

Laura Bush, Mubarak and Washington's “crusade for democracy”

By Patrick Martin
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Only a merciless satirist could have choreographed the trip through the Middle East last week by Laura Bush, wife of the US president. Mrs. Bush visited Jordan, Israel and the occupied West Bank, then finished up with two days in Egypt, where she visited Cairo, the pyramids, and the site of the ancient library at Alexandria.

Mrs. Bush spent much of Monday, May 23 with Suzanne Mubarak, wife of the Egyptian dictator who has ruled the country with an iron fist for 23 years. In the course of that day, she made her only substantive political comments of the trip, effusively endorsing Mubarak's scheme to rig the upcoming presidential elections to insure his victory.

Mubarak set a referendum vote for May 25 to ratify his proposed constitutional changes, which would—on paper—allow opposition candidates to challenge his reelection later this year. Under the previous procedure no opposition candidates were permitted, and the population was compelled to vote “yes” or “no” on a new term for the sole candidate, the incumbent president.

The new procedure has been condemned by opposition parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood, which remains illegal, liberal presidential candidate Ayman Nour, and the Kifaya movement, which has called for Mubarak to step down. Besides continuing the state of emergency, under which all forms of public protest are illegal, the new election process only permits candidates who are endorsed by at least 250 national and provincial legislators, giving the ruling National Democratic Party, which holds virtually all elected offices, a veto over potential rivals.

Evidently, the prospect of a sham election rigged to ensure the victory of the incumbent had a definite appeal to the wife of the US president. As she toured

the pyramids at Giza, she told accompanying US reporters, “I would say that President Mubarak has taken a very bold step.” Echoing Mubarak's own description of the measure, she added, “You know that each step is a small step, that you can't be quick.”

Striking a pose of tolerance and humility, she noted that a full-fledged democracy did not appear overnight in the United States either—as though Mubarak, a blood-soaked military dictator, was some kindred spirit to the American Founding Fathers. The Egyptian leader “is taking the first step to open up the elections, and I think that's very, very important,” she said.

On her flight home to the United States, Mrs. Bush responded to Egyptian oppositionists who criticized her praise of Hosni Mubarak. It was “naïve,” she said, to think that a country like Egypt could make a swift transition from dictatorship to democracy. And it was unrealistic to think that US pressure could effect such a change. “Especially, I don't want Americans trying to tell people how you're going to go from here to there in no time, because we know that it's not easy and we know that it's, in many cases, not possible.”

The cynicism of these comments is remarkable. After her husband has seized on “democratization” as the all-purpose pretext for US military intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, and any other country targeted by American imperialism, Mrs. Bush blithely admits that such considerations don't apply to US client regimes like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. By this convenient logic, the United States is called on to be a force for democracy only in those countries considered by Washington to be hostile.

It is pointless to spend much time analyzing the half-baked rationalizations crafted for Laura Bush by the White House speechwriting pool. Events provided a far more direct and devastating refutation only a day

after she parted from her Egyptian hosts.

Wednesday, May 25 was the day set for the nationwide referendum on Mubarak's constitutional amendments. Opposition parties had called for a boycott, declaring both the amendments and the referendum a sham. They attempted to stage rallies and protests in Cairo and other cities, supporting a boycott and opposing Mubarak's reelection maneuvers. The response of the regime was swift and brutal.

Hundreds of thugs mobilized by Mubarak's National Democratic Party attacked the few dozens of anti-government demonstrators, beating them with sticks and clubs while both riot police and Western journalists looked on. In some cases, the journalists were also targeted for attack.

The riot police worked in tandem with the pro-government thugs, clearing corridors for them to attack the demonstrators, while blocking the protesters' path when they attempted to escape the violence.

The thugs chanted slogans in support of Mubarak, while the anti-government demonstrators shouted, "The Americans have sold us out," in reference to the Bush administration's embrace of the Mubarak reelection plan.

Mubarak's thugs went out of their way to assault and humiliate women among the demonstrators. They pulled at their clothes, in some cases ripping off blouses and fondling their victims. One woman activist told the press, "They put their hands in every conceivable place. I was basically sexually abused." A female Arab reporter for the Associated Press was also assaulted.

Although the Bush administration presented Mrs. Bush's trip to the Middle East as an effort to promote greater political participation and social freedoms for women, there was no immediate White House reaction to the deliberate attacks on women by Mubarak's goons.

Asked about the attacks—carried out in broad daylight on the streets of the Egyptian capital and widely covered in the media—US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice blandly told the French news agency AFP, "I've not seen the reports that you're talking about today."