

There's Only One Real Law Now in Egypt

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Washington should focus on shielding U.S. strategic interests in Egypt from the effects of persistent political instability, while also encouraging Cairo to address the root causes of this instability over time.

The optimism of Egypt's January 2011 Tahrir Square uprising, which began three years ago today, persists in Washington, where it infuses the idealistic pronouncements of columnists, policymakers, and pundits alike. Their analysis often goes something like this: Egypt was on a democratic path, albeit a bumpy one, until the military removed Mohamed Morsi from power on July 3, but it's now off that path completely, so the U.S. should use its leverage -- including its \$1.3 billion in annual military aid -- to get Egypt back on it.

Never mind that military aid is as useful for promoting democracy as a screwdriver is for hammering a nail. Washington's hand wringing regarding Egypt's autocratic trajectory overlooks an even more substantial challenge: that within Egypt itself, "Arab Spring" romanticism is practically -- and very sadly -- dead. The revolutionary groups that coordinated the uprising's initial demonstrations are now widely reviled; the most prominent revolutionary activists now sit unjustly in prison, with minimal popular outcry demanding their release; and a critical mass of Egyptians appear willing to move forward with a transition that will ironically move the country backwards, as approximately 20 million Egyptians voted "yes" on a constitution that will effectively restore the entrenched, military-backed authoritarianism of the Mubarak era.

Within the Beltway, Egypt's autocratic recidivism is often blamed on Egypt's poisonous media and draconian military-backed government, thereby casting ordinary Egyptians as passive actors in their own country's story. But they aren't. Time and again, critical masses of Egyptians have cast and recast their lot: first with the 2011 anti-Mubarak uprising, then with the military junta that succeeded Mubarak, then with the Muslim Brotherhood during the 2011-2012 parliamentary and presidential elections, and then with the military once again during the July 2013 uprising-cum-coup that ousted Mohamed Morsi.

In all likelihood, these critical masses of Egyptians will change their minds again, because even as the rules of

Egypt's political game have been written and rewritten repeatedly, one hard law has emerged: nothing is permanent. Egyptians can vote for a constitution today that will be revoked -- with their blessing -- tomorrow, and they can elect a president tomorrow whose toppling they will demand the next day. No political actor in Egypt is immune from this cycle of recycling: not the youth activists who were feted on the very Egyptian television stations that now decry them as foreign agents; not the Brotherhood, which scored a string of electoral victories and is now widely viewed as a "terrorist" organization; and not even General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, whose neck is likely strained from looking over his shoulder at the lower-ranked generals who might one day respond to mass protests by removing him, particularly if he runs for president, as is widely expected.

Within Egypt, the defining feature of the past three years has been fear, not democratization. And those who are most powerful on paper have typically been the most fearful. The military junta that succeeded Mubarak in February 2011 feared becoming the target of another mass uprising, so it mostly avoided its policing duties and thus permitted crime, sectarian violence, and Sinai-based jihadi terrorism to rise under its watch. The Muslim Brotherhood, seeing itself as part of a centuries-long struggle to implement Egypt's supposedly innate Islamist character, was so fearful of its "secular" enemies that it sloppily rushed to consolidate total power for itself and, in the process, catalyzed a massive resistance that destroyed its ability to govern. And despite its rhetorical bravado in confronting the Brotherhood since ousting Morsi in July, the current military-backed government similarly knows it's just one mass-uprising away from Tora Prison or worse, which is why its supposedly technocratic ministers are hesitant to introduce much-needed economic reforms, let alone enfranchise Muslim Brothers who very openly demand death to the "putschists."

It's a political environment in which nobody gives an inch, because nobody thinks he can afford to. And since the willingness to compromise is essential to democratic stability, any near-term effort by the U.S. to promote political inclusion in Egypt, let alone true democracy, is unlikely to succeed. Meanwhile, the fact that Egyptian rulers are simply too afraid of their own people to undertake bold but necessary reforms means that the underlying causes of the initial uprising three years ago -- high youth unemployment, massive economic inequality, and exclusivist politics -- will likely go unresolved. At this rate, Egyptians will remain dissatisfied indefinitely, and may continue flipping through governments like bored diner patrons examining the jukebox list.

Amidst Egypt's persistent domestic political tumult, Washington should craft a two-pronged strategy. First, it should prioritize its narrow interests -- regional peace, counterterrorism, overflight rights, and preferred Suez Canal access -- through its strategic relationship with the Egyptian military, which will remain the relevant partner for protecting these interests, and which will be there no matter who rules. In this vein, recent efforts on Capitol Hill to ease the flow of military aid to Egypt despite this summer's coup are well-considered: Egypt's external behavior remains the one thing that Washington can still reliably shape, and maintaining this type of predictability is essential when nothing else is certain.

But Washington must also look towards the end of the current transitional process, which will likely conclude with parliamentary elections this summer, and craft a longer term strategy for encouraging Cairo to respond to the political and economic demands that have now sunk two presidents in three years. This will encompass a broad range of policy tools: quiet diplomacy for prodding Cairo to permit greater political contestation, so that oppositionists pursue power through formal channels, rather than in the streets; economic incentives for encouraging the regime to reform its bloated bureaucracy and outdated subsidy policies, so that it can finally invest in education and infrastructure; and broad outreach within Egypt, to encourage political and societal actors to use their own influence to promote reform.

In other words, smart policy would focus squarely on shielding U.S. strategic interests in Egypt from the effects of persistent political instability, while also encouraging Cairo to address the root causes of its instability over time.

This means treating Egypt not as a country whose democratization has been stymied, but as a strategic partner in the throes of an ongoing revolution, whose democratization has not yet started.

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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