

Walking a Tightrope: Secretary Clinton Goes to Cairo

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Mar 14, 2011

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Brief Analysis

Tomorrow, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrives in Cairo, becoming the most senior U.S. official to visit Egypt since the fall of former president Hosni Mubarak. She lands at a sensitive time, just days ahead of a controversial constitutional referendum, and in a political atmosphere characterized by deepening anxiety about counterrevolution, sectarian violence, and the uncertain prospects associated with civilian leadership. Given the Obama administration's initial ambivalence toward Egypt's revolution -- and the secretary's own statement that Egypt was "stable" in its early days -- Secretary Clinton has an opportunity to define the contours of the U.S.-Egypt relationship going forward. In doing so, she should deliver a balanced message that publicly conveys the respect and support of the United States for the democratic course pursued by Egyptians, while privately expressing concerns over elements of the accelerated transition being led by the Egyptian Armed Forces' Supreme Military Council (SMC).

The Obama Administration and the Revolution

Little is known at this point about the secretary's schedule while in Egypt, but when she arrives and presumably meets with Egypt's military leadership, along with representatives of civil society and emerging political leaders, she will likely be welcomed with warmth and skepticism in equal measures.

A notable element of the revolution that began January 25 was the absence of anti-American sentiment. In the words of a number of American pundits, the revolution "was not about us." Still, many Egyptians were dismayed by U.S. efforts to appear neutral in the struggle between the Mubarak regime and those pursuing freedom in the streets. The regime itself blamed the United States and Israel for supporting the demonstrations.

By the time President Obama caught up with the wave of events that led to Mubarak's toppling, Egyptians sensed that the United States had finally decided to back the revolutionaries and that it was on the right side of history. Nevertheless, both real and latent concerns over America's policies toward Egypt and the region's revolutionary moment make the secretary's mission a difficult one, especially given American reticence over a prospective no-fly zone in Libya, approved by the Arab League in Cairo over the weekend.

Troubling Developments in Egypt

A principal cause for concern in Egypt is the hastily organized constitutional referendum scheduled for March 19 - a little more than a month after Mubarak's departure and just four days following Secretary Clinton's arrival. In

the referendum, the process behind which is largely unknown, Egyptians will vote on whether to amend Egypt's current constitution to create a framework under which parliamentary and presidential elections can be held in June and August, respectively.

The proposed constitutional amendments putatively address the most troublesome articles of the current (suspended) constitution by instituting presidential term limits and restoring full judicial supervision over elections. Despite these seemingly responsive amendments, Egyptians have voiced increasing concerns over both their substance and the process that has led to the referendum. Worries also center on the amendments' endorsement of the SMC's overall electoral timetable and transition plan -- and the implications of this endorsement.

The amendments themselves were drafted over a two-week period, in near secrecy, by a ten-person, all-male committee chosen opaquely by the SMC. Two members, including the committee chair, have Islamist orientations. The amendments essentially leave intact the presidential system and various articles that permit expanded executive power. Furthermore, they ban from the presidential contest any person holding dual nationality or whose spouse is non-Egyptian, a ban that would preclude well-respected public figures such as Egyptian-American Nobel laureate Ahmed Zewail from the race.

The amendments presume the election of the parliament before the president by requiring that the president be sworn in by the nation's legislative bodies. With the exception of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Egyptian opposition and civil society groups are largely opposing the amendments and the time line because they do not result from a participatory, inclusive, and genuine dialogue with the Egyptian people.

Along with favoring the MB -- which, though lacking majority support, is organized and relatively disciplined -- the accelerated time line is believed by other opposition figures to boost former regime elements, which remain entrenched in local governments and could easily reconstitute either under the same or an alternative party banner. Given the short proposed timeframe, the severe constraints placed on the Egyptian political space during Mubarak's thirty-year tenure cannot realistically be undone.

Although these concerns have been voiced through numerous channels, the SMC remains intent on maintaining the plan. Furthermore, passage of the amendments would be perceived as an endorsement of not just the amendments but of the political transition plan in its entirety. More troubling is the growing perception that the SMC is allying itself with former regime elements and the perceived "counterrevolution," the strength of which has been remarked on by Egypt's new prime minister, Essam Sharaf. Examples contributing to the perception of a counterrevolution include a surge in sectarian violence believed by some to be instigated by former regime elements that resulted in thirteen deaths last week. Additionally, the violent clearing of Tahrir Square by military police and the subsequent arrests and purported torture of peaceful prodemocracy protesters has fueled the perception of an authoritarian rebound.

The Secretary's Message

In this charged political climate, Secretary Clinton should convey unmistakable U.S. support for the Egyptian people and their achievement, along with the U.S. intent to be a strong and reliable partner to a democratic Egypt. Reports that the secretary will announce the creation of a fund to spur entrepreneurship in Egypt -- to accompany the \$150 million already announced for democratic institution building -- are encouraging. Clinton might also consider announcing plans to explore debt reduction or forgiveness and make clear that the United States will lead international efforts to return stolen assets to Egypt's coffers as soon as possible. Both initiatives would offer more economic assistance than the administration will likely squeeze out of an already overstretched foreign assistance account.

Notwithstanding concerns about the SMC's role in the current transition, Secretary Clinton should communicate

American appreciation of the Egyptian military for playing a critical, professional role in limiting bloodshed in the days preceding Mubarak's departure. She should also praise the SMC's stated objective of turning power over to civilians as soon as possible, given that civilian control of the military is a core pillar of democratic practice. Still, in her private meetings with the SMC leadership, the secretary should seek to better understand the SMC's transition objectives and echo local concerns, emphasizing the U.S. belief that too rapid a political transition could create added instability in the country. As noted before, she should express pointed concern about the lack of transparency in a referendum organized on such short notice and with so little information divulged to the public. She should rearticulate American support for a meaningful transition that affords all political forces an opportunity to organize effectively in advance of parliamentary elections and meets the international community's goals of seeing the new Egypt emerge as pluralistic, democratic, and committed to regional peace.

Finally, the secretary should take advantage of public appearances during her visit. Such appearances could include becoming the first American policymaker to address Egyptians directly on state-owned television in support of liberal values and fundamental human rights, emphasizing the importance of religious freedom. She should praise this past weekend's joint Muslim-Christian protests against sectarian violence, noting that the treatment of minorities is a defining marker of mature democracies. In the process, however, Secretary Clinton must be careful not to involve herself directly in the debate over the constitution. Such involvement could backfire on both her and the United States.

Conclusion

The timing of Secretary Clinton's trip offers potential advantages and challenges alike. She has the opportunity to reorient U.S.-Egypt relations in the postrevolutionary scene, but she must do so with care. Much deserves to be celebrated in today's Egypt, but Clinton must not be seen as either embracing the military and its timetable for transition or interfering in sensitive constitutional discussions. Walking this tightrope will require boldness, vision, and finesse.

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