

Understanding the Middle East 'democratic wave'

BY BEN WHITE

In the aftermath of a second bitterly contested US presidential election, many political commentators surmised that a second-term Bush administration would be forced to depart from the radical neoconservative agenda that had characterized the previous four years. However, the last couple of weeks have served as a wake-up call that the neocon-inspired campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq might just have been a warm up.

Was Bush Right?

Newsweek boldly proclaimed 'Across the Middle East - People Power' while in London. The Economist put it slightly more sanguinely, 'Democracy stirs in the Middle East'. Commentators from Charles Krauthammer in the Washington Post, Gerard Baker in The Times, and Fareed Zakaria in Newsweek asked the question, in the light of recent developments in Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, and Lebanon, 'Has the Bush administration been proved right?'

The 'we told you so' cry is being taken up by any right-wing commentator worth their salt on both sides of the Atlantic. This is the core of the argument, in the words of its proponents. According to Krauthammer, "We are at the dawn of a glorious, delicate, revolutionary moment in the Middle East. It was triggered by the invasion of Iraq, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and televised images of 8 million Iraqis voting in a free election."

This coupled with "demonstrations in Egypt for democracy...and now, of course, the 'cedar revolution' in Lebanon" means that the foreign

policy 'realists' and the Left must eat humble pie. As President Bush put it this week, "The trumpet of freedom has been sounded, and that trumpet never calls retreat."

'Simplistic Master Narrative'

Writing in Ha aretz, Meron Benvenisti wrote scathingly of an American spin "which connects events of differing backgrounds and unique circumstances into a thrilling epic of a 'freedom Intifada' that is spreading all over the Arab world, and which will confront terror and be victorious over it". In other words, why bother yourself with the complicated internal political and social dynamics of a nation like Lebanon when it could get in the way of what Professor Juan Cole rightly identifies as the "simplistic master narrative". Anything more than a cursory examination of the situation in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt shows up the cracks in the propaganda. As Cole points out, the Iraqi elections, while undoubtedly worthy of qualified welcome, were also "deeply flawed".

Democratic Wave?

42 percent of the electorate did not show up. The elections could only be held by locking down the country for 3 days, forbidding all vehicular traffic to stop car bombings. The electorate had no idea for whom they were voting, since the candidates' names were secret until the last moment. The Sunni Arabs boycotted or were prevented from voting by the ongoing guerrilla war which started right back up after the ban on traffic lapsed.

In Egypt, Mubarak's announcement that the presidential election will be contested for

the first time was greeted with cautious optimism by campaigners in Egypt, who have been campaigning for years against a dictatorially-inclined government propped by the United States. But as pointed out by some Egyptians, in Tunisia a supposedly pluralistic presidential election always seems to result in a 95% vote for the incumbent Ben Ali.

In Lebanon, meanwhile, it is absurd to suggest that the scheduled spring elections mark a glorious new chapter in the development of Lebanese democracy. Syria has been undeniably and inexcusably dragging its feet in withdrawing forces from Lebanon for many years, and viewing Lebanon as a sphere of influence necessitating the stifling of independent Lebanese political expression. Yet even the US State Department's own generally scathing human rights report on Lebanon noted that there was "fewer voting irregularities" in 2000 compared to 1996, and that in May 2004, municipal elections were contested "with no reports of major disturbance or fraud".

The anti-Syrian protests that graced the front pages of so many news weeklies were followed up by pro-Syrian rallies that dwarfed their opponents' gatherings, yet the dynamic in Lebanon has been presented as the plucky, democratic Lebanese patriot versus the nasty Syrian occupation.

In the UK Economist's feature article on this supposed 'democratic wave' sweeping across the Middle East, the writer refers to the 'oddity' that the three people groups held up as flag-bearers of this 'new' democratic spirit - the Lebanese, the Palestinians, and the Iraqis - are all under foreign

occupation. While this throwaway remark does at least go some way in pointing towards the discrepancies between the rhetoric and reality of the neoconservatives and their propagandists, it is also necessary to note the differences between these three 'occupations'.

