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WHY PROTESTS MATTER: THE BATTLE BETWEEN AUTHORITARIANISM AND DEMOCRACY, A WAR WE MUST WIN

Marco Rubio

Silence and inaction are a choice.

It has been more than a decade since the 2009 protests in Iran, in which the people rose up and voted to shake off the oppressive bonds of Islamic theocracy and demand their God-given rights. Instead of being a moment of triumph for the universal longing for freedom, it was marked by widespread ballot fraud, ushering in the largest protests since the Islamic Revolution, dubbed the “Green Movement.” It also marked a stunning failure of U.S. foreign policy.

Though the Green Movement brought an opportunity to change the trajectory of Iran’s future, the U.S. administration at the time did not support the Iranian people nor rally the international community on behalf of the oppressed. It was only after protesters were beaten in the streets that then U.S. President Barack Obama spoke up. Not only did his administration fail to meet the moment, but President Obama reportedly “overruled advisers who wanted to do what America had done at similar transitions from dictatorship to democracy, and signal America’s support.”¹

Over the next decade, the Iranian regime brutally crushed additional protests, kidnapped Americans, continued to deprive Iranian women and minorities of their basic human rights, financed terrorist groups, and generally made the region and world unsafe.

Last year, protests erupted across the globe as authoritarian rulers fought to maintain their control over freedom-loving peoples from Caracas to Khartoum, Moscow to Hong Kong—a struggle whose outcome will define the 21st century. These protests transcended geographic boundaries and social classes, afflicting our allies, adversaries, and partners alike.

It is painfully clear that the United States should never simply be an impartial observer. Silence and inaction send a deafening signal to corrupt,

dictatorial regimes that they can strip away their citizens' identities and freedoms with impunity. It is morally reprehensible and, as we have seen with Iran, also dangerous for our own nation.

AUTHORITARIAN RESURGENCE

In the aftermath of World War II, America worked to prove to the world that free, democratic governance was the most effective and ethical way to administer a nation-state. The U.S.S.R. worked to undermine these values worldwide, but its corruption and weak economy doomed it in the long run. Today, we see a rise in authoritarian regimes that are both economically powerful and overtly hostile to civil society, with China being by far the most potent and malign example. Indeed, China uses sophisticated new tools through the internet and social media to carry out the repression of its citizens.

Such behavior is not sustainable. The yearning for freedom is intrinsic to every human being, transcending culture, ethnicity, and socioeconomic conditions. And while a regime can repress it for a time, there are long-term costs and consequences for doing so.

For billions worldwide, there is no more powerful example of the irrepressibility of the human desire for freedom than the 1989 protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. The students, who were eventually joined by Beijing residents and Chinese from the provinces, took to the Square against a lack of economic opportunity, inflation, and the corruption of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership. Soon, the protests escalated into calls for freedom and democracy. Many demonstrating did so courageously, in the face of near-certain death as Chinese People's Liberation Army tanks rolled in. While the CCP violently struck down thousands of protesters, their bravery has served as a powerful inspiration to those who bear it on themselves to defend democracy and advance the cause of freedom.

This inspiration is seen in the struggle of the people of Hong Kong, whose long-cherished freedoms have been eroded for years as Beijing has broken its promises and international commitments to Hong Kong's autonomy. For many in the city, an unjust bill introduced by the government that would allow extraditions from Hong Kong to mainland China—and expose people to the CCP's corrupt judicial system—was the straw that broke the camel's back. It brought over a million protesters from all backgrounds to the streets, likely making them the largest demonstrations in Hong Kong's history. The police responded with brutality, beating and arbitrarily detaining protesters and slapping on spurious charges against them, as well as detaining and harassing medical workers who could otherwise attend to injured demonstrators.²

The National Security Law that Beijing imposed in June was the latest blow to Hong Kong's freedoms. The destruction of Hong Kong's autonomy is not only a tragedy for its people but has major geopolitical implications, including severely weakening the city's status as an international economic hub. But Hong Kongers are far from solitary in their recent fight for freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.

A WAVE OF PROTEST MOVEMENTS

A decade after 2009, Iranians' economic grievances and frustration over price increases of basic consumer goods boiled into the largest protests since the Green Movement. Instead of addressing unemployment and an economy declining in part due to sanctions over its malign regional activities, the regime in Tehran continued to spend money funding foreign adventurism and terrorism abroad. Protesters quickly shifted from anger over economic mismanagement and corruption to demands for political and social freedoms—including, notably, women's rights, as Iranians protested their nation's repressive compulsory hijab law.

