invariably means having (or creating) enemies. In regions like Latin America, even if the dictators were relatively benevolent, it was more than likely that their enemies were pro-democracy activists, and that their friends were some pretty nasty types engaged in arms trafficking, drug smuggling, or worse. In these societies, the US has become known for allying itself to the latter and not the former, a reputation that not only stands in stark contrast to US foreign policy rhetoric, but that lasts for decades (see previous point). Important sectors of the center-left in Chile, for example, continue to be rather circumspect with regards to the United States, while still holding Cuba up to another standard for having stood by so many Chilean exiles.

Our son of a bitch, for better or for worse. How does the US disassociate itself from dictators with which it no longer wishes to be associated? It turns out it is actually rather easy. In the case of Egypt, President Obama decided that a few days of mass demonstrations were sufficient to warrant turning against an ally of thirty years. The problems, however, appear later. What message is being sent to current allies in Afghanistan, Iraq, or even Israel? Is US policy now to

support democratic movements no matter their positions vis-a-vis the interests of the United States? If so, and especially after Mubarak's exit, it may be time to talk of an Obama Doctrine.

However, the Reagan administration, presiding over the “third wave” of global democratization, turned against Marcos (Philippines) and Pinochet (Chile) when it decided that it was no longer in US interests to continue supporting them. The great difference between those cases and the current one (and George W. Bush's earlier attempts at “democratizing” the Middle East): the United States had clearly identified new, viable, and democratic partners who enjoyed mass popular support. This included not only the existence of political groups that the United States felt it could at least deal (though not necessarily agree) with. It also implied the existence of a large and well-educated middle sector—academics, businesspeople, unions, teachers, journalists, and even Armed Forces—who after the transition would continue to work for the well being of the country. In cases as different as Venezuela and Iran, these groups fled. The nature of the Egyptian experience, so far, indicates that these middle sectors may stay on and build a new democratic Egypt. The minute that the more radical groups grab hold of the democratizing momentum, however, the middle class will head for Miami and Los Angeles. Good for the American real estate market; bad for the future of the Middle East.

Robert Funk is Deputy Director and Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Institute for Public Affairs of the University of Chile. Dr Funk's research areas include democratization, left and populist movements in Latin America, and political elites. Recent publications include “Parties, Personalities and the President: The Institutional Challenges of the Bachelet Government”, in The Bachelet Government: Conflict and Consensus in Post-Pinochet Chile, edited by Silvia Borzutzky and Gregory Weeks. From 2006 to 2008, Dr Funk served as president of the Chilean Political Science Association.