

Toward the Sisi Era: A New Page in U.S.-Egypt Relations?

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Brief Analysis

Three experts offer firsthand observations on Egypt's presidential election and its aftermath, including recommendations for the future direction of U.S. policy and aid dollars.

On June 2, 2014, Eric Bjornlund, Eric Trager, and Michele Dunne addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Trager is the Wagner Fellow at the Institute and was in Egypt during the latest election, as was Bjornlund, who serves as head of Democracy International. Dunne is a senior associate in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ERIC BJORNLUND

In the week's leading up to Egypt's presidential election, international observers were deployed around the country to learn what people were saying about the process. In total, eighty-six observers representing some seventeen different countries were present in twenty-five of the country's twenty-seven governorates.

Election observers are typically required to remain impartial and respect local laws; their presence should not be taken as endorsement of the process. For this election, observers used an innovative system of gathering information, including handheld tablets to collect data in realtime. Given these local findings, which did not indicate substantial turnout, the government's reported turnout figures do not seem credible.

Moreover, serious concerns have emerged about the repressive political environment surrounding this election. Although Egypt's constitution protects freedom of expression and other rights, the government's suppression of dissent, widespread arrests, and enforcement of anti-protest law make it difficult to hold a genuinely democratic election. The campaign of Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's sole opponent, Hamdin Sabahi, had more political space to compete than in previous contests, including better access to media and visibility throughout the country. Yet Egyptian media strongly favored Sisi, and the government waged a strong campaign to get out the vote.

On election day, many limitations were imposed that made it more difficult for observers to get access to the process. Some domestic groups were better able to get accreditation, but groups with certain political views met with continued burdens and procedural hurdles. Election officials were better trained, but the inability to appeal electoral commission decisions is out of line with international standards.

Election day also witnessed a heavy security presence, including military, police, and other armed individuals. Observers found a substantial number of uniformed and ununiformed personnel inside polling places, playing a more high-profile role than desirable. The government also made a last-minute decision to extend polling by one day, even though observers did not see any voter impediments that would suggest a need for that measure. Such extensions should only be made under extraordinary circumstances.

In the wake of the presidential campaign, Egyptians are discussing a draft parliamentary election law. The selection of a new legislature may give the country an opportunity to reorient itself and include more voices in the political process.

ERIC TRAGER

Washington faces a dilemma: to continue military aid to a country that is heading in an autocratic direction, or withhold aid to encourage democracy. But realistically, there is little hope of influencing Egypt's domestic politics in a more democratic direction right now.

Sisi's presidential campaign embraced the same political strategy on which former autocrat Hosni Mubarak depended. First, it relied on the clan and tribal networks that supported Mubarak for mobilizing the vote. These clans dominate social and political life outside major cities, where approximately two-thirds of Egyptians live. Second, Sisi depended on businessmen to fund banners and propaganda, relying on decentralized power bases throughout the country -- a very Mubarak-like approach. Third, as the recent cancellation of Bassem Youssef's satirical news show *Al-Bernameg* indicates, old redlines are returning, and it is now effectively unacceptable to mock Sisi, as it was once unacceptable to mock Mubarak. Fourth, Egypt's media has become hyper-nationalist -- many outlets fear that the new government will revive state media, so they are being extremely supportive of Sisi to prevent the emergence of competing outlets.

While Egypt's authoritarian trajectory is unfortunate, Washington faces three challenges in promoting democracy right now. First, there are no organized democrats in Egypt: the Muslim Brotherhood demonstrated its autocratic tendencies during Muhammad Morsi's year in power, and non-Islamists are currently supporting a leadership that governs in a similarly exclusivist fashion. Second, the Egyptian public severely distrusts Washington. Third, the struggle between the Brotherhood and the military remains an existential conflict. Sisi and people around him are concerned that if the group were able to mobilize, it would return to power and seek vengeance. This is not a purely theoretical concern, since Muslim Brothers routinely say they want Sisi executed. The government thus views calls for "reconciliation" with the group as suicidal -- there is nothing the United States can offer or withhold that might compel Cairo to politically include the Brotherhood now.

Since Washington cannot get the more democratic Egypt it wants, it should instead aim for the Egypt it needs: one that is strategically aligned with the United States. While many in Washington fear that giving military aid to the current government would be interpreted by locals as supporting autocracy, Egyptians tend to view military aid as a guarantor of their national security, not as a tool for influencing their domestic politics. Although Washington should not condone Egypt's trajectory as a "transition to democracy," it should be realistic about America's capacity for shaping that trajectory right now and focus instead on maintaining the strategic relationship.

MICHELE DUNNE

Egypt has gone through several different phases over the past three years, all part of a lengthy period of change whose ultimate outcome is unknown. The country clearly has a real terrorism problem. It also has massive human-rights abuses, with many individuals arrested or

killed at demonstrations, widespread reports of torture, and significant curbs on freedom of expression. The limitations on speech may increase post-election: later in the Mubarak era, it was acceptable to criticize the president, but it was never acceptable to criticize the military. Sisi is identified with the military, so criticizing him has become verboten.

Given that Egypt's military sees itself in an existential struggle, the United States cannot stop the slide toward authoritarianism. Yet it is not suitable for Washington to maintain the same kind of assistance package to Egypt that it had in the past. The U.S. government will recognize the new president and work with Cairo on its legitimate security needs, but the relationship has gone out of balance in terms of what Egypt really needs. It has evolved over the years to emphasize the security side while becoming lighter on the economic and people-to-people side. Similarly, Sisi's interviews in recent months emphasize rebuilding the state but say very little about the people and empowerment.

The United States needs to send the signal that its partnership is with the nation of Egypt, not just the military. Accordingly, most U.S. assistance should be redirected toward the people. There is a rising generation of young Egyptians who need to be educated and prepared for the labor force. The United States must not get trapped in a zero-sum game -- it is time for a bottom-up rethink.

Reassessing the aid package is unlikely to affect Cairo's cooperation with the United States, which has continued even when aid is suspended. It should not affect the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty either; Cairo adhered to the treaty even under Morsi.

Finally, although Egypt's new constitution gives the parliament a bigger role, the draft parliamentary law will mark a return to the Mubarak-era electoral system in which three-fourths of the seats are elected by individual mandate. This will discourage the country's new political parties, which had believed they could benefit from the Muslim Brotherhood's absence from the political scene. Given these and other conditions, the United States should not be spending its assistance on fielding large electoral observer teams, which risk legitimizing noncompetitive contests like the one that just took place.

This summary was prepared by Marina Shalabi. ❖

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