Meanwhile, in Venezuela, peaceful protesters began in 2014 calling for freedom from drug-trafficking dictator Nicolás Maduro. After suffering under years of blatant cronyism and human rights abuses, including jailing dissidents, Venezuelans took to the streets in historic numbers to call for Maduro's removal. The regime responded by violently suppressing the protests, weaponizing its food supply, and committing crimes against humanity³ such as killings, torture, and disappearances. Thankfully, the Trump administration has taken swift measures to support the Venezuelan people in their struggle to restore the rule of law and democratic order.

In Sudan, peaceful protests in 2019 fueled by anger over corruption, poor economic conditions, lack of governance, repression, and egregious human rights violations led to the ousting of corrupt dictator and indicted war criminal Omar al-Bashir—who oversaw genocide and crimes against humanity and hosted al-Qaeda training camps during his decades in power.⁴ Sudanese from all walks of life demonstrated, demanding an end to Bashir's brutal reign, even when met with violence and repression.

Since the fall of Bashir's bloodthirsty regime, a joint military-civilian-led transitional government has worked hard to secure a path toward democracy and peace, despite many challenges. Should the Sudanese prove successful in their pursuit of stable, democratic governance, the results will have significant implications. The United States would be able to: advance discussions on removing Sudan from the State Sponsor of Terror list; review new security cooperation arrangements with the United States and our allies; open economic relations that would help Sudan rebuild while also providing the United States and others with a new market for exports; and

potentially even pursue a Sudanese-Israeli peace agreement.

In Europe, the world has watched as the people of Belarus have risen up peacefully against dictator Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled the country with an iron fist since 1994. For Belarusians, this is a critical opportunity to reject decades of Soviet-style control—marked by continued arbitrary detentions and interrogations at the hands of the KGB—and replace it with a transparent government and the ability to decide their own future. What follows in Belarus will send ripples across Europe, NATO, and our collective security. It is in our national interest to have a stable, responsible government that is accountable to its people and able to withstand pressures from Vladimir Putin or other malign actors.

HOW AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AND OUR INTERESTS

While factors vary by country and region, beneath the surface of each of these protests there has been a pervasive theme: the global battle between authoritarianism and democracy. The United States has a tremendous stake in winning this fight, but policymakers must make the case to weary Americans, exhausted by decades of war abroad and suffering from a pandemic-induced recession at home.

Proponents of a robust U.S. foreign policy should view populist skepticism of U.S. involvement abroad as an opportunity to sharpen their arguments by grounding the impetus for American leadership in the common good of the American people and world.

First, there is the morality of rights that only the United States is positioned to champion. Unlike many other countries, Americans recognize that these rights derive not from any man, nor were they granted by the authority of any government. They are God-given. The principles enshrined in our founding documents, which have driven our own struggle for freedom, define who we are as Americans. Our foreign policy must reflect that basic conviction.

Authoritarian regimes especially do not recognize this fundamental truth. These are regimes that have no mooring in the natural rights of their people. The United States has a moral obligation, embodied in the laws that govern Americans and our institutions wherever in the world we operate, to protect and defend these rights from tyranny.

But beyond that moral obligation, because authoritarian regimes lack the secure foundation of natural rights, they inexorably move toward instability, which has a direct impact on Americans.

This is in contrast to democratic nations with robust civil societies, which tend to protect individual freedoms, respect their people's rights, and rarely

cause significant problems for regional stability. They are also more likely to be economically prosperous and become reliable trading partners.

Compare democratic nations to regimes like that of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, whose bloody war has sent a massive tide of refugees into Europe, or Venezuela, where Maduro's domestic repression and narcotics trafficking have destabilized much of Latin America, caused a hemispheric migrant crisis, and sent a wave of drugs and crime to our allies and the United States. These authoritarian states also offer opportunities for malign actors like Russia and China to exploit a crisis or conflict and subvert American interests.⁵

Autocratic regimes tend to be outright hostile to other nations when it comes to conducting trade and economic relations. The most destructive example is China under the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP's evil and repressive policies against its own people—e.g. surveilling and jailing religious and ethnic minorities or denying the nation basic liberties such as the right to free expression—have long been well known. Yet international investors tried to convince themselves that such repression would not affect Beijing's dealings outside of China. For decades, workers in the United States have suffered because of China's predatory economic practices, and in recent years, U.S. investors have increasingly found themselves deprived of the market access they were promised.

