

Egypt after the Revolution: An Early Assessment

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On April 11, 2011, J. Scott Carpenter, Dina Guirguis, David Schenker, and Robert Satloff addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Ms. Guirguis is a Keston Family research fellow with Project Fikra: Defeating Extremism through the Power of Ideas. Mr. Schenker is the Aufzien fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at the Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of Ms. Guirguis and Mr. Schenker's remarks. Dr. Satloff and Mr. Carpenter's remarks will be published separately.

DINA GUIRGUIS

In stark contrast to the Hosni Mubarak era, liberal and Islamist political forces alike have appeared on Egypt's dynamic political landscape, while traditional currents have largely diminished. Though certain emerging forces, such as the Salafists, have existed for some time as social or religious movements, they are now engaging in Egypt's expanding political sphere. For example, during Egypt's first postrevolutionary referendum on March 19, Salafists campaigned at the mosques, urging their followers to support the amendments, even though hardline Salafist doctrine rejects political engagement.

The religious forces now appearing on the Egyptian political scene are not monolithic. Eight distinct "Salafist" groups can be identified, with each appealing to a slightly different segment of the population. Of these, the relatively left-leaning Muslim Brotherhood, for example, will likely splinter into three separate political parties: Freedom and Justice, Nahda (under the leadership of "reformer" Abdel Moneim Aboul Fattouh), and possibly Shabab al-Ikhwan (Youth of the Muslim Brotherhood), the last of which played a key role during the revolution by participating in the Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution.

This apparent fragmentation of Islamist groups may owe in part to the newfound sense of freedom in Egypt. Islamist groups share a common goal of having a state grounded in Islamic values, but they disagree on the means of achieving this goal and the implementation of sharia (Islamic law). In the days preceding the constitutional referendum, Islamist groups in general urged a "yes" vote, highlighting the need to protect Article 2 of the Egyptian constitution, which states that sharia is the chief source of legislation. Yet the progressive discourse emerging from various Islamist forces is particularly noteworthy. Certain leaders now say that women and Copts are viable presidential candidates, a contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood platform released in 2006. Though questions have

arisen regarding the possibility of deliberate fragmentation, many believe that Islamist forces will likely coalesce as parliamentary elections approach this September.

The results of the March 19 referendum are driving the perception of Islamist strength in postrevolutionary Egypt. Indeed, the official Egyptian government tally indicates that 77 percent of all voters supported the amendments. Yet even as the religious card was played prominently before the vote, the results do not necessarily imply support for the Islamists alone.

Despite the strong presence of Islamist groups, liberal movements continue to wield influence on the streets and are working to channel this influence into official political parties. Naguib Sawiris, Egypt's wealthiest businessman, founded a party named al-Masreeyeen al-Ahrar ("The Free Egyptians") aimed at creating a nonmilitary, nonreligious, civil Egyptian state rooted in free-market economic liberalism. Sawiris has indicated a willingness to support other parties that embrace this goal, and will likely attempt to build coalitions with this goal in mind.

The formation of leftist parties includes that of labor activist Kamal Khalil. Formerly marginalized, these movements may become stronger in the coming period, appealing to the labor sector if other parties fail to do so.

As new political forces emerge on Egypt's political scene, many traditional opposition forces have merged or split. For example, the youth of the Democratic Front Party who were active during the revolution are likely to join forces with new parties, such as Sawiris's al-Masreeyeen al-Ahrar. Ayman Nour's al-Ghad Party is being transformed into the al-Ghad Free Civil Coalition. The April 6 youth movement is considering reconstituting as a party, a move that would enable it to support liberal and leftist parliamentary candidates through its well-established grassroots networks.

As parliamentary elections approach, liberal forces' lack of grassroots organizing experience places them at a disadvantage compared to their Islamist counterparts, who worked consistently during the Mubarak era to expand their grassroots base.

DAVID SCHENKER

Despite the profound events of January 2011, the Egyptian state remains intact. Regrettably, many of the problematic characteristics of the Mubarak regime also persist: heavy-handed security measures, sectarian violence, economic problems, and deep-seated opposition to political reform. Regardless of who eventually leads Egypt, the next government will face significant challenges in governance, the economy, and foreign affairs.

Of these three challenges, the economy may be the greatest. Egypt experienced impressive growth and implemented substantial reforms under the National Democratic Party (NDP), and the next government will possibly, if not likely, be compelled for various reasons to roll back some of these reforms. Yet Egypt will first have to rebound from the profound economic damage done by the revolution, which extends well beyond the closing of the stock market and cancelation of trips by tourists.

The next government in Cairo will also be faced with challenges associated with governance and foreign affairs. Corruption, incompetence, and ongoing excesses by the state security apparatus will no doubt continue to frustrate average Egyptians. At the same time, in recent years, Egypt's regional influence has declined precipitously, to the benefit of Iran and Turkey. Alongside this decline, Egypt today confronts failed-state scenarios on its three respective borders, with Libya, Sudan, and Gaza. Perhaps the most significant foreign policy question for Egypt, however, is how the next government will handle relations with Washington. Almost certainly, the credibility of the next Egyptian president will be defined in opposition to Mubarak. In fact, he will likely strive to be the "anti-Mubarak" -- and bilateral relations could suffer as a result.

Given these realities, what steps should Washington take to help facilitate the transition, stabilize the regime,

promote positive change for the Egyptian people, and secure the bilateral relationship?

Support a transparent transition. Egypt's Supreme Military Council -- charged with managing the transition -- is opaque, and is seemingly opposed to meaningful political reform. Organizations such as the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems can work with Egyptian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the coming period to help ensure the process is credible.

Reallocate civil society funding. Washington should reallocate its civil society funding away from government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) of the Mubarak era to focus on fighting corruption, alleviating poverty, and boosting vocational education.

Defer cuts in aid. U.S. assistance to Egypt cements the bilateral relationship, and Washington should therefore defer cuts in aid. Particularly important is military aid, which provides one of the few sources of U.S. leverage in the state. At the same time, Washington should help Cairo track down the billions of dollars in assets stolen by former regime cronies.

Focus on government performance. Future U.S. assistance to Cairo should focus on government performance, including the themes mentioned before: tackling corruption, fighting poverty, and improving the education system.

Support liberal democrats and democracy. The United States should be clear with regard to the type of government it supports -- liberal democracy. The Egyptian revolution will only be consolidated if those committed to lasting democracy win. Even as they face internal divisions, the Islamists currently have an organizational advantage over the liberals. In any event, Washington should aim high: Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey should not be the model for Egypt.

Reinvigorate the bilateral relationship and reestablish Egypt as a regional actor. The next government of Egypt will likely take the populist route, straining the traditionally close relationship with the United States. Even so, it is increasingly important for Washington to maintain strategic ties with Cairo. Likewise, the United States could benefit from a more robust Egyptian role in Sudan, Libya, and even Gaza.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Lauren Emerson. ❖

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