

Egypt's Fragile Stability

BY DINA GUIRGUIS

Egypt, long a pillar of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, faces an imminent transition — not only politically but societally. In the fall of 2011, Egypt will hold its second ever multi-candidate presidential elections. This will follow recent parliamentary elections that served as a bellwether for next year's scheduled presidential elections and determined who can run against the 82-year-old President Mubarak for his sixth term should he choose to run. As the political transition nears, Egypt is becoming increasingly authoritarian, sectarian and politically exclusionary, even as Egyptian society becomes more restless. The interaction of these twin developments will have ripple effects throughout the entire region.

In Washington, the reality of the situation is slowly dawning but the Obama Administration remains unable or unwilling to find and/or use tools of leverage to substantively engage the Egyptian regime on critical issues of domestic reform. During his recent speech at the UN General Assembly last September, President Obama articulated a renewed commitment to democracy and human rights within a broader security paradigm that recognizes nations' domestic stability as integral to the role they play, for better or for worse, in the international community. Now—at the moment of Egypt's first potential political transition in 30 years—is the time for the U.S. to act on these stated values. Not only is it the right thing to do; ultimately it is in the United States' national security interest.

During its first two years in office, the Obama Administration has struggled to find its voice on promoting political reform in the Middle East. After the perceived failures of Bush's freedom agenda, this was only natural, but facts on the ground have been imposing themselves in a way that neither favors the U.S. or Middle Easterners. For decades, successive American administrations have relied on the now octogenarian President Mubarak as a stabilizing, moderating force in the region. It is unlikely he will serve as chief executive for much longer, and the Egypt he will be leaving behind is anything but moderate.

Notwithstanding a decade-long apparent plan to engineer hereditary succession to Mubarak's son Gamal, Egyptian government opacity during this transition has left both Egyptians and American officials wondering what comes next. Some are concerned about how this transition will take place, but mostly, there is anxiety about what the change will ultimately mean for Egypt and how it will impact its western allies, especially as the Egyptian domestic scene appears increasingly turbulent and an increasing number of Egyptians continue to take to the streets to agitate for change.

The Obama Administration's attempts to steer through these murky waters through appeals to "mutual respect" and reciprocity have been met with the Egyptian government's contempt, manifest for example in the renewal of Egypt's notorious emergency law this past May. The law, which has been in effect since Mubarak took office in 1981, suspends the basic constitutional protections granted to all Egyptians. The Egyptian regime marketed the renewal as necessary to fend off legitimate security threats generated by drug trafficking and terrorism, and pledged to restrict the law's application to those cases.

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Not surprisingly, few were convinced of this stated purpose. Only a month later, in a gruesome and brutal display of the Egyptian security apparatus's traditional impunity, a young man named Khaled Said was kicked to death by police officers. His crime?: Said refused to surrender his identification documents to the officers at an internet café. To many in Egypt, Said's case epitomizes all that is wrong with a regime increasingly out of step with Egyptian society and reliant on a brutal security apparatus that with more than one million men is at least twice the size of the nation's military. Said's case paints a picture of systematic and growing oppression in Egypt that betrays the regime's insecurity during this sensitive time of transition. Harassment (beating, torture, and detention) of young men and women peacefully advocating for basic political rights and reform, restrictions on speech, media, and the right of association, unrelenting attacks on the opposition's attempts to peacefully organize, and state complicity in growing sectarian strife have become routine.

This oppression also takes on the form of political exclusion and intimidation, seemingly designed to advance the succession prospects of the president's son, Gamal Mubarak, to the Egyptian presidency, to the exclusion of all other potential candidates and arguably against the will of the majority of the Egyptian people. The National Democratic Party's claim to a whopping victory in the recent parliamentary election falls squarely within the Egyptian regime's "overkill" during this phase, even eliciting criticism from some anonymous sources within the party.

