

Lebanon, Bolivia and Bush's idea

of freedom

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There are two democratic earthquakes happening right now. You've probably heard about the "Cedar revolution" in Lebanon but have you heard about the watery revolt in Bolivia? These countries are 7,000 miles and a mental universe apart, but taken together they reveal basic truths about the nature of American power and about the world we share.

You won't find many people eager to talk about both these rebellions. The Bush administration and its cheerleaders are very happy to talk about Lebanon, where a huge popular movement has spontaneously arisen to demand an end to the 29-year Syrian occupation. The Bush message is clear. See? We told you Arabs wanted to be free, and Iraq would begin a "domino effect" for democracy throughout the region. The Iraq war has blasted a hole in the Arab Berlin Wall. Now Arabs are beginning to stream through, demanding throughout the region that their governments answer to them.

The opponents of the Bush worldview have been cautious or silent about this "ripple of change" (copyright T. Blair). Some have even sneered, claiming that any change will simply risk restarting the Lebanese civil war or reactivate Arab "tribalism". By contrast, left-wing campaigners are eager to talk about the rebellion erupting in Bolivia, a small, bitterly poor, landlocked country in South America. It has technically been a democracy since 1982, but in practice the Bolivian government has not been accountable to its people.

No: It has been subject to the undemocratic demands of the US government, and to massive corporations, and their proxies, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. For example, the US demands that in the name of the "war on drugs" Bolivia destroy the coca crops of its peasants, one of the few sources of income for over 5 million poor Bolivians. Or, in another example, the World Bank ordered the Bolivian government to sell its water supplies to Bechtel, a Californian multinational, even though they increased water bills by as much as 200 percent in a country where thousands of children die every year because they don't have access to clean water.

But then in 2000 something remarkable happened. The

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totally different intellectual heritages but both want to be democracies. So it's not right to respond to neocon rhetoric about "ending tyranny" and "spreading democracy to the darkest corners of the earth" by howling that this belief is "utopian".

But the second crucial lesson nor is it right to take them at their word. Bolivia and the wider US strategy in Latin America reveals the limits of the "freedom" the US government wants to spread. Let's look at what neoconservative "freedom" does not include. It doesn't include freedom from torture. The less-than-White House is knowingly handing suspects over to torture in Egypt, Uzbekistan and elsewhere. Nor does "freedom" mean that a democracy should be allowed to control its own economy and resources, even to the limited extent we enjoy in Europe. In Iraq, the democratically elected government put in office with stunning courage by the Iraqi people will have to hand over its economic policies (including its tax rates) to the International Monetary Fund for the next decade. If they refuse or defy the demands of their new masters, Bolivia-style the "international community" will reverse the cancellation of Saddam's debt and slap a £101 billion bill on the Iraqi table.

It goes on: "Freedom" doesn't even mean more countries adopting US-style capitalism. The model of "democracy" spread by the Bush administration is far more extreme than the capitalism that Americans practice at home (which is itself the most extreme in the democratic world). In the US, for example, 85 percent of water is owned by public utilities yet the US demands other countries privatize their supply completely. So what does the Bush administration mean when it says it wants to promote "freedom"? In reality, what it wants is a pallid semi-democracy conditional upon a willingness to serve US corporate and strategic interests. In a "free" country, you must allow the IMF and World Bank, in effect, to run your economy. You must enforce the "war on drugs". You must privatize your entire public sphere. You must accept massive inequalities in wealth. But you will be allowed to pick your own local administrator to implement these policies. When it comes to anything outside the US con-

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Tale of Two

Revolutions? The most

important lesson is that there are such things as universal values. It is a natural human desire to want to live in a free, self-determining democracy. Lebanon and Bolivia have totally different histories and totally different intellectual heritages but both want to be democracies.

Bolivian people rose up and expelled Bechtel from the country, keeping their water supply under democratic control. Over the past week, the Bolivian people have risen again. They want to be allowed to grow coca without American interference, including yes for the huge global market in recreational drugs. And they want the massive (mostly US) multinationals operating within their borders to pay 50 percent corporation tax the same level of tax that poor Bolivians pay. The rebellion has been so popular that the President, Carlos Mesa, has resigned.

This time, the roles are reversed. The left is eager to speak while the Bushies are silent. The neoconservatives' warm words about democracy are sent into the deep freezer when it comes to Bolivia, or any other Latin American country which has the temerity to ask for democratic control of its own resources and of corporations operating within their borders. Indeed, the Bush administration actually tried to destroy the democratically elected government of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela in 2000 for just this kind of anti-corporate policy.

So what can we learn from this Tale of Two Revolutions? The most important lesson is that there are such things as universal values. It is a natural human desire to want to live in a free, self-determining democracy. Lebanon and Bolivia have totally different histories and

conditions religious rules, say, or women's rights you will be allowed to decide for yourselves. But if you push this democracy lark too far as the people of Venezuela did, by trying to control their own oil and impose restrictions on corporations you will be crushed, and a more corporate-friendly viceroy will be installed for you to approve. There are some countries in the world so locked in tyranny that this American-imposed model of quasi-freedom is a significant advance on the status quo. Having some say over some issues however unacceptably limited is much better than living under Saddam's genocidal dictatorship, for example. But in most other circumstances and eventually, as it develops, in the Arab world itself the very same model will be hideously regressive. This complexity doesn't lend itself to scabrous polemics but it is the truth.

So sincere advocates of democracy should simultaneously welcome the ripples of change in the Arab world and the changes in Latin America. Indeed, we should embrace these stirrings so enthusiastically that we demand they are followed through to their proper conclusion. The people of Lebanon, Bolivia and everywhere in between deserve more than an corporate neocon "freedom" where most of the people's choices are ignored or crushed. They deserve real democracy.

A THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

"Doing easily what others find difficult is talent; doing what is impossible for talent is genius."

— Henri-Frédéric Amiel