

Washington and Egypt: The Incredible Shrinking Policy

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Brief Analysis

The Obama administration's once-powerful message to Egypt about strategic direction, democratic institutions, and economic growth has lost its voice. Even as polls open, it is still not too late to engage Egyptians on the consequences of their vote.

Egypt's parliamentary elections, which begin today, may yet produce an outcome that advances U.S. interests, but it would only be due to a stroke of good fortune. That voters in Cairo, Alexandria, and elsewhere are going to the polls with the full blessing of the Obama administration to kick off the first of three rounds of Egypt's legislative elections, just hours after the haze of tear gas lifted from the streets of Egypt's main cities, highlights how far Washington's message to Egypt has been whittled down in the nine months since the demise of Hosni Mubarak.

A New/Old View of Democracy

Compare, for example, two sets of White House statements. At a press conference on February 15 -- four days after Mubarak stepped down and President Obama effusively praised the revolutionaries of Tahrir Square, citing Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and the fall of the Berlin Wall -- the president gave substantive remarks on the coming transition:

Now, with respect to the situation in the Middle East, obviously, there's still a lot of work to be done in Egypt itself, but what we've seen so far is positive. The military council that is in charge has reaffirmed its treaties with countries like Israel and international treaties. It has met with the opposition, and the opposition has felt that it is serious about moving towards fair and free elections. Egypt is going to require help in building democratic institutions and also in strengthening an economy that's taken a hit as a consequence of what happened. But so far at least, we're seeing the right signals coming out of Egypt.

In other words, the president opened with a statement about critical U.S. interests (Egypt's international obligations); underscored the importance of the *institutions* of democracy (an independent judiciary, a pattern of

religious tolerance, etc.), not just the *actions* of democracy (e.g., elections); and highlighted the vital role that economics was likely to play in ensuring a successful transition.

By contrast, the White House statement issued this past Friday cited none of these desiderata -- nothing about U.S. interests, nothing about institutions, and nothing about the economy. Instead, like the Bush administration on the eve of the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, the Obama administration appears to have come around to the idea that elections -- specifically parliamentary elections -- are synonymous with democracy:

The United States strongly believes that the new Egyptian government must be empowered with real authority immediately. We believe that Egypt's transition to democracy must continue, with elections proceeding expeditiously, and all necessary measures taken to ensure security and prevent intimidation. Most importantly, we believe that the full transfer of power to a civilian government must take place in a just and inclusive manner that responds to the legitimate aspirations of the Egyptian people, as soon as possible.

Yet the most likely outcome of holding legislative elections in the current environment is to increase the plurality that Islamist factions -- the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and the even more extreme Salafist parties -- are expected to receive. Some in Washington may view this outcome as appropriate (i.e., representing the "authentic" voice of the Egyptian people) and even advantageous to U.S. interests (i.e., the Islamists in question offer an alternative to the bin Ladenist violent model), but they are wrong. Egypt's Islamists may be taking an evolutionary approach to political change, but it is the product of a pragmatic assessment of what circumstances permit, not some ideological opposition to a radical Islamization of politics, culture, society, or foreign policy.

Even so, it is too conspiratorial to believe that any advocates of the Islamist plan for Egypt live or work in the White House; the administration would undoubtedly prefer a liberal democratic triumph to an Islamist victory. How then did the president effectively come to advocate a policy that benefits political groups inimical to U.S. interests?

A Partnership Gone Awry

It is important to recall that the current situation was not inevitable. For example, it remains a mystery as to why a risk-averse Egyptian military would insist that risky legislative elections precede a less-risky presidential election. More fundamentally, even accounting for the serial bungling of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), there were many points during the past eight months at which the military could have achieved its prime objective -- defining a protected space for itself in a new, democratic Egypt -- without triggering an all-out backlash.

That, of course, was a prime U.S. objective too. Washington's main partner in Mubarak's ouster was not so much the Tahrir revolutionaries who believe they forced him out, but the generals who actually eased him out. From the heady days of early February on, building a working partnership with the SCAF was viewed as the way to provide a soft landing for Egypt while safeguarding U.S. strategic interests. But the strategy failed, spectacularly, and in the process severely damaged U.S. interests.

Washington cannot hide behind the proposition that "Egypt's transition is Egypt's to define"; such sentiments do not shield it from criticism or even responsibility. If indeed the elections produce an Islamist-led parliamentary government -- a potential outcome to which the White House has already given its premature blessing (see its statement above about the formation of a "civilian government...that responds to the legitimate aspirations of the Egyptian people, as soon as possible") -- then the administration will be at least partly to blame. Three questions in particular will haunt Washington:

- Did the administration use all means of influence to press the SCAF into holding a presidential election before legislative elections?
- Why, last Friday, did the administration publicly endorse the idea that elections be held on schedule today, despite the

presence of other alternatives -- from suspending the vote in Cairo, given recent violence, to reordering the electoral calendar completely so as to move the presidential vote up much earlier?

- More generally, has the administration at any point in the electoral process communicated to Egyptian voters, in a mature, nonthreatening fashion, the potential consequences of their choice?

Engagement That Could Make a Difference

The first two questions are, at this point, academic. But the third is still operational; it is not too late. Indeed, having taken the dramatic step last week of endorsing a position advocated by Islamist parties, the administration has the standing to speak to Egyptian voters this week and throughout the multiple rounds of voting. The idea is not to endorse or warn against specific parties; rather, it is to lay out for voters in a sober, realistic way the implications of their choices in terms of international credibility and investor confidence. Given the stakes involved -- especially the health of Egypt's democratic institutions, the durability of its new political order, and the vitality of its economy, about which President Obama spoke so appropriately in February -- both Egypt's transition and U.S. interests deserve no less.

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