

Washington's "democratic" hypocrisy: The cases of Egypt and Iran

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The hypocrisy of US imperialism's pretense of promoting democracy on the world arena is manifest in Washington's markedly different reactions to the Iranian elections of 2009 and the recent military coup carried out in the midst of the elections in Egypt.

In response to Iran's elections, almost precisely three years ago, the US government and the media mounted a ferocious propaganda campaign aimed at portraying the vote as fraudulent, with its results rigged to keep the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in power.

That there was not a shred of credible evidence to support charges of massive electoral fraud was never an issue for the US propaganda machine once it was set in motion. The claims by the defeated opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi and the so-called Green Movement that supported him were merely repeated as fact.

Polls and ballot counts in the Iranian elections both showed Ahmadinejad winning over 60 percent of the vote, gaining his strongest support from among the working class and rural poor, who feared that living standards, already battered by high unemployment and punishing inflation, would only worsen under Mousavi, whose election promises centered on making major cuts to social spending.

The Obama administration and the major media openly supported the Green Movement demonstrations that followed the election. Drawn largely from better-off layers who hoped to benefit from a further turn toward free market policies and greater accommodation with Washington, and noteworthy for the lack of participation by the working class, these protests were portrayed as a freedom movement expressing the will of the Iranian people.

US government agencies provided covert support and funding for the demonstrations. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton commented in an interview that followed them, "Behind the scenes, we were doing a lot ... to empower the protesters."

The aim three years ago was not to win democracy for the Iranian people, but rather to provoke and manipulate a political crisis in Iran with the aim of regime-change, i.e.,

bringing to power a government willing to make Iran a US client state and play a role similar to that played by the hated dictatorship of the Shah until his overthrow in 1979.

The pretense of impassioned concern for Iranian "democracy" in 2009 stands in stark contrast to the muted reaction to the unfolding of a coup by the Egyptian military in the midst of the presidential election completed on Sunday. The issue in Egypt is not merely allegations of vote fraud, but the consolidation of dictatorial power in the hands of the US-backed military junta, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), to the extent that any president would be merely a powerless puppet of the Egyptian generals.

The actions of the generals render the results of the presidential election meaningless, while annulling the results of the earlier parliamentary elections. The parliament and the constituent assembly have been disbanded and their premises occupied by army troops.

In addition, the military has decreed its own power to arrest and repress civilians for any acts challenging the regime or threatening "order" and "property." The target of these measures is clearly the Egyptian working class, whose mass strikes and demonstrations were the motor force of the Egyptian revolution that toppled the 30-year dictator Hosni Mubarak in February 2011.

The US reaction has come from the Pentagon and the State Department, with President Obama maintaining a discreet silence on the events in Egypt. The first public response from Washington came from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton following the disbanding of the Egyptian parliament and constituent assembly.

Carefully avoiding a condemnation of the military coup or demanding its reversal, Clinton told reporters, "There can be no going back on the democratic transition called for by the Egyptian people."

What the events have exposed, however, is that the "democratic transition" was always a fraud, engineered by the military and its backers in Washington. It represented an extension of US policy in January and February of 2011,

when Obama and Clinton first supported Mubarak against the masses in the streets and then—only when the dictator’s grip on power became untenable—sought to orchestrate a transfer of power to the regime’s chief of intelligence, Omar Suleiman. Behind the facade of elections, Washington’s aim has always been to maintain the power of the military high command, which is seen as the principal guarantor of the interests of US imperialism and both foreign and Egyptian capital.

“Now, ultimately, it is up to the Egyptian people to determine their own future and we expect this weekend’s presidential election will be held in an atmosphere that is conducive to it being peaceful, fair and free,” Clinton added.

Who did she think she was kidding? The actions of the SCAF junta guaranteed that the election was held at gunpoint, with masses of Egyptian workers and young people boycotting the polls and rejecting the choice between Mubarak’s former prime minister and a right-wing Islamist.

Clinton’s public remarks were followed by a private conversation Friday between US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and SCAF’s chief, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi. The Pentagon said Panetta phoned to “discuss current events in Egypt” and urged Tantawi to “move forward expeditiously with Egypt’s political transition, including conducting new legislative elections as soon as possible.” Both men “agreed on the importance of the US-Egyptian strategic relation,” the Pentagon said.

Such a conversation amounts to a US endorsement of the generals’ actions, while preserving a public pretense of support for “democracy.” Neither Panetta nor the State Department demanded that Tantawi and his fellow military thugs rescind the actions carried out over the past several days, or pull their troops out of the parliament and allow its elected members back in. Rather, they expressed the hope that the military could stage-manage a new and improved parliamentary election at its convenience.

The real attitude of the Obama administration was made clear last March, when Clinton restored \$1.3 billion in annual aid to the Egyptian military, waiving congressional requirements tying the funding to progress in transferring power to a civilian government and upholding democratic rights. At the time, the Obama administration publicly cited the same “strategic relation” invoked by Panetta, while privately administration officials argued that US arms manufacturers couldn’t afford losing contracts tied to the aid.

Washington’s position was reiterated in a June 18 briefing by State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland. She answered queries as to whether the US was demanding that the junta rescind its dictatorial measures and whether US military aid was in question with the identical phrase:

“We’re not going to get prescriptive here.” She concluded by expressing US hopes that that Egypt’s military dictators would prove “good stewards” of the “democratic transition.”

Taken together, the public responses from Washington point to direct US complicity in the Egyptian coup.

Perhaps the most glaring contrast between the reaction to the 2009 election in Iran and the coup in Egypt has been provided by the US “newspaper of record,” the *New York Times*, whose editorial policy faithfully reflects the policies and interests of US imperialism.

In 2009, the *Times* mounted a full-scale campaign of journalistic provocation in Iran, dispatching both its right-wing foreign columnist Roger Cohen and its executive editor Bill Keller to Tehran to churn out material that failed to maintain even a pretense of objectivity. Citing no evidence, the newspaper branded the election “bogus” and even a “coup d’état” because the candidate favored by Washington failed to win.

In Egypt, the *Times* has used the word “coup” to describe the military’s consolidation of power only between quotation marks, attributed to Egyptian opposition figures, with the implicit suggestion that the term is an exaggeration.

In an editorial Tuesday, the *Times* cynically lamented the Egyptian events as having set “a terrible example” for the rest of the Arab world and chided the Obama administration for sending “the wrong message in March” with the unconditional restoration of the \$1.3 billion in military aid. The newspaper went on to declare that the administration “should have delayed some of the aid” to pressure the generals, while stressing the importance of the Egyptian military to the security of Israel.

The kid gloves treatment for the coup by the US-backed military in Egypt, versus the hysterical denunciations of the election in Iran, is an accurate reflection of the hypocritical and self-serving character of Washington’s posture of defending democracy. Its attitude in both countries is determined not by democratic principles—which have been virtually banished from America’s own electoral process—but rather the drive to impose imperialist hegemony by whatever means are at hand.



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