

# Egypt's Great Liberal Nope

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**Given that Egypt's incoming Islamist legislature will seek to change the state from a presidential to a parliamentary system, the presidency may soon be irrelevant, and ElBaradei might find himself well positioned -- and well qualified -- for the top slot.**

**T**wo years ago in Cairo, Nobel laureate and former International Atomic Energy Agency head Mohamed ElBaradei was the talk of the town. Newly retired from the IAEA, ElBaradei returned to Egypt in February 2010 after living abroad for decades. He began criticizing the Mubarak regime, hinting that he might run for president, and almost overnight he became Egypt's great liberal hope. And yet when ElBaradei announced last week that he was ending his presidential bid, the news was met with a collective yawn. As one Salafist Nour Party leader said following ElBaradei's announcement that he would not run for president, "He did not gain the confidence of the majority of the Egyptian people because he did not have any role in the revolution."

More accustomed to carousing at Davos than campaigning in Dakhaliya, ElBaradei's aloofness was apparent from the moment he returned to Egypt. Over 1,000 young activists welcomed him when his plane touched down at Cairo International Airport in the winter of 2010, but rather than translating the energy and enthusiasm into action, ElBaradei retreated to his gated suburban villa to host academics and opposition leaders for parlor discussions.

When ElBaradei wasn't physically distant -- he spent nearly half the year outside of Egypt -- he seemed emotionally distant. Greeted outside Cairo's historic Hussein Mosque in March 2010 by crowds chanting "long live Egypt,"

ElBaradei retreated to his car. In April, he addressed a rally in Mansoura, telling the hundreds of activists in attendance to sign a petition for change while he sat awkwardly behind an oversized table. Then in June, when a mass protest was organized in Alexandria after Egyptian police beat a young activist to death, ElBaradei appeared only briefly, departing early without saying a word.

ElBaradei's popularity started to plummet, almost as dramatically as it had risen. For example, shortly after his return to Egypt, an online petition supporting ElBaradei's seven-point plan for change in Egypt garnered over 1 million signatures. Months later, however, when opposition parties largely ignored his call to boycott the November 2010 parliamentary elections, his umbrella organization, the National Association for Change, began to implode. Activists working with the NAC were deeply divided over strategy, and as infighting proliferated, the award-winning diplomat declined to intervene.

Perhaps most strangely, when Egyptians poured into the streets on January 25, 2011, setting off the revolt that would topple Hosni Mubarak, ElBaradei was in Vienna. Interviewed that day by *Der Spiegel*, ElBaradei said he would not return to join the demonstrations. "I don't want to rob the people who have called for the protests of their victory," he said. He explained that, "I am more useful to the movement on a strategic level [abroad]." He changed his mind two days later, but the revolution had already passed him by.

ElBaradei's weakness as a revolutionary figure shouldn't have surprised anyone. As it turns out, the cocktail party circuit in Europe and Turtle Bay does little to prepare one for post-revolutionary politics in Cairo. Neither does twenty-six years at the IAEA, where, as director general of the organization from 1997-2010, ElBaradei's tenure coincided with a period of unprecedented Iranian progress toward a nuclear bomb. The mullahs miss him. Indeed, when ElBaradei's successor, Yukiya Amano issued a report in 2010 that was uncharacteristically critical of Tehran, Iran's foreign minister actually lamented the departure of ElBaradei.

ElBaradei's leadership shortcomings in Vienna were magnified under the microscope of Egyptian politics, where he started to exhibit an almost Zelig-like quality. Prior to his storied return, for example, ElBaradei committed to work toward abolishing Article II of the Egyptian constitution, which declared sharia "the principal source of legislation." Yet when he realized how repulsive average Egyptians found his pledge, ElBaradei backtracked, and took to quoting Quranic verses during his television appearances. It was hardly his only concession. Shortly after Mubarak's ouster, when then-presidential rival and former Arab League chief Amr Moussa declared that the Camp David accords were "over," ElBaradei suggested that Egypt might consider going to war with Israel to protect Palestinians in Gaza.

In the end, though, it wasn't the hyperbole that undermined ElBaradei's candidacy. It was his inability to lead. One Twitter exchange from this summer encapsulates the exasperation among his supporters at this glaring deficit. On August 14, ElBaradei expressed his irritation with the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), tweeting "Military trials for young activists, while Mubarak & co. stand before civilian courts, is a legal farce. Don't abort the revolution." Dalia Ziada, a well-known activist responded via Twitter almost instantaneously, "Please, stop stating the obvious. Tell us something new. Do something to inspire us as a leader!"

Alas, "inspire" is not a verb generally associated with ElBaradei. Even if he hadn't been a shrinking violet, though, the odds of him winning a presidential election were never particularly good. For starters, Egypt's newly proposed presidential elections law requires independent candidates to collect at least 30,000 endorsements from fifteen governorates, or to secure the backing of thirty members of parliament. ElBaradei wasn't likely to meet either of these criteria. Moreover -- and more importantly -- based on the Islamist tsunami in the legislative elections, ElBaradei's compromised version of liberal politics has an incredibly limited constituency in Egypt. Hardcore Islamists, after all, took nearly 70 percent of the vote.

Still, Washington should shed no tears over ElBaradei's departure. While the mustachioed ElBaradei might have

been preferable to bearded Islamists who advocate covering the faces of ancient Egyptian statues in wax to fulfill the Islamic precept against idolatry, he was no panacea. While indisputably committed to democracy, ElBaradei would neither have been a strong president or a reliable friend to Washington. In any event, given that the incoming Islamist legislature will seek to change the state from a presidential to a parliamentary system, the presidency may soon be irrelevant. Should this transpire, ElBaradei the elder statesman might find himself well positioned -- and well qualified -- for the top slot.

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