

U.S. Policy and Egypt's Presidential Runoff: Projecting Clarity, Not Disinterest

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Brief Analysis

To bolster the integrity of Egypt's democratic process and preserve America's own national interests, Washington should make clear how the outcome of the presidential runoff could affect U.S.-Egyptian relations.

The second round of Egypt's presidential election poses a stark choice to the Obama administration: stay silent and suggest that the United States is indifferent to who will lead its most important Arab ally, or declare U.S. preferences and risk being charged with intervention in Egypt's democratic experiment. The solution lies in clearly articulating U.S. interests -- that is, not supporting any particular candidate, but reminding Egyptians what sort of political program the United States can and cannot support with its still-substantial financial assistance.

THE WESTERNIZATION OF EGYPTIAN POLITICS

Outsiders who bemoan the results of the election's opening round should look no further than French or American domestic politics for an explanation. In effect, Egypt's first round mirrored the initial stage of France's presidential election or American party primaries -- it exaggerated the extremes. With thirteen names on the ballot, none received more than 25 percent of the vote, and five received more than 10 percent. Of those five, the top three vote-getters were the most extreme: Muhammad Morsi, the most extreme Islamist; Ahmed Shafiq, the most extreme anti-Islamist; and Hamdin Sabahi, the most extreme populist/secularist. The two lowest among the top five were the ones with cross-sectional, hence diluted, appeal: Abdel Monem Abouel Fetouh, the Muslim Brotherhood renegade who tacked first to the center and then toward the Salafis, and Amr Mousa, the nationalist who projected a mildly liberal, Islamist-wary aura. Candidates who appealed to their base did well in the first round; candidates who tried to appeal too broadly failed.

Now that the "primaries" are over, however, the two finalists -- Morsi, the main Brotherhood candidate, and Shafiq, the law-and-order *ancien regime* candidate -- appear to be applying the typical general-election campaign model to

their second-round contest. Just hours after the national election commission certified their faceoff for June 16, both men began to move from the extremes to the middle, softening the hard edges of their campaign personas, reaching out to former adversaries, and offering to work in coalition with people of differing politics, ideologies, religions, and genders. With less than three weeks before the final ballot, it is unclear whether any of this will sway Egyptian voters.

Of the two, Morsi certainly enters the runoff with a distinct advantage. He performed significantly better in the first round than most polls anticipated, largely through the strength of the Brotherhood's well-disciplined organization. His pool of potential supporters is huge -- it includes voters who produced a legislative landslide for Islamist parties in the latest parliamentary elections, plus at least some non-Islamist revolutionaries and others virulently opposed to Shafiq as a Mubarak-era holdover. Salafi party leaders have already swallowed doctrinal differences and thrown their support to Morsi as the Islamist standard-bearer, while a substantial number of Tahrir Square figures (e.g., celebrated Google marketing executive Wael Ghoneim) have endorsed him as more likely to carry the banner of the revolution. Accordingly, the dour, doctrinaire Ikhwan leader is the odds-on favorite.

By contrast, Shafiq faces an uphill battle attracting much additional support beyond a sizable chunk of Mousa's voters. Even with every Mousa supporter dutifully falling in line, Shafiq would still fall significantly short of the 50 percent mark. There are only three possible sources of additional votes for the former air force commander and Hosni Mubarak's last prime minister: the nearly 39 percent of first-round voters who supported either Abouel Fetouh or Sabahi; the 54 percent of all registered voters who did not participate in the first round at all; and the unknown number of forged ballots that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces could arrange for him. Given the volume of votes Shafiq would need to beat a Salafi- and Tahrir-backed Morsi, even all of these three reservoirs of potential votes combined are unlikely to give him victory. Unlikely, that is, but not impossible.

DEFINING A U.S. POSITION

So far, the Obama administration has limited itself to a brief formal statement by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton after the close of the first round:

Today, the Egyptian people concluded a historic two days of voting in the first round of their presidential election, marking another important milestone in their transition to democracy. We look forward to working with Egypt's democratically elected government. We will continue to stand with the Egyptian people as they work to seize the promise of last year's uprising and build a democracy that reflects their values and traditions, respects universal human rights, and meets their aspirations for dignity and a better life.

