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Our Friend the Autocrat

By Neil Hicks

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President Bush will have an opportunity to put his "forward strategy for freedom in the Middle East" into practice this week when he meets with Tunisian President Zine Abidine Ben Ali at the White House.

President Ben Ali is an unreconstructed autocrat who runs one of the most repressive police states in the Arab world. He was "reelected" to a third five-year term by better than 99 percent of the vote in 1999. In 2002 the ruling party called a referendum in which it claimed that more than 99 percent of the voters favored allowing the president run for a fourth term and granting him blanket immunity from prosecution, even after he leaves office -- assuming he ever does.

President Bush has pledged that "when the leaders of reform ask for our help, America will give it," and he has said that America is "expecting a higher standard from our friends" when it comes to upholding liberty.

These are fine words, but the champions of liberty in Tunisia will be expecting little from their president's visit to Washington. The Tunisian government, on the other hand, will be expecting further affirmation of its position as a U.S. ally in the war against terrorism. In short, it will be expecting business as usual, with Washington turning a blind eye to persistent violations of human rights in Tunisia and the brutal gagging of peaceful dissent.

It is vitally important that the Bush administration find a way to show it is serious when it claims to have a new approach to the region, especially in its dealings with such repressive allies as Tunisia. Otherwise, the long suffering of the region -- "a place of tyranny and despair and anger," to quote President Bush -- will continue, with ever more of the blame attaching to the United States. To follow the administration's logic, this would result in it producing more "men and movements that threaten the safety of Americans and our friends."

The indications that we will hear something qualitatively different from the administration this week are not good. In December, Secretary of State Colin Powell went to Tunis and praised the "excellent partnership" between Tunisia and the United States in fighting terrorism. A few weeks earlier the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, William Burns, announced that the United States had chosen Tunis as the regional center for its Middle East Partnership Initiative, a program to promote democracy and political reform. The announcement provoked a hollow laugh from Tunisia's beleaguered democrats and reformers.

Powell indicated at his news conference in Tunis that President Bush would want to discuss political reform and openness in Tunisia during his meeting with President Ben Ali in Washington. There is much to talk about.

Independent organizations monitoring human rights such as the National Committee for Civil Liberties in Tunisia and the International Association to Support Political Prisoners have been denied legal recognition. Their activities are habitually banned or broken up by the police, and their members are harassed and subjected to intrusive surveillance. Human rights leaders are subjected to sustained governmental harassment. Their careers are destroyed; members of their families are threatened; they are arbitrarily banned from foreign travel; their telephone lines are cut or interfered with. Periodically they are imprisoned.

Zouhair Yahyaoui, who published an independent Web magazine, Tunezine, was sentenced in June 2002 to 28 months in prison for "putting out false news" and "unauthorized use of the internet." He spent 15 months in jail. The Internet is strictly censored in Tunisia, as are local broadcast and print media. Zouhair Yahyaoui incurred the wrath of the government by publishing a memorandum by his uncle, Mokhtar Yahyaoui, at that time a senior judge, who criticized the Tunisian government's undermining of the independence of the judiciary. Mokhtar Yahyaoui was removed from the bench for voicing his opinions.

For years the Tunisian government has justified its repressive ways as being necessary to hold back the tide of militant Islamic extremism. It points to neighboring Algeria as an example of how things could go wrong. But Tunisia is not Algeria and never was. If democracy and human rights cannot make progress in commendably literate, comparatively prosperous, ethnically and religiously homogenous Tunisia, then they are unlikely to make progress in other Arab countries, all of which are wrestling with much greater challenges.

It is time for the Tunisian government to end its excuses. President Bush can prove wrong those who are skeptical about his plans to reshape the Middle East by delivering a clear message to President Ben Ali that his repression of nonviolent dissent must stop.

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