In response to even tepid U.S. criticism related to these developments, the Egyptian government has reacted with resolute resistance. Egyptian officials, for example, rejected

President Obama's call for all nations to open themselves to international election observation. In a joint letter from the International Republican and National Democratic Institutes to President Mubarak, respective chairpersons John McCain and Madeleine Albright expressed U.S. support for international election observation of upcoming elections. That letter went ignored by the Egyptian government. Instead, the government proceeded with the elections in the absence of international monitors—making Egypt an exception to the current trend and majority of countries in the region that now accept the practice. (The latest country to join this majority group is Jordan, which opened its doors to international monitors during its parliamentary elections last November.)

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Similarly, a non-binding, strongly supported bipartisan congressional resolution supporting free and fair elections and an end to the emergency law—S. Res. 586—was vehemently fought by the Egyptian government and its extensive lobbying resources until it was killed off in the congressional lame duck session. Further illustrating the Egyptian government's contempt for Mr. Obama's policy of reciprocity, the Egyptian government's official media mouthpieces have become increasingly vocal in criticizing the U.S. One of the most vitriolic of these criticisms came in the form of an op-ed from the pro-government Al Ahram newspaper editor-in-chief Osama Saraya on November 22, entitled "The Devil Preaches," which lengthily refers to America's "failures" in the region.

Meanwhile, a faction of the Egyptian opposition boycotted the parliamentary election from the beginning. After the first round of voting, two important opposition players, the Wafd and the Muslim Brotherhood, decided to join that boycott, citing widespread fraud by the NDP. Already facing an incredibly restrictive domestic environment—not the least of which is the extensive fraud documented during the course of the election—the opposition additionally perceives a changed international climate where neither the U.S. nor the European Union are gaining traction on key governance issues. Perhaps most restrictive have been the carefully tailored recent constitutional amendments which substantively exclude the opposition from legitimate political participation and from this year's presidential contest.

But times of challenge are also times of opportunity. In the face of tremendous obstacles, Egyptians are taking to the streets in acts of peaceful civil disobedience in unprecedented fashion, at great personal risk, to demand basic social, economic, and political reforms. For the past two years, Egypt's labor movement has become one of the most active in the world, and a growing poverty rate (currently 40% of Egyptians live on \$2 per day or less) will continue to fuel that activism.

Gradually, some sectors of the U.S. government, in particular the U.S. Congress, while maintaining Egypt's importance as a critical U.S. ally, are beginning to reject the Faustian bargain being offered by the regime, namely that Egyptian cooperation on U.S. regional interests comes in exchange for U.S. acquiescence to growing failures on liberalizing political reform and a systematic failure to respect basic human rights. In Washington, bureaucrats and political appointees alike in this Administration seem to understand that Egypt has its own national interests in pursuing Arab-Israeli peace and fending off regional military and ideological threats, and that Egypt has continued and will always pursue those interests independently of its bilateral relationship with the United States.

This basic understanding has yet to be translated into a policy that recognizes how broadly U.S. regional interests will be undermined should Washington continue to ignore Egypt's alarming socio-political trajectory. Ironically, the Egyptian regime's obsession with consolidating power domestically has led to a loss of Egyptian regional clout and diplomatic prowess, making it a weaker partner for the United States. Additionally, the regime's obsession with staying in power, coupled with increasing public frustration and anger, has led to a bloated internal security apparatus, skewing resource allocation that in turn have accentuated poor and corrupt governance across many fronts and resulted in substantial development failures. Making matters worse, the regime has pursued a divide-and-conquer approach that pits Egyptians against foreign countries, like the United States, or against each other in order to deflect blame for these failures. The fruit of this regime policy can be seen daily in anti-American official state newspapers and in the uptick in sectarian violence and extremism.

