

# It's regime change, not democracy

By Junaid S. Ahmad

Middle East  
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**P**RESIDENT George W. Bush has been proudly touting the putative realization of his "vision" for the Middle East: the spread of democracy and freedom. And his close aides are exhibiting extraordinary pride in taking credit for gradually making up the "democracy deficit" in the Arab world.

There is a strong belief in the US that the Arab, and the Muslim for that matter, culture is inherently authoritarian and even critics of the Bush administration, and the many who have been in the anti-war camp, appear convinced by the imagined progressive results of the Bush doctrine. Of course, much of this only shows how well the propaganda machine operates and how obliging is the mainstream US media.

What is trumped up as the triumph of the Bush doctrine is a series of events that have taken place in the Middle East over the past few months. First, there were the Palestinian elections, used by the media in the US and Israel to deflect attention away from the Israeli occupation and to place the onus on the Palestinians to "reform" themselves, and to christen the US-approved leadership of Mahmoud Abbas.

Then there were the "historic" elections in Iraq, which the US portrayed as a remarkable achievement made possible by American insistence. In reality, the Americans were compelled to hold the polls because of the fast growing anti-occupation resentment in the

country as voiced by the Grand Ayatollah Sistani. More recently, there have been political developments in Saudi Arabia and Egypt for which the Bush administration also takes credit. Saudi Arabia held municipal elections in which half of the candidates were simply appointed by the Saudi authorities and there was no participation by women in them, either as voters or as candidates.

President Mubarak of Egypt has carried out some cosmetic changes in his country's political structure that would technically allow opposition members to contest presidential elections, but make their candidature contingent upon approval from a parliament controlled by Mubarak's party. Democracy on the march, indeed.

The most recent Middle Eastern development causing rare exuberance amongst subscribers to the Bush doctrine has been the mass demonstrations in Lebanon after the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri. Although this event initially persuaded the pro-Syria government in Beirut to resign, the subsequent much larger rally held in support of Damascus enabled the president of Lebanon to re-appoint the outgoing prime minister till new elections take place and to partially restore the government's tilt toward Syria.

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had been in possession of a part of it for 22 years.

As for the so-called "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon, it is slowly being exposed for it is a mixed bag. The largest demonstration by the anti-Syrian Lebanese opposition was estimated to be around 70,000 people, whereas the pro-Syria, pro-Hezbollah demonstration ran from somewhere between half a million to one and a half million people, which is a substantial part of the population in a country of 3.8 million. The religious and sectarian divisions in Lebanon also play a major role.

A recent public opinion survey taken by the Lebanese pollster Abduh Sa'd informs us that the opposition forces are primarily composed of Christians and Druze, that 97% of Shias (who form 40% of the country), as well as most of Sunnis, oppose the Lebanese opposition and that there is a massive anti-US sentiment throughout the country. However, the well-to-do Lebanese opposition exercises control over most of the resources that give it an access to various Lebanese and international

ment comes from Washington which claims to have organized Iraqi "free and fair" elections under its auspices and under its occupation forces of ten times the size of the Syrian forces in Lebanon.

A similar situation exists in occupied Palestinian territories but it did not have any negative effect on the elections there and the US has described them as "successful". Keeping in view the enthusiastic approval given by the US and Israel to the elections held under their military occupation, Syria should, in fact, be asked to remain in Lebanon and supervise the holding of the scheduled polls there, to make up what the neocons call "democracy deficit" in the Arab world.

The kind of stress the US, French, and some Arab governments such as Saudi Arabia, have put on the need for a rapid and complete Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon makes their case even more suspect when one sees how inconsistent their position on this question has been during the last three decades. At two crucial moments in the recent history of the Middle East, the US and various Arab states had supported Syrian intervention in Lebanon: in 1976 during the Lebanese civil war and during the 1990-91 Gulf War.

Throughout the Lebanese civil war, Syrian forces were seen favourably by the US and its Arab allies because they could stave off the victory of the Palestinian-allied Left in Lebanon, and also because of the Syrian support for the

right-wing Phalange government, closely allied with Israel. Syria's close cooperation with the US and the Gulf states in the 1990-91 Gulf War against Iraq earned it the right to virtually do as it pleased in Lebanon, substantially increasing its troops level and political influence there. There was hardly a whimper of protest from those now condemning Syria's "half-measures and delaying tactics."

The intense sabre-rattling by the US against Syria must be seen in the light of Washington's wider objectives in the Middle East. The February assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri gave Bush Jr. and his Israeli allies a rare opportunity to achieve a cherished goal that has nothing to do with the pious profession of "democracy enhancement" in Lebanon. Both the US and Israel perceive the Syria-Hezbollah-Iran nexus as a major impediment to their complete domination of the Arab world. Crippling Syria by backing its Lebanese opponents is certainly preferable to the US than sending in its own military to do the dirty work. The fact of the matter is that the Bush administration is using its spurious concern for "democracy" in Lebanon to precipitate regime change in Syria. And its proclamation that democracy is "on the march" in the Middle East is meant to give credence to its continued occupation in Iraq.

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outlets, enabling it to win supporters for its case. These are some of the facts that Bush's portrayal of the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon seems to ignore.

The US stance towards Lebanese crisis is hypocritical, to say the least. Since Syria had military presence in Lebanon for nearly thirty years, it is perceived to be an "occupied" state which is "isolated" internationally, according to President Bush. But the longer occupation by Israel of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights, not to mention the Sinai Peninsula and Southern Lebanon for some period of time, is ignored. Instead, it enables Israel to qualify for the \$2.52 billion of US taxpayers' money that Bush has allocated to it for the fiscal year 2006.

The UN Security Council resolution 1559, which calls for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon but which does not authorize the use of force for its enforcement and is in a category of resolutions which have a de facto "optional" status, was passed only a few months ago and is being ardently upheld by President Bush. The UN resolution 425 calling for Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon remains disregarded for more than 20 years, despite the horrendous atrocities committed because of that occupation. Countless resolutions on Israel's prolonged and brutal occupation of Palestine have been casually put aside in favour of Washington's "peace process" accords, only adding to misery and suffering

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Throughout this whole episode, Syria has been subjected to condemnation for its violations of agreements under which it was required to respect the sovereignty of Lebanon. What is not discussed are the Taif negotiations of 1990 in which Syria and Lebanon had come to an agreement that although the former should gradually reduce its troops strength in the country, its military presence was necessary to act as a deterrent to Israel which is a threat to the country and

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President Bush is of the view that the phased, gradual withdrawal from Lebanon to which Syria has agreed is inadequate. A Bush aide says: "How fair an election can Lebanon hold if the troops are there to intimidate voters, people running for election, or people now in office?" It is ironic that such a state-

ing to be the pro-democracy enhancement" in Lebanon. Both the US and Israel perceive the Syria-Hezbollah-Iran nexus as a major impediment to their complete domination of the Arab world. Crippling Syria by backing its Lebanese opponents is certainly preferable to the US than sending in its own military to do the dirty work. The fact of the matter is that the Bush administration is using its spurious concern for "democracy" in Lebanon to precipitate regime change in Syria. And its proclamation that democracy is "on the march" in the Middle East is meant to give credence to its continued occupation in Iraq.

The power vacuum that the US is trying to create in Lebanon by forcibly seeking Syrian pullout from the country may very well send a green signal to the insidious reentry of Israel into the Lebanese political terrain and re-ignite a violent conflict. These are some of the logical consequences of the aggressive policies pursued by Bush in the region. His father, Bush Sr, once said about the new world order: "What we say goes." ■