Caught in Egypt's Political Cross-Fire

by **Eric Trager (/experts/eric-trager)**

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The recent ordeal of American democracy workers in Egypt was not so much about them as about Cairo's own internal power struggle.

The Egyptian government's prosecution this winter of seven American democracy workers catalyzed a two-month crisis in American-Egyptian relations. But after Washington threatened to withhold $1.3 billion in annual military aid to Egypt, the standoff swiftly subsided. The presiding judge resigned from the case, travel bans on the Americans were lifted, and most of the Americans were on their way home by the beginning of March.

This rapid turn of events surprised many Americans, but it shouldn't have. The prosecutions targeted the Americans, but they weren't really about them. The democracy workers had merely become pawns in a bitter domestic power struggle over Egypt's future, in which rival groups competed by appealing to anti-Americanism.

For that reason, the crisis didn't change America's core interests in Egypt. But it should prompt Washington to develop a strategy for persuading the various political forces in Egypt to cooperate in pursuit of those interests rather than allowing American-sponsored efforts to become political footballs there.

Since the cold war, the United States government has promoted democracy abroad by supporting pro-democratic organizations, two of which -- the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute -- were among those targeted in the crisis. Both institutes, which Congress founded in 1983, train political parties, monitor elections and help build civil society. The support they offer dissidents, however, often leads autocratic regimes to restrict their activities and claim they violate the host country's sovereignty.

In Egypt, the point person targeting such pro-democratic groups has been the minister of planning and international cooperation, Fayza Abul Naga, a holdover from the Mubarak era. Since 2004, she has sought to ensure that all foreign funding for non-governmental institutions flows through her ministry. That empowered her to limit the resources available to Egyptian activists, including many of the protesters whose demonstrations toppled Hosni Mubarak from Egypt's presidency a year ago. She began an inquisition against foreign-financed non-governmental

organizations last summer and, on Dec. 29, security forces raided 10 of them, including 4 American groups.

By many accounts, Egypt's ruling military junta was unaware that the prosecutor had placed travel bans on American democracy-promotion workers until Jan. 21, when Sam LaHood, the son of Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood and the International Republican Institute's Egypt director, was prevented from boarding a flight to Qatar. Even as a diplomatic outcry mounted, the junta saw an opportunity to portray the activists, whom it considered a threat to its legitimacy, as foreign-backed agitators.

In doing so, the junta put itself out in front of one rival for power, the Muslim Brotherhood, which won Egypt's parliamentary elections. In recent months, the Brotherhood has increasingly blamed the junta for Egypt's increasing instability and demanded complete civilian control by June 30. The junta has responded by blaming "foreign fingers" for the decline in order and has positioned itself as the only institution capable of defending Egyptians from the supposed plots against them.

So the crackdown on American nongovernmental organizations played right into the junta's story line: Egypt's state-run press published sensationalist stories claiming that the groups were "fomenting chaos," which made the junta appear effective in confronting threats.

But that impression put the Muslim Brotherhood in a quandary. Traditionally anti-Western, it wasn't inclined to defend the Americans. On the other hand, it wasn't happy that the prosecutions were burnishing the junta's domestic image.

Ultimately, the Brotherhood came out against both the military and the pro-democracy groups. Shortly after the December raids, a Brotherhood legislator, Essam el-Erian, told me that he and his colleagues were concerned about "the illegal funds" given to nongovernmental organizations and political groups. But he rejected the way in which the raids were conducted. "Everything must be done according to law," he said. This balancing act was later reflected in Brotherhood statements.

Once the United States began objecting to the inquisition against the democracy workers, however, the Brotherhood shifted gears. To enhance its own international image, it took on the role of conciliator. A Senate delegation led by John McCain commended it later, saying it had played a "constructive role" in getting the travel ban lifted.

But once most of the American workers had left Egyptian airspace, the Brotherhood changed its tune again, this time criticizing the junta for succumbing to "humiliating pressure" from Washington and calling on the cabinet to resign. Meanwhile, secularist activists, including the Nobel laureate Mohamed ElBaradei, accused the junta of interfering in Egypt's judicial process. Now 6,000 miles away, the democracy workers remain a political football.

The fact that the Americans' ordeal wasn't really about them but about Egypt's own internal power struggle leaves American interests in Egypt essentially unchanged. The greatest interest remains ensuring that the next government maintains Egypt's peace treaty with Israel, counters violent extremism and upholds pluralism and minority rights.

But to avoid being trapped again as a pawn among Egypt's squabbling parties, Washington should condition future economic aid to Egypt on an agreement by all parties to respect these interests. There is good reason to believe that this conditionality could work: Egypt is approaching bankruptcy, and Washington has unique leverage over Cairo through its influence in international financial institutions.

Indeed, since no party will want to be blamed for scuttling a deal in which desperately needed aid is acquired in exchange for partnering with Washington, it may be possible to unite Egypt's competing players in support of such a bargain. In that way, American interests could be immunized from becoming Egyptian political footballs again.

Executing this strategy requires quiet persistence. On one hand, Washington must demonstrate its desire to help an Egypt that is willing to be friendly. On the other, it must also demonstrate its willingness to watch a hostile Egypt try

to survive on its own -- without any Americans to blame for its troubles.

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