The lack of regime confidence and the inability to lead from a point of strength has exacerbated sectarian strife. Lately, Egypt has been shaken by a grisly terrorist attack on New Year's Eve targeting Christians as they were leaving a church service in Alexandria that left at least 25 people dead and dozens injured. Preceding the attack were sectarian protests that emerged in the aftermath of what appears to have been a domestic dispute between a Coptic priest and his wife, Kamilia Shehata, who was alleged to have sought to convert to Islam. Typically in Egypt, the church discourages conversions of Muslims to Christianity, because the

converted—as well as any Christians allegedly complicit in that conversion—face grave danger and serious state security harassment. Christians seeking to convert to Islam, however, typically face no such harassment. In the most recent case, some Muslims alleged that state religious authorities at Al-Azhar mosque refused to immediately recognize Shehata's alleged conversion to Islam and surrendered her to the church for “counsel.” It was alleged, with great outrage that state security authorities deferred to the church on the conversion and rendered her to church custody.

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The alleged surrender of the woman to the church led to charges by some Muslim protesters of church “kidnapping” and even of weapons stockpiling inside Egypt's Coptic churches. Some protesters went so far as to curse the Coptic patriarch and to call for violence against Copts and their return to dhimmi (inferior minority) status. These protests have been a mainstay after Muslim Friday prayers in mosques in Cairo and Alexandria since September. The usual heavy handedness wrought by state security on political protesters has been conspicuously absent, as protesters were left to engage in open threats of violence against the Copts. Instead, and absurdly, the Egyptian government “responded” to such tensions by placing restrictions on SMS messaging, which they claim played a part in “inflaming passions” in these circumstances. Rather than afford citizens equal treatment and protection before the law—such as the right of Christians to build or repair churches—an easily resolvable issue by Egypt's executive which alone would ease Egypt's sectarian tensions, the regime chooses instead, in typical fashion, to clamp down on all civil liberties. Conveniently for the regime, these restrictions came at a time when some civil society groups, with U.S. government backing, were planning on conducting election monitoring programs through the use of SMS messaging.

Weeks before the New Year's Eve massacre, the regime's unwillingness, for over a decade—despite numerous pleas by rights groups—to pass a law facilitating church repair and construction saw another tragic end. Coptic protesters, who came out to demonstrate against the refusal by Cairo's governor to let Copts build a church, were assaulted by security forces, which grossly outnumbered the protesters

and responded with disproportionate force. Tear gas, rubber bullets, then live ammunition were used against the protesters, leaving at least two, including one 19-year-old boy, dead, and dozens injured.” That the Copts were denied the ability to build a house of worship was nothing unusual; the strong Coptic public show of anger after years of discrimination was, as was the state's fatal use of force against them: all young, unarmed civilians. This incident marked a turning point in the Coptic population's relations with the state, signaling that Coptic acquiescence to the status quo may no longer be relied on as it once was. This turn was especially evident in the days following the New Year's Eve massacre, when thousands of angry Coptic protesters refused to heed even the call of the Coptic patriarch for calm.

Sadly, the spiral of political uncertainty and sectarian unrest, fanned by government incompetence and complicity, reinforces for some the need to hold more tightly to the “moderating” Mubarak regime to avoid a complete collapse of the state. Already the regime succeeded for years in coercing acquiescence from sectors of its Coptic population as well as from some of its western allies, including the United States, by fueling fears of Islamist extremism—a phenomenon it has largely fueled. The problem, of course, is that the longer we wait, the more likely the worst case scenario becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. And the more Egypt's regime acts out in draconian fashion its growing insecurities during a time of transition, the less certain the prospects of a smooth transition.

Make no mistake, Egypt is changing, and these changes will substantially affect its Arab neighbors as they always have. They will also impact U.S. ability to rely on Egypt as a partner, both because a weak Egypt internally is weaker externally, but also due to growing anger toward the United States for its persistent support of the Mubarak regime. Will the U.S. stand on the right side of history in looking beyond short-term interests to help support the people of the region's legitimate aspirations to create stable and pluralistic democracies in the Middle East, as President Obama pledged? Or will we as a nation continue to compromise our values and ultimately threaten our interests in so doing? Like some of the Coptic protesters, will we awaken to the fact that the status quo does not serve but harms our long-term interests? Making the hard but necessary and strategic choice to do so will require the creative examination and use of all the tools of leverage—and the political will to use them.

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