It's no mystery why, as the Chinese playbook is clear at this point. After luring foreign firms with promises of cheap labor, the CCP then slowly seizes everything that makes those firms successful—their production techniques, trade secrets, and human resources—transferring these assets to CCP-controlled domestic competitors and foreclosing any possibility of fair competition.

Beijing also uses forced labor from Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities imprisoned in extrajudicial internment camps to make goods to export abroad. Most recently, reports surfaced that the Chinese government was using forced labor to make personal protective equipment amid the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ Besides depriving the American people of stable, dignified work, Beijing's blatant intellectual property theft also comes with a hefty price tag to our economy: between \$225 billion and \$600 billion per year.⁷

Under its Belt and Road Initiative, China uses debt-trap diplomacy to exert control over the political systems and economies of countries it seeks to influence and, in some cases, informally subjugate.⁸ Beijing backs huge, state-directed firms like Huawei to thuggishly compete with private companies abroad and, after unfairly beating out competitors for international contracts such as for 5G implementation, gains access to critical technological infrastructure of foreign nations.

Now, China is working to try to sell its authoritarian tools abroad and undermine norms of good governance. To vulnerable nations, the CCP offers an effective toolkit for repression and graft for a corrupt elite, allowing enriched dictators to paint a façade of economic success. This approach is evil because it devalues human life and harms future economic opportunity for millions worldwide. But even from an amoral perspective, there are reasons to doubt its legitimacy. In China, the ruthless exploitation of the country's rural population for the benefit of an urban upper class no longer provides high economic growth, and nations abroad are starting to wake up to the dangers of partnering with Beijing or its state-run firms. And when disasters like the initial COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan occur, the world sees firsthand how autocratic regimes respond. They hide information by punishing whistleblowers and stifling the free flow of important data to the rest of the world. In other words, they act to preserve their own power at the price of global health and security—not to mention the well-being of their own people.

In contrast, good governance and democratic principles promoted by the United States promote the common good for Americans and the rest of the world. The American-led system of economic alliances rebuilt Europe after World War II. It guided governments in Europe and Asia to their present prosperity and has raised billions out of poverty in developing nations. And with the right political priorities, this is valuable for Americans not just as consumers, but producers as well. In general, stable markets and law-abiding states allow for durable contracts in long-term business relationships. One of the most important goals of the Marshall Plan, for example, was to develop a European market overseen by democratic leaders that would buy American goods. But for a country like the United States, a mutually beneficial relationship is not possible when dealing with an authoritarian rival constantly looking to undercut its would-be business partner.

The threats, however, that authoritarian regimes pose to Americans extend beyond reduced economic opportunity. These regimes also give rise to threats to our national security that directly harm Americans. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad's autocratic rule and prolonged war have spurred the uprising of jihadist terrorist groups that have gone on to kill Americans and others.⁹ And in Tehran, the regime's devotion to funding terrorist organizations has meant countless lives lost, including Americans, at the hands of Hezbollah, Hamas, and other groups.

WHY PROTESTS MATTER

When oppressed people peacefully rise up to demand that their rights be respected—as Iranians did in 2009, and again in 2019—it provides a window for American leaders to demonstrate our support for the values and

the principles of freedom. Protesters in Iran and elsewhere are exercising their fundamental rights to free expression and assembly—and fearlessly demonstrating to authoritarians their will to do so—as they seek basic freedoms and better opportunities for themselves and their children. These are the essential ingredients for building a robust civil society, the means by which ordinary people around the world are able to raise families, find dignified work, practice their faith according to their conscience, and meaningfully contribute to their communities. These individual elements may look different from place to place, but the yearning for freedom and dignity of life exists in all of us.

Protest is vital not only because it's an expression of that yearning; it is the essential practice of freedom and dignity itself and a force against tyranny. And while a government has a role to play in nurturing the requisite qualities of civil society, those qualities will necessarily arise from the ground up, not top-down. The state cannot simply mandate the creation of strong, local communities—though it can allow the freedoms required to create the environment in which they take form. As such, authoritarian regimes fear an active civil society, often marked by protest, because it exists outside their control.

