

Democracy in Egypt Needs More Than an Election

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What is clear is that the Muslim Brotherhood did not offer the right path for change.

The term "Arab Spring" was always a misnomer. There was never going to be a rapid transformation from authoritarian rule to democracy in Middle Eastern countries. Genuine democracy requires not just elections, it requires a political culture of tolerance and respect for minority rights, institutions that provide for the rule of law, a readiness to accept the outcome of elections even when you lose, and a recognition that governance cannot favor only one group to the exclusion of everyone else.

The year 2011 was marked not by an Arab Spring but by an "awakening" in many of the countries of the Middle East. It was an awakening in the sense that people suddenly saw themselves as citizens and not as subjects: As citizens, they had a right to make demands; have a voice, expectations, and hopes -- and above all else, create accountability. After 40 years of having regimes that imposed on them, defined their hopes, told them to listen but not express themselves, and made them accountable to the leaders, the peoples in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen said, "Enough." Only in Syria, where the regime chose to kill its citizens rather than let them replace it, has the leader remained in power. However, Bashar al-Assad remains in power as a civil war rages and the country of Syria has largely ceased to exist.

Now, in Egypt, we see what some are calling a second revolution. As supporters of democracy, we in the United States can take small comfort when an elected leader is replaced not by the ballot box but by the demands of the street. Yet, while we see the Egyptian military act on those demands, and feel uneasy about it, we should not ignore the deeper reality that is playing out in Egypt. President Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood acted in power as if they were the new authoritarians. Yes, he was elected; however, he was not anointed. And he and his colleagues in the Muslim Brotherhood acted as if they had been -- choosing to seek control over governance. Rather than be inclusive, Morsi appointed mostly members of the Muslim Brotherhood and sought to rule by decree, ensure that the

new constitution would be written only by Islamists, prosecute journalists that "insulted" the president, remove judges who opposed him, and ignore the economic needs of the country.

The "Tamarod" (rebellion) movement was fed by sheer frustration in vast segments of the Egyptian public with Morsi and Muslim Brotherhood rule. It was not just the exclusion of others and the fear that Morsi was determined to create an Islamic state in Egypt; it was also the sheer ineptitude in dealing with Egypt's problems. Unemployment went up significantly; electrical blackouts occurred multiple times daily and were accompanied by shortages of bread, long gas lines, and increasingly, the absence of law and order. It was not just the liberals and the secular groups who were in the streets, it was also broader segments of society -- all of whom felt they had no other recourse.

From that standpoint, this is not like Algeria, where the military acted to void an election and prevent a newly voted-in Islamist leadership from assuming power. This was the Egyptian public literally revolting and seeking a course correction. No doubt, there are questions now about what happens next. Will the military truly allow a political transition to take place and return to the barracks? Will the Muslim Brotherhood forsake violence in response to being removed from power? Assuming the Muslim Brotherhood does not resort to violence, will it be allowed to participate in the political process? It is, after all, a social force in Egypt. Can the disparate elements of the opposition who could agree only on removing Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood come together sufficiently to be a credible force in elections? Indeed, what happens if the Brotherhood is allowed to participate in the political process and its superior organization and unity again produces electoral success? That may seem less likely now with the Brotherhood's credibility having been so clearly tarnished with much of the Egyptian public. But organization still matters, and those who turned to the street to mobilize against Morsi have shown the ability to turn out crowds to express their revulsion against the Egyptian president. But can they turn that into a positive political force?

While the United States has limited influence in shaping the answers to these questions, we have a stake in what happens in Egypt. The last thing we want is for Egypt to become a failed state -- a reality that would threaten stability in the wider Middle East. With conspiracy always rife in Egypt and suspicions of us running deeply, we need to stand on key principles and not for any group or party in Egypt. President Obama had that right in his statement in response to the military's removal of Morsi.

For now, we should emphasize the need for a credible political transition that sets a date for elections for a new president; that provides for an inclusive approach to the writing of a new constitution; that creates ground rules for the election that exclude only those committed to violence; that calls on all parties to refrain from violence and ostracizes those who commit it; and that encourages the interim administration to tackle economic needs and not defer dealing with them until after elections.

It is too soon to know whether what has happened in Egypt can yet move the country in a more hopeful direction. One thing is for sure, however: the Muslim Brotherhood did not offer such a path and any future leadership, including one that may involve them, must start with the premise of sharing power and responsibility. Egypt's daunting problems demand no less.

Dennis B. Ross was a special assistant to President Obama and senior director of the Central Region on the National Security Council staff from 2009 to 2011. He is now the counselor at the Washington Institute. ❖

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