A DEPENDENCY ON DICTATORS

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Scott Shane, The New York Times, Reprinted in The Toronto Star, 13 February 2011

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The agony of Hosni Mubarak's Egypt raises again the question of whether such a pattern can ever be broken. More than mere misjudgment or duplicity is behind it; the embrace of dictators has been so frequent over the last half-century that it obviously results from hard-headed calculation.
Every country has both values and interests. Sometimes they coincide — for example, promoting human rights can help combat terrorism — and sometimes they conflict. What makes the United States stand out, perhaps, is how frequently American officials proclaim their values to the world, setting themselves up for charges of hypocrisy when a policy is expedient rather than idealistic.
Supporting Egypt's military-led regime over four decades, first under Anwar el-Sadat and then Mr. Mubarak, offered strategic benefits to seven American presidents. They got a staunch ally against Soviet expansionism, a critical peace with Israel, a bulwark against Islamic radicalism, and a trade- and tourist-friendly Egypt. What they did not get was a functioning Egyptian democracy. The apocryphal comment about a foreign strongman often attributed to Franklin Delano Roosevelt sums it up nicely: he may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch.

History is rich with precedents. In 1959, there was Fulgencio Batista of Cuba, darling of American corporations and organized crime, fleeing with an ill-gotten fortune of $300 million as Fidel Castro's troops reached Havana.

In 1979, it was Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the shah of Iran, abandoning the throne in the face of a revolt two years after President Jimmy Carter toasted his country as "an island of stability."

In 1986, the turn came for Ferdinand Marcos, ousted by the Philippines' People Power movement

five years after Vice President George H. W. Bush told him at a luncheon: "We love your adherence to democratic principles and to the democratic process."

The list could be extended. Since World War II, the White House, under the management of both parties, has smiled on at least a couple of dozen despots. ("Friendly Dictators Trading Cards," marketed by a California publisher in the 1990s, featured "36 of America's most embarrassing allies.")

"It used to be anti-Communism," said David F. Schmitz, a historian at Whitman College and author of two books on the American attachment to dictators. "Now it's most often moderates who stand against radicalism in the world of Islam."

Mr. Schmitz deplores the phenomenon, which he believes has too often bought an ersatz stability at a very high price. By backing an autocrat, he said, America often ensures that "the political center gets destroyed, giving credence to extremists' arguments and discrediting the U.S."

After all, the man who felled Batista, the virulently anti-American Mr. Castro, is still in power more than 50 years later. Cuban-American relations produced a brush with thermonuclear war in 1962, a permanently crippled Cuban economy and — well, generations of successful anti-Castro politicians in Miami and beyond.

Iran, too, got mired in a new brand of undemocratic rule after the shah. The United States still faces a hostile regime ruled by ayatollahs and protected by a brutal, profiteering Revolutionary Guard — tough enough to have weathered its own Egyptian-style uprising in 2009.

The Philippines are a less dispiriting example. With a belated but definitive push from Washington, the dictator there gave way to democracy; however imperfect, that outcome suggests that American-backed strongmen are not inevitably succeeded by America-hating strongmen.

But Mr. Schmitz watches diplomacy from the tranquil distance of the academy. Ask a onetime practitioner, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser at the time of the shah's fall, and you get a very different view. No administration, he noted, starts with an ideal set of international partners.

"To conduct foreign policy," he said, "we have to deal with the governments that exist. And some of those are dictatorships."

When Mr. Brzezinski and his boss encountered the shah's dictatorship, the only other power centers in Iran were the Communists of the Tudeh Party and the mullahs of the mosques, he said. As the popular revolt against the shah grew, he said, the Carter administration was divided. Some officials thought Ayatollah Khomeini, returning from exile, might provide a reasonable alternative. Mr. Brzezinski disagreed.

"My view was that the shah should crack down and then begin aggressive reforms," he recalled. He lost the argument. Three decades later, the United States is trying to prevent the theocracy that

followed from getting nuclear weapons. It is at least an arguable position that Mr. Brzezinski's formula of crackdown and reform, if it had worked, would have produced better long-term results for the rights of Iranians, as well as for international security.

Mr. Brzezinski says Egypt's prospects if Mr. Mubarak is toppled are brighter than Iran's in 1979: "The army is respected and has a lot of support across the country. There is a middle class of sorts. And the Muslim Brotherhood is still under control," reducing the risk that a theocratic regime would emerge.

Mr. Brzezinski was Mr. Carter's adviser when Mr. Sadat signed the historic peace treaty with Israel's Menachem Begin, and while he now says Mr. Mubarak's time has passed, he by no means considers American support for him to have been a tragic mistake. "I would say it was a good deal for the U.S. and for Egypt," he said. Mr. Mubarak consolidated peace in the region and was a "modernizer" at home, he said. "Historic change outpaced the modernizer, as often occurs."

Rashid Khalidi, professor of modern Arab studies at Columbia and a former adviser to Palestinian peace negotiators, rejects this brand of realpolitik. The ostensible benefits the United States has derived from its backing of Mr. Mubarak are illusory, he said: the peace between Egypt and Israel has not yet brought a peace between Israel and the Palestinians; oppression in Egypt has actually fueled terrorism, even if some of its Egyptian practitioners, like Ayman al-Zawahiri, the deputy leader of Al Qaeda, have fled Egypt proper; and as is self-evident today, stability did not last.

Other cooperation has left a stain on America's reputation. The Bush administration sent some terrorist suspects to Egypt, where they later said they were tortured. Today, protesters in Cairo hold up spent tear gas canisters with American labels. Such policies were "bankrupt morally and stupid politically," Mr. Khalidi said.

"I know it's easy to talk about American being true to its values," he said. "But you know, sometimes it makes sense."

The evolving statements from the Obama administration show officials feeling their way through the tricky intersection of morality and pragmatism, as they separate from an ally of 30 years. Every statement from the White House and State Department is parsed for nuance in Egypt, in Israel and at home.

When Mr. Obama said on Tuesday that an "orderly transition" in Egypt "must begin now," for instance, Mr. Brzezinski winced. "I wish he'd said 'should begin now.' "

"It sounds like an order," he said. "Egypt is a proud country, and Egyptians aren't going to listen to orders. They might listen to suggestions."