It takes tremendous effort, organization, and courage to stand up against authoritarianism. When the United States turns its back on these protesters, we squander an opportunity to put American power and influence to use for the greater good and instead convey to those standing up that they do so alone.

This is not, and cannot be, how America chooses to respond when people are calling out for freedom.

THE NECESSITY OF AMERICAN LEADERSHIP

In today's divided political environment, every public policy issue can seem black or white. This extends to contemporary debates over foreign policy, in which every argument is framed as belonging to one of two camps. The first is characterized as dominated by politicians in search of foreign injustices to quash and evil regimes to topple, no matter the cost. By contrast, the second is portrayed as made up of war-weary isolationists more concerned with challenges at home, but who are unwilling to lift a finger in the face of human rights disasters away from our shores.

Both of these depictions are exaggerations. The reality of American foreign policy is far more complex. One problem for the latter camp is, as we are witnessing, that authoritarian regimes breed instability—if not domestically, then abroad by working to undermine American interests. This includes physical violence and interfering in our democracies' direction. We know for a fact that Russia, China, and Iran all try to intervene in

our politics. Not only is it safer when democracy succeeds abroad, it is for the health of our own political system that it does.

Pacifying these threats requires American strength and moral leadership to support peaceful demands for freedom. Such leadership can prevent war and strengthen our friends and allies so they can fight threats themselves. Because of American wealth and power across various dimensions—economic, military, and soft power—no other country can fill that role. But it is for precisely this reason that America will not be able to lead abroad if the economic machine that has powered our nation for generations—which has given working Americans the chance to thrive, as well as the industrial capacity needed to produce medicine and weapons of war—loses its power.

The CCP's desire to supplant the United States is a clear and present danger to our economic future. Stuningly, the CCP's ambitions are aided by a decades-long consensus in the United States between political and corporate elites. That consensus prizes economic efficiency over national resilience, offshoring jobs for short-term gains over long-term domestic investment, and individual enrichment over the common good.

This consensus is antithetical to our nation's founding and responsibility to defend our values internationally. Instead of practicing international relations based on our values, we have outsourced those values to the logic of efficiency. The results are plain to see. In the face of atrocities committed by the CCP from Xinjiang to Hong Kong, many U.S. companies side with Beijing, an outcome disastrous both for the people suffering in China and the economic interests of Americans.¹⁰ This is no exaggeration, as Disney, an American icon, recently thanked eight Xinjiang government bureaus for their assistance in filming *Mulan*.¹¹

The extent of America's international presence cannot simply be pursuing the most efficient economic outcomes; instead, it must prioritize American security and the pursuit of fundamental rights, including the strengthening of American workers and, through them, our nation's civil society.

We cannot accomplish those goals domestically by receding inward and abandoning the mantle of leadership abroad. Free, democratic allies are integral to our way of life at home. Strong international engagement means greater international stability and prosperity, as well as less mass migration, terrorism, and international crime.

But even more fundamentally, ensuring that we don't ignore oppressed people when they are looking for assistance is vital to our national interest and identity. Support from the United States can take many forms, including statements of moral support, imposing targeted sanctions on those suppressing freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, developing internet access tools to combat censorship, and providing safe haven to those persecuted.

Of course, America cannot be a force for democracy abroad if we fail to set the right example within our own borders. It is vital that our nation continue to hold transparent, democratic elections protected from foreign interference, so we can preserve their legitimacy. And there can be no hesitation when we are called to defend our own people's foundational right to peaceful protest—even when we don't agree with the message.

The yearning for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is not what makes us American; these desires are inherent to the human condition and can be found all over the world. What makes us American is our unwavering commitment to securing those natural rights through democratic self-governance so people can flourish. It is our commitment to ensuring the protection of people's freedoms to raise families, form communities, and live their lives without the fear of their government.

As Americans, we live in a nation founded on the very truth that every human is created equal and endowed with inalienable rights that no government or individual can revoke. With this truth comes the obligation to defend these principles. These are the values of our Constitution, and they undergird our nation's security. Standing with those engaged in the struggle for freedom and democratic values against authoritarian regimes worldwide must remain a frontline U.S. foreign policy priority. 🇺🇸

NOTES

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