

Mickey Mouse Runs Afoul of the Islamists in Egypt

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Today, Islamists have sought criminal charges against a Christian for tweeting an image of Mickey Mouse. In what world will they be democrats tomorrow?

In the months since Hosni Mubarak's ouster, Egypt's liberals have feared the rising influence of Islamists. Last Friday, billionaire liberal party leader Naguib Sawiris expressed this fear comically.

On his well-followed [Twitter feed \(http://twitter.com/#!/naguibsawiris\)](http://twitter.com/#!/naguibsawiris), the Coptic Christian Sawiris posted an image of a bearded, kaffiyeh-clad Mickey Mouse and a face-covered Minnie Mouse, alongside the comment, "Micky [sic] and Minnie after ..." -- in other words, "after" the Islamists gain power. It was a fairly pedestrian, if pointed, piece of political humor, but the anti-ironic Islamists didn't see it that way.

On Monday, 15 Islamic lawyers associated with the puritanical Salafists submitted a complaint to Egypt's general prosecutor, alleging that Sawiris "ridiculed the Islamic faith" and violated a penal code that criminalizes speech attacking "heavenly religions." If convicted, Sawiris would face six months to five years in prison, plus a fine.

Whether or not Sawiris is ultimately indicted, this episode should serve as the latest reminder that Islamism and democracy are mutually exclusive. Democracy, after all, requires a broad array of civil rights, including the right to criticize the state and its legal foundations.

Yet by virtue of their political beliefs, Islamists are practically incapable of accepting such extensive liberties. While Islamists vary considerably in how they interpret Islamic legal texts, they broadly agree that Sharia -- a set of religious legal principles -- should form the basis of their countries' legal systems. And because they view Sharia as divinely created, they view criticisms of Islamic law or theology as inherently wrong. Thus Islamists demand that Islam be protected from political speech -- even as they push for Islam to assume a political role.

There is a word for legislating on the basis of unassailable legal principles: tyranny.

It hardly matters that the Islamists are pursuing power through elections. While it goes without saying that Egypt's Islamists are preferable to Hamas and Hezbollah, all three are united by the undemocratic aim of building political

systems in which legal debates are inherently religious. And despite the Muslim Brotherhood's promise to create a "state of all its citizens," a legal system based on Islamic law would surely exclude Egyptian Christians, who comprise 10 percent of the population, as well as the millions of Muslims who want a secular body politic.

Sadly, Islamist authoritarianism appears likely to determine Egypt's political future. The Islamists possess such superior mobilization capabilities, that many liberal parties are joining with, rather than challenging, them. Even the powerful Sawiris has been cowed. In the aftermath of a Facebook campaign to boycott his company, which drew over 90,000 supporters, the billionaire apologized for the cartoon.

There are various things that Western policymakers could do to enhance the position of liberals vis-a-vis Islamists in the future, such as supporting liberal parties and speaking out against Islamists' attempts to hide behind religion in public debates.

Western policymakers must proceed with a clear-eyed view of Islamists' mutual exclusivity with democracy. They should avoid the mistake of Britain's ambassador to Egypt, who recently claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood is a positive force for a democratic Egyptian future. These kinds of comments whitewash Islamism's inherently anti-democratic character, and lead people to expect democracy even as a new brand of authoritarianism quickly asserts itself.

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Eric Trager is the Ira Weiner fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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