

Why Neither of Egypt's Presidential Choices Represents Democracy

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



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The results of the first round of voting in Egypt's presidential elections has yielded a choice in the second round between two starkly different men -- former Mubarak-era prime minister and air force general Ahmed Shafik, and Muslim Brotherhood official Mohammad Morsi. For Washington, less important than which man wins is the fate of the two disparate trends they represent: military rule, with which Shafik is fairly or unfairly associated, and Islamism, championed by Morsi. Both trends present a challenge to the full unfolding of democracy in Egypt and therefore to long-term American interests.

The United States, despite its tepid and uncertain response to the uprisings across the Arab world, has a clear desire to see steady progress towards liberal democracy in the Middle East. The belief that democracy is the best guarantor of peace, stability, and prosperity in the region has been articulated not just by President Obama, but also by his predecessors in the Oval Office.

In Egypt, the two clearest threats to democracy taking root, apart from economic woes, are the uncertain willingness of the military to yield power to civilian institutions, whose powers remain ill-defined; and the disregard for individual liberties manifest in the persecution of women and minorities and the Islamists' apparent desire to intolerantly impose their views on all Egyptians.

The dilemma posed by the presidential election for Egyptian democrats and their backers overseas is that it forces a choice between these two threats to democracy rather than offering a clear path toward overcoming both. In practice, supporting emerging democracies around the globe has often meant supporting revolutionary leaders like Lech Walesa or Aung San Suu Kyi. But because Egypt's revolution was essentially leaderless, there is no Egyptian Walesa, Suu Kyi, or even Yeltsin for the U.S. to throw its support behind. Instead, Washington should support the liberal democratic policies that such a leader would represent, and to which many Egyptian activists, businessmen, and others do in fact aspire.

This means that the U.S. should set as its policy objective not only narrowly defending interests such as access to the Suez and cooperation on regional security issues, but promoting the full development of liberal democracy in Egypt and across the region. This necessarily implies both urging the military to subordinate itself to civilian institutions,

and defending civil liberties and minority rights against any efforts by the Islamists and others to constrict them.

Washington should also identify and seek to strengthen its natural allies in these efforts -- the liberals who were evident in Tahrir Square, but are not represented in the forthcoming runoff. With Islamists and the military sharing power, it would be easy for visiting U.S. officials or Western embassies to neglect Egypt's liberals. This would be shortsighted; there may be no well-organized liberal alternative to the SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood today, but this need not be true in perpetuity.

During the Cold War, though U.S. policies were not always consistent, it was clear that the U.S. stood for freedom and democracy. In the Middle East today, that has been far from clear, as the U.S. has responded to the Arab uprisings hesitantly, even passively. If nothing else, Washington must ensure that every person in the Middle East understands that America remains committed to this vital region, and remains committed to freedom and democracy for its citizens.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute and a former senior director for Middle East affairs at the National Security Council. ❖

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