

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Egypt's Public Diplomacy Test for Washington ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

America's public diplomacy problems in the Middle East can be summed up in a single word: credibility. Over two generations we have acquired a well-deserved reputation for saying one thing and doing another. We preach the virtues of democracy while supporting tyrants. We proclaim our openness and freedom even as we make the US an ever-more-difficult place to visit (and don't kid yourself – getting a US visa was a slow and often humiliating process before 9-11, in the three years since it has only gotten worse). Washington has long portrayed itself as an honest broker in Arab-Israeli peace talks, but as the recent memoirs of long-time Mideast envoy Dennis Ross show Washington usually cleared American proposals and ideas with the Israelis in private before 'presenting' those ideas to 'both' sides. That revelation surprised some in the US. In the Arab world it merely confirmed what most people had long suspected.

In Egypt today the Bush administration faces a crucial test of its public diplomacy skills and, hence, its own credibility: after all the talk over the last month about supporting freedom and standing up to tyrants, will the United States do anything serious to help Ayman Nur?

Nur is an opposition member of Egypt's parliament. In recent weeks the government has blocked his attempts to form a new political party, prevented the party from publishing a weekly newspaper, stripped Nur of his parliamentary immunity and arrested him on trumped up charges of forgery and corruption. Nur's sins include questioning President Hosni Mubarak's policies, calling for the direct election of Egypt's president (currently parliament – dominated by Mubarak's party – 'picks' a single candidate who is then submitted to the public for a yes/no referendum in which the 'yes' vote invariably draws 95+ percent) and openly questioning the president's efforts to pass his office on to his son Gamal.

There have been demonstrations in support of Nur in Cairo, despite emergency laws making such protests difficult and dangerous. The case is getting significant media coverage around the region though little internationally (the best place to follow it in English is Al-Jazeera's website: english.aljazeera.net).

And where, in all this, is the Bush administration, the self-declared foe of tyranny and friend of democracy activists? State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters in Washington last week that a dialogue between Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party and opposition parties is scheduled to take place later this year, adding "we find this arrest at this moment incongruous with proceeding with that dialogue."

In fairness, the United States is not completely absent on this one. This evening US-funded Radio Sawa devoted a good chunk of its evening news and current affairs program to a report

on the case including interviews with several opposition-leaning Egyptian analysts. That's a good start, but it is far, far from adequate.

Egypt is one of the largest recipients of American foreign aid. It is a key military ally. It plays an important role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. All of this has, on the whole, earned it a pass on public criticism as Mubarak's government has grown steadily more repressive over the last 15 years.

If President Bush's inaugural address and Condoleezza Rice's speech this week in Paris are to mean anything then something beyond Boucher's wishy-washy statement needs to come out of Washington. The criticism needs to be sharply worded and public. It is Mubarak's sovereign right to go down this repressive road, but if he chooses to do so America must make it clear he does so without our support. Later this spring G8 foreign ministers are scheduled to meet their Arab counterparts in Cairo. If Mubarak refuses to ease up on Nur's Al-Ghad party, allow it to function and drop the ridiculous charges against Nur himself then neither Rice nor any other American official should attend that meeting, and the Secretary should publicly say why she is not going to Cairo. Many Egyptians will complain that this amounts to interference in their internal affairs. Perhaps, but then we are under no obligation to give large sums of money to a government that abuses its citizens and flouts its own laws.

Even if you deeply oppose the policies President Bush has laid out over the last month there is a bigger issue at stake here. American credibility is once again on the line. Right now hardly anyone here in the Middle East thinks the Bush administration is really serious about supporting democratic reform in the region. Public diplomacy is in large measure about showing the world what we, as a society, stand for. If the president means what he says the time to prove it is now and Egypt is the place to start.

grr
