

The First Flower of the Arab Spring

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Articles & Testimony

Now more than ever, the forces of Western liberal democracy and Islamism are arrayed against one another over Egypt's future.

The outrage and political ferment that arose in Egypt after President Mohamed Morsi's recent decisions to centralize power and ram through a new constitution is, in fact, the true beginning of the "Arab Spring" that erupted in Tunisia and Egypt two years ago. The newly empowered Egyptian people are not just fighting for their freedom, they are using the tools of democracy in an ideological battle for the future of their nation.

The fundamental change that has taken place in Egypt since the fall of the Mubarak regime -- aside from the assumption of power by political Islam -- is the newfound openness and freedom of expression enjoyed by the people, the media and the political parties. The transformation is remarkable.

Where there was once a police state in which people feared government agents who enforced a ban on all anti-establishment activity -- especially anti-government activity -- today stands an Egypt in which journalism is more or less free and where criticism and demonstrations against the government are simply part of daily life.

The liberal forces that initiated the Egyptian uprising felt that the Islamists jumped on the bandwagon late and then hijacked the revolution. This impression was reinforced by Morsi's first steps as president: disbanding the army council, unrestricted support for the Islamist-dominated houses of parliament, and the creation of a committee to draft a new, Islamist-oriented constitution.

These sophisticated political moves hinted at what was to come. With the added bona fides he garnered for brokering a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas, Morsi took the opportunity to institute his latest draconian measures. The Islamists are using today's opportunities to institute changes that may not be reversible tomorrow.

The new round of demonstrations in Tahrir Square and throughout the country indicates an important change in Egyptian society.

The Arab uprising that began in 2010 -- disorganized, lacking leadership and without an ideological agenda -- had one inchoate purpose: to depose Mubarak's authoritarian regime and create a democratic nation in which the people themselves determine their own political future, not those sitting in the presidential palace.

Today's demonstrations are entirely different. Egyptians of all backgrounds -- Islamist men and women, liberals and secularists, young and old, intellectuals and common folk -- have taken to the streets to determine the character of the nation. Will Egypt continue on the path to democracy or become an Islamic dictatorship? The outcome of this struggle -- which will have important implications for Egypt and the region -- is by no means predetermined. In truth, Morsi beat his secular rival, Ahmed Shafik, by the narrowest of margins. It is now abundantly clear that Egyptians -- secular or religious -- are not homogenous in their political ideology and will not walk in lockstep with

the political marching orders of the government.

Morsi's actions have brought to a head the political tension between the forces of Western liberal democracy and those of the Islamists. These two streams, which cooperated to bring down Mubarak in 2010, are now arrayed against one another over the nature and future of the state.

At this tenuous moment, when so much is in the balance, it would be wise for the United States and the Western nations to devote intensive care, effort and resources to strengthening the liberal parties and democratic forces in Egypt, and in the other states in the Arab world. The time to do so is now, when the repressive restrictions of the old regimes are gone, the wheels of democratic change are in motion, and it is possible to effect change.

Indeed, a recent bipartisan task force of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy concluded that the United States should impose "informal conditionality" on its relationship with Egypt based, in part, on its performance on democracy and human rights issues. In its final study, "Engagement without Illusions," the task force concluded that "it is too risky to provide Egypt with virtually unconditional aid and support and thereby feed a dangerous sense of entitlement -- the notion that Egypt is somehow owed American reparations for Washington's past support of nondemocratic leaders who served U.S. strategic interests."

The report recommended that the Obama administration should link a close and mutually beneficial relationship to Cairo's performance on a variety of issues, including maintaining the peace treaty with Israel, support for constitutional democracy and commitment to political pluralism. Specifically, the report urged the Obama administration to actively engage with the broadest possible spectrum of political actors in Egypt.

Unfortunately, it seems that the Egyptian government that was brought to power on the silver platter of a democratic election now seeks to shatter the dishes in an attempt to gradually eliminate the very steps that led to a real democratic country.

In the past, when he campaigned for office, Morsi expressed a willingness to cooperate with secularists, even to nominate a woman or a Coptic Christian vice president. But today, his attitude is closer to the Muslim Brotherhood line, and he is demonstrating a desire to put Islamist policies into practice. His political position is inclining more toward the radical Salafists than the secularists.

Many Egyptians are saying no to this in Tahrir Square and across the country. The coming weeks and months will be the most critical in determining the outcome of this struggle, a byproduct of the Arab Spring that will determine the future and the character of Egypt. Today, more than ever, they should not undertake this campaign alone.

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