This statement has two notable phrases -- "last year's uprising" (rather than the term "revolution," which Egyptians generally prefer) and "universal human rights," which is the closest the administration gets to laying down markers on such key issues as protection of minority rights, gender equality, and freedom of speech, assembly, and religion.

If that is the only hint the administration offers regarding its preferences in the presidential vote, it is much too subtle. Given the enormous investment the United States has in Egypt -- in its peaceful transition to popularly elected government, in its economic viability, in its maintenance of international commitments, in its model of constructive behavior on the regional and international level -- and the substantial U.S. military and economic assistance Cairo receives annually, Washington should not be silent about the potential impact that a given electoral outcome could have on core American interests. Silence would only be an option if both candidates were likely to produce the same impact on these interests.

To be sure, either outcome is likely to trigger some degree of crisis. A Morsi victory would give the Brotherhood and its allies a monopoly over Egypt's political institutions, setting up a virtually inevitable clash with the military establishment and a potential exodus of middle-class Copts, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs. A Shafiq victory -- even one deemed clean by the bulk of Egyptian and international public opinion -- would signal an Egyptian

Thermidor, which in turn would likely trigger the return of hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries to Tahrir Square and cities across the country and a new, potentially bloody standoff.

But the impact on U.S. interests extends beyond these immediate crises. Egypt may have two flawed candidates for the presidency, but a review of their past positions, policy pronouncements, and likely policy initiatives suggests that their election would not threaten U.S. interests equally.

Specifically, any new Egyptian president will greatly influence three critical decisions, each of which has profound implications for U.S. interests:

1. Which path will Egypt choose to fix its ailing economy and avoid becoming a failed state: populist "social justice" initiatives or investment-focused market economics?
1. What will be the pace and content of Islamization in Egypt's public space, which goes to the heart of the country's approach to religious tolerance, gender equality, and the basket of "universal rights"?
1. Will Egypt maintain its current pro-Western, pro-peace, anti-extremist strategic orientation, or will it adopt a more neutralist course?

It is difficult to imagine a Morsi-led Egypt adopting policies that align with U.S. interests on all three of these questions; indeed, there is a distinct possibility that he would pursue problematic policies on all three. Such an outcome would have severe implications for Washington's willingness to sustain high levels of assistance to Egypt. In contrast, it is not difficult to imagine a Shafiq-led Egypt adopting relatively favorable policies on all three questions; he would certainly do so on at least one of them. The impact on U.S. aid would therefore be substantially less.

Ironically, Egyptians who read Washington tea leaves cannot be faulted for concluding that America prefers Morsi. After all, senior U.S. officials and legislators with close ties to the administration have made regular pilgrimages to the offices of Brotherhood leaders in recent months, and the group's representatives have met with respectful hearings during their own visits to Washington. The fact that the *Washington Post* effectively endorsed Morsi -- describing Shafiq's possible election as "even more worrisome" -- only adds to this sense of American support for the Brotherhood candidate, whether accurate or not.

The Obama administration can and should clear up this misconception and remind Egyptians of the consequences of their vote, but not by signaling support for Shafiq, which is likely to backfire and aid Morsi. Rather, it should take a page from Vice President Biden's May 2009 visit to Beirut, which may have tilted the Lebanese parliamentary elections in a more moderate direction. That is, the administration should consider statements and actions underscoring the type of Egyptian leadership that is likely to merit continued U.S. direct assistance and backing at international financial institutions. This includes high-level reminders about the five key U.S. interests in Egypt: on the domestic front, political pluralism (i.e., commitment to competitive elections) and religious freedom (i.e., protection of Christians), and on the international front, commitment to security cooperation with the U.S. military, active counterterrorism coordination, and fidelity to the Egypt-Israel peace treaty.

While U.S. policy may not determine the election's outcome, Washington owes it to the integrity of Egypt's democratic process as well as to America's own national interest to be clear with Egyptians, laying out more explicitly how their vote will likely impact Egypt's most consequential international relationship.

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