

DEMOCRACY WATCH

As the World Marches for Freedom, Where is Trump?

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Activists at home and abroad are being galvanized to stand up for fundamental freedoms. Why can't the President?

Look beyond the chaos in Washington, and you can spot some good news in a number of settings across the globe: people in the streets, on social media, or at the ballot boxes are demanding freedom and insisting that corrupt and tyrannical governments step aside. This encouraging phenomenon, alas, has largely been overshadowed by the twists and turns of the Trump presidency. The launch of an impeachment inquiry against the President, and his recent decision to tacitly greenlight a Turkish invasion of northeastern Syria, will further drown out the good news.

The demonstrations in Hong Kong are the most visible manifestation that the fight for democracy lives on. Activists in Russia, too, have challenged the Putin regime's iron-fisted control over national politics, with more than 800 protests across the country this year. In Sudan and Algeria, street protests spearheaded by civic groups have opened the door to changes in autocracies that seemed destined to survive forever. In Turkey, the "do-over" election for Istanbul mayor produced a stunning setback for President Erdogan.

Then, of course, there is Ukraine, a country much in the spotlight these days. Earlier this year Ukrainians elected a President and Parliament that included many new faces, candidates relatively untainted by the country's pervasive corruption.

Meanwhile, outrage over China's human rights abuses has erupted within the United States, after the NBA apologized for a pro-Hong Kong tweet by Houston Rockets general manager Daryl Morey. The controversy has suddenly focused American attention on China's long train of human rights abuses, from Hong Kong to Xinjiang, and its increasingly brazen attempts to squelch discussion of those issues beyond its borders.

Those Americans incensed by such abuses are standing up for our fundamental freedoms. And those taking to the streets abroad to demand better for their countries are taking enormous risks—from harassment and intimidation to loss of jobs, arrest, and even torture and death at the hands of their own governments. The least they deserve is the moral and political backing of the United States.

But the response from the White House has been one of silence and indifference—in what amounts to a profound rupture with America's human rights tradition.

The U.S. government has supported democracy for decades. While this principle has never been applied evenly—all Presidents have made compromises in the name of national security—the policy paid off with the end of communism and toppling of dictatorships around the world. But freedom is not inexorably sustained; it requires steadfast commitment and sacrifice. And as Freedom House has amply documented, democracy has slipped during the past 13 years, with

a steady decline in the number of democracies worldwide and an erosion of political liberties in democracies once thought stable.

The United States is not responsible for this erosion, but it hasn't always helped. The war in Iraq tainted the cause of democracy promotion for many, who came to associate it with open-ended war and quixotic attempts at regime change. By 2009, only 21 percent of Americans thought promoting democracy should be a top priority of U.S. foreign policy. Perhaps overlearning this lesson, the Obama Administration was often marked by passivity toward autocratic regimes, especially Iran and Syria. Even so, both Bush and Obama administrations incorporated democracy assistance as a core policy during their terms.

Things have changed dramatically under Trump, who has been downright disdainful of human rights and democracy. While awaiting the arrival of Egyptian President Mohamed el-Sisi at a meeting on the margins of the last G-20 summit, Trump was overheard saying, "Where's my favorite dictator?" On Saudi Arabia, he dismissed the significance of the state-sponsored murder of American resident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi and defended the relationship with Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman. Doubling down on his terrible deal with Erdogan abandoning our Kurdish allies, Trump has invited the Turkish leader to the White House on November 13.

On North Korea, Trump began reasonably, highlighting the unparalleled abuses of dictator Kim Jong Un—before he "fell in love" with Kim. On Russia, while his administration has grudgingly imposed minimal sanctions mandated by Congress for gross human rights abuses, Trump himself never utters a bad word about Vladimir Putin. Instead he says in response to human rights criticism of the Russian leader, "There are a lot of killers. We've got a lot of killers. What do you think? Our country's so innocent?"

Only Cuba, Venezuela, and Iran have consistently drawn the ire of the Trump Administration for their human rights record. While Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has spoken out on China's human rights abuses, including the appalling persecution of the Uighurs, Trump says virtually nothing. Instead, he congratulated the Chinese Communist Party on its 70th anniversary, comments members of his own party condemned. After the NBA controversy this past weekend, Trump shrugged that the basketball league and China "have to work out their own situation."

On Hong Kong, where the mass marches over the past several months have included a fair number of American flag-waving protesters, it's been left to bipartisan leaders in Congress, not the administration, to come out firmly in defense of the brave activists confronting Chinese political and military might. This week, members of Congress as diverse as Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) co-signed an open letter to NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, condemning the NBA for kowtowing to Beijing and blasting China for "using its economic power to suppress the speech of Americans inside the United States." Why can't Trump issue such a forceful denunciation himself?

Ukraine, a country on the front line of the struggle between democracy and autocracy, is another case in point. Ukraine's people have opted for democracy and an alignment with Europe. Threatened by Putin, Ukraine needs help from the United States. Instead, the President is trying to drag it into American domestic politics.

Making matters worse, Trump's relentless denigration of the American media, his demonization of political opponents, his abuse of power and his nepotism send terrible messages to other countries about rule of law.

How do we tell Azerbaijan's authoritarian, corrupt leadership not to mix business with government responsibilities when our own President does so? Who are we to advocate for press freedom abroad when our President refers to reporters as "the enemy of the people"? And how do we stress the importance of rule of law and separation of powers when Trump urges newly elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to launch an investigation against his political opponent, Joe Biden?

Despite Trump's lack of support for democracy movements, compounded by the terrible example he is setting within the United States, citizens in Hong Kong, Russia, Sudan, and elsewhere remain determined. The recent protests in Cairo, the first such massive demonstrations against Sisi, show that even in the most brutal dictatorships the desire to live freely is inextinguishable. And the bipartisan outrage over China's abuses show that human rights continue to resonate profoundly with the American people.

The next American administration, whether it comes in 2021 or 2025, must make support for democracy and human rights a top foreign policy priority. The advance of democracy in other countries will make the world safer and more prosperous. The United States should back this cause and return to leading by example.

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