The Syrian military presence in Lebanon, for example, initially began at the behest of the Lebanese government, and has been characterized by neither the mass confiscation and colonization of land (like the Israeli occupation of Palestine), nor by the same scale of violence and disruption to daily life that is an intrinsic feature of the Israeli and American occupations of Palestine and Iraq respectively.

A Bankrupt Approach

However, it is a focus on Palestine that proves most instructive, and best exposes the farcical nature of the current propaganda. An integral part of the case advanced by Bush's apologists is the recent Palestinian elections, and the current political climate that apparently makes a peaceful solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict within touching distance.

Unintentionally, however, the juxtaposition of Lebanese politics with events in Palestine has served to highlight the bankruptcy of the Bush-Blair approach. Speaking to the BBC's Radio 4 'Today' program on March 4, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw commented on Lebanon, "You can only have a democracy if the government which is elected has complete control over the territory of that country". A mere three days previously, Straw had been hosting a conference in London designed

to square precisely that circle in Palestine.

On the day of the London conference, Karma Nabulsi wrote a comment piece in The Guardian, in which she described the reality of what was happening at the meeting: "The facts on the ground created by Israel - and the international community's refusal to tackle them politically - have turned their engagement into one of funding the direct political assistance to Israel by offering economic assistance to the Palestinians". In a sense, it is Oslo redux: hands are to daily life that is an intrinsic feature of the Israeli and American occupations of Palestine and Iraq respectively.

What is Happening?

This passion for democracy and human rights is unfortunately not extended to US strategic allies such as Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Gulf States like the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman, to name but a few, all countries currently offering financial, military, diplomatic, or economic assistance to the Bush administration. But if the 'wave of democratization' is so palpably false, then what is happening? It is obvious that there are fundamental changes occurring in the Middle East, but who is engineering them, and with what purpose? For answers, look no further than the neoconservatives who were meant to be on the back foot.

In Middle East International, Nasser Aruri points out that events in Syria and Lebanon look set to benefit only American and Israeli interests, and further the strategic goal of the neocons of "balkanizing the Arab world in pursuit of a common US-Israeli agenda whose first phase was the invasion of Iraq". Aruri goes on to remind the reader that US Middle East policy is "now constrained to the likes of David Wurmser, Douglas Feith,

NCO and civil society movement already there.

These people, who are laying the democratic and civil foundations for any future Palestinian state, are impaired in their work because they can not guarantee they will be granted permission by the Israeli Occupation Forces to attend a meeting in a nearby city. The Empire's, sorry Empires, New Clothes have never looked so non-existent when the 'peace process' in Palestine is examined.

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Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Elliott Abrams and other Sharon operatives in the think-tanks, media and Administration". Before taking the reins of power, the neocons never sought to disguise their agenda, as laid out the 1996 report 'A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm'. Signed by individuals like Perle, Feith, and Wurmser, this document recommended "removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq" as "an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right", as well as "engaging Hizballah, Syria, and Iran, as the principal agents of aggression in Lebanon".

Ultimately, the goal of policy advocates such as these, and those affiliated with think-tanks such as Project for the New American Century, who have come to occupy dozens of positions within the Bush administration and Pentagon, is to "shape the regional environment" in accordance with "Israel's new strategic agenda" and US hegemony. In the events currently unfolding in the Middle East, the fingerprints of the neoconservatives are clearly visible, with some items on the wish list ticked off, while some are 'works in progress'.

They include neutralizing Iraqi independence, isolating and targeting Iran, destabilizing, and replacing the Syrian government, and the rubberstamping of Israel's unilateral Bantustanization of the remainder of Palestine. Resistance to these designs cannot be distracted by smug newspaper columnists or the adulation proffered to the Bush inspired 'democratization' of the Middle East.

—Courtney Palestine Chronicle