

## Egypt Should Take Its Time Building a Democracy

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

**Because democratic transition is hard enough without pressure demanding that it be rapid, the objective for Egypt is to ensure that the revolution is sustainable. The test is not a first election, but rather whether there is a second one.**

The jubilation in Cairo has riveted the world. The sea of this non-violent protest movement is both inspiring self-empowerment and providing hope that a democratic revolution need not bypass the Middle East. It is a historic moment to savor.

Even as it looks as though the hardest part has been accomplished with Hosni Mubarak's departure, surely the toughest part is ahead. President Obama wasted no time in insisting that the Egyptian transition retain its momentum. Yet, a democratic transition should not be confused with an instant election. One cannot have democracy without an election, but this is only part of the story. Timing is key.

Apart from an election, democracy is about building the institutions that ensure there are safeguards for individuals. This means going beyond the obvious of lifting the existing emergency law and amending the Egyptian Constitution. It also requires an independent judiciary, a free press, minority rights, and a security apparatus that maintains the monopoly on the use of force. These institutions provide the opportunity for the creation of a civic culture where parties can negotiate their demands in a peaceful framework. Otherwise, the hope for democracy can be easily thwarted.

### Daunting Challenges

As democracy theorists say, the combination of low levels of economic development, concentrated sources of national wealth (crony capitalism), little historical experience with political pluralism (Egypt has lived under military government since 1952), a non-democratic region and identity-based divisions (particularly over religion) all combine for a daunting challenge for Egypt.

Sequencing is important, and the Palestinian example is instructive. In 2006, the Palestinians held parliamentary elections before they focused on creating the foundations of solid institutions. This is a key reason, albeit not the only one, for the success of the militant government of Hamas. Subsequently, Hamas used its militia to expel the Palestinian Authority security forces from Gaza in 2007.

The West Bank has taken the opposite course. Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, an economist by training, stands for the idea that the quality of governance is a prerequisite for a 21st century modern Arab state in the Middle East. Fayyad has focused on building institutions, supporting the rule of law and improving the quality of life for Palestinians. A high level of economic growth has followed. Fayyad is hoping that four years of institution-building will culminate in a state and a fresh election in the fall.

Such a bottom-up approach should be a sign that democracy in Egypt can occur amid improving conditions for the people. Functioning institutions are key prerequisites for a democratic election. There should be a clear timetable to Egyptian elections, but a hasty vote without institutional safeguards could mean a return to authoritarianism or chaos that can be exploited by the Islamist militants.

A look at the Middle East in recent years proves the danger is not theoretical. For example, it is critical that the state retains the monopoly on the use of force, or else we will be seeing political parties seeking to use liberal means to illiberal ends. In 2005, the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon evoked great hope yet ultimately came apart because a determined minority with its own militia, Hezbollah, used brute force to get its way. Bullets and ballots do not go together. The Egyptian security apparatus seems strong, but this might not always be the case.

### Toward a Functioning Democracy

A functioning democracy also must honor and uphold the rights of minorities. This could be alien thinking to the Muslim Brotherhood, whose statements belittle women and gays. While Egypt's military leaders have said that the country will be bound by past international agreements, the Brotherhood seems to think otherwise, deriding the legality of the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty.

The world can be of help to Egypt during this interim period, given the country's strong ties to the U.S. as well as being the center of political gravity in the region. Despite U.S. budget constraints, it is important that American assistance to Cairo reflect our commitment to political reform and institutional infrastructure for democracy. As it is now, the \$1.3 billion in U.S. aid to Egypt is purely military.

Democratic transition is hard enough without pressure demanding that it be rapid. The objective is to ensure that the Egyptian revolution is sustainable. The test is not a first election, but rather whether there is a second one.

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