

Seeking to Protect Egypt's Democratic Transition

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Articles & Testimony

The Obama administration and Congress should seek to protect a democratic transition in Egypt -- not stand in its way out of exaggerated fear.

Egyptians have taken to the streets in full force again today to demand the departure of President Hosni Mubarak, in their eleventh consecutive day of mass mobilization for regime change. At the same time, the American policy establishment is hyperventilating about the possibility of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) coming to power when all is said and done.

As an Egyptian Christian woman, I have deep concerns that Egypt could be ruled by illiberal forces that do not abide by democratic principles or govern with respect for fundamental human rights including religious freedom, protection of minorities, and equal rights for women. However, there are many reasons why I do not believe Egypt is headed in this direction, and why I support Egypt's Lotus Revolution.

Egypt's Lotus Revolution is a people's revolution for freedom and economic opportunity. Similar to Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution, it is largely spontaneous, lacking in central leadership, and not driven by any particular ideology, whether Islamist or otherwise. Egypt's Lotus Revolution was initially only fed by tactical support via youth activists employing social media, most notably Facebook. That support represented some borrowed wisdom from Tunisian youth counterparts via new media, who shared knowledge with Egyptian activists on the mechanics of street revolt: how to protect yourself against tear gas, what to wear, what to bring to a protest and meeting points. These "guides" were widely disseminated across the new media, and most notably included endless exhortations affirming the peaceful nature of the protests. Notably, they also encouraged the rejection of any partisan or religious symbols or slogans. The "national" nature of these protests was and remains the prominent and distinguishing feature of these protests.

Indeed, my friends and family report back that the now famous Tahrir Square has become a symbol of Egypt's pluralism, encompassing together young and old, men and women, professionals, artists, and workers, Muslims and Christians, and all stripes of Egypt's political spectrum. This includes followers of the MB. That is because they are part of Egyptian society. In a genuine mass people's movement, it is untenable to exclude them. The beauty of the Lotus Revolution is that no one has been able to hijack it so far. But the protracted nature of the struggle and the intransigence of the Mubarak regime makes this possibility more likely with every passing day. So what should the United States do?

Though likely attractive to the US, especially those in the "stability" camp, supporting Egypt's transition to another military dictatorship is not the answer. To be sure, Egypt's military enjoys broad support as a national symbol in Egyptian society and also wields substantial economic interests in the country. In any transition that can be envisioned it will remain a force to preserve the state and maintain the security of Egypt's borders. For this reason, I

expect it to play a key safeguarding role should a real transition get underway.

But what should that role be specifically?

Some of Egypt's opposition groups, most notably the Baradei led National Association for Change (NAC) and others, including well respected public figures, propose that Mubarak delegate to newly appointed Vice President Omar Sulaiman, a military man, the responsibilities of managing the transitional period which should be completed by the end of the president's current term, expiring in September.

They are requesting that Sulaiman dissolve the two nationally elected legislative bodies, the Shura Council and the People's Assembly, due to the widespread documented irregularities that marred the conduct of both elections to the respective bodies. They are requesting the formation of a legislative committee comprised of constitutional experts and independent judges to prepare for the drafting of a new Egyptian Constitution that would enshrine the civil nature of the Egyptian state and respect for human rights and religious and political pluralism. They are also requesting the formation of a new government comprised of independent figures to administer the state's executive functions during the transition, and the immediate repeal of Egypt's notorious emergency law, with which Mubarak has governed since 1981. These are reasonable demands, and are the best guarantors of Egyptian stability and international standing moving forward.

What should be clear to U.S. policy makers, however, is that Egyptians no more desire another military dictatorship than they do a transition to a theocracy. The best way ensure neither eventuality takes place is to have the military preserve and protect Egypt's newly drafted Constitution and the civil (not Islamic) nature of the state.

But the longer Egypt's leadership crisis persists, the only two parties who reap political benefits are the reactionary forces of the current regime and the illiberal MB, which is increasingly asserting its street presence. To protect its national interests, the US should best support the democratic aspirations of the Egyptian people, which find reasonable expression in the demands of the NAC.

The U.S. still wields some leverage in this situation given its long history and standing with the Egyptian military, not the least of which is the substantial annual assistance package. A call by Secretary of State Clinton to VP Sulaiman on Wednesday positively impacted the conduct of the Egyptian armed forces in protecting peaceful protesters on Thursday after the violence wrought on Wednesday. Nonetheless, what has begun in Egypt is an Egyptian led effort to end an autocracy. In these circumstances, the Obama administration and the Congress should seek to protect a democratic transition -- not stand in its way out of exaggerated fear.

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