

## Egypt's Opposition Must Escalate 'War of Attrition'

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Articles & Testimony

### In Egypt's war of attrition, only continued mobilization will compel the military to reassess its current calculation that a September exit for Mubarak is the only solution.

Over the past two weeks, the fact that Egyptians of all classes, ideological and religious orientations have resisted every attempt to undermine or appropriate their struggle for a peaceful democratic transition is a testament to their political maturity and resolve.

For a country known, particularly in the West, for its Islamist-oriented opposition, Egypt's massive protests have been notably nationalist in orientation, focusing on economic and political reform. Throughout Mubarak's era, the country has been scarred by growing sectarianism, beginning three decades ago with sectarian violence in Upper Egypt and culminating in the New Year's Eve Alexandria massacre that killed dozens of Christians.

In this context, the sight of a Christian mass being held in Tahrir Square and the raising of a wooden cross by Muslims who chanted "Long live the cross and crescent" was a sight to behold. This event was not only emotionally appealing to those who had given up on Egyptians' capacity for coexistence and mutual tolerance. It is significant in demonstrating the insidious role the state has played in turning Egyptians against one another. With every passing day that peaceful protests continue with little to no sectarian tension, Egyptians are demonstrating that the regime's divide and rule tactic has failed to pull them apart.

Egyptians' supposed apathy and negativity have been subverted in exchange for an unyielding desire to reclaim Egypt and stake a claim for a democratic and pluralistic future -- not one governed by a new military elite or Islamists. The Muslim Brotherhood's lack of broad appeal is becoming increasingly apparent, demonstrated by the escalation of Tuesday's street protests despite the negotiations some MB members initiated with newly-appointed vice president Suleiman.

The regime's attempts to drive wedges between the opposition by drawing more parties to the negotiation table have failed to stop the protests' momentum or to mitigate the demands of the street. Activists continue to reject centralized leadership or representation in the form of traditional opposition parties, the Brotherhood, or any other self-proclaimed group making claims not linked to the street's demands.

To be sure, the Brotherhood will seek and likely play a part in a future political landscape, given the fact that they are a reality in Egyptian society, their support largely driven by the Mubarak regime's strategy of suppressing and discrediting liberal opposition forces.

But the swelling mass of protesters has demonstrated that Egypt's political landscape is more complex than the hackneyed dichotomy portrayed by Mubarak -- still echoed by Washington pundits -- of regime vs. Islamists. Any new government formation or reforms will have to account for that reality by permitting greater space for both old liberal parties to operate and new ones to emerge. Throughout this process, the international community should provide technical and financial assistance to all parties that prove their democratic credentials.

While Egyptians imagine and build a framework for a modern, democratic representative government that allows participation of religious groups alongside liberal forces, they are rejecting overtures at appropriation coming specifically from Iran and Turkey, and have maintained their movement as uniquely Egyptian. All this demonstrates a high degree of political maturity.

But how will this amorphous movement make political gains?

The perseverance and peaceful escalation of the protest movement (now including workers' strikes) in the face of Omar Suleiman's vague piecemeal concessions is the only way to ensure a broadly representative government. The regime is offering more seats to traditional opposition parties by promising to respect judicial rulings on contested parliamentary seats, and negotiations with the Muslim Brotherhood indicate they may be angling for greater inclusion in the event that the regime prevails.

In this war of attrition, only continued mobilization will compel the military to reassess its current calculation that a September exit for Mubarak is the only solution. Otherwise Egyptians risk a return to the status quo, albeit with cosmetic reforms that fail to match the magnitude of the past two weeks of conviction and sacrifice.

It would be a mistake for the Obama administration to place all its eggs in the military basket throughout this transition, when it is far from clear that the current Suleiman framework will give the armed forces leadership of a future government. Doing so would be akin to repeating the mistake of supporting Mubarak while ignoring other emerging forces, risking a severe backlash by the Egyptian people that have irreversibly oriented themselves toward freedom.

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