

Democracy Is Not All That Different

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Articles & Testimony

Ensuring that U.S.-Egyptian friendship is deeply rooted and sustainable beyond a potential political transition means that the bilateral relationship cannot rest solely on President Mubarak.

In kayaking, you can choose one of two types of stability, but you cannot have both. A flat-bottomed kayak has high "initial stability" -- it appears to ride smoothly in the water, with little rocking back and forth. But it has low "final stability" -- in rough seas, it tends to quickly and catastrophically capsize. An angled-bottom kayak is just the opposite. With low initial stability, it takes more effort to guide and is prone to constant shifts from side to side. But these kayaks are faster and more efficient, and their high final stability means that they remain upright in stormy seas, and can recover even when turned nearly upside down.

Things are not so different with democracies and dictatorships. Democracy is messy -- look at the United States, where in the last five years alone we have experienced swings from right to left and back again, and where political discourse can often be raucous. Dictatorships, on the other hand, often possess a superficial stability -- until they reach the tipping point, which often comes more quickly than expected. Such was the case in Tunisia, which seemed an oasis of calm until a small spark quickly grew to consume the longstanding rule of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali.

Dictatorships lack the self-righting mechanisms and institutions which provide democracies with their deep stability. Free expression, free assembly, multiple and accountable political parties, free and fair elections, and independent courts -- all of these form the vital structure of a democracy and provide an outlet for people's grievances. In a dictatorship, people are denied these outlets and anger simmers beneath the surface, occasionally bursting through society's calm veneer in violent fashion.

These two broad categories -- democracies and dictatorships -- are of course an oversimplification. In reality there is a full spectrum of political and civil liberties along which countries fall. Egypt is not Tunisia. But it is perhaps not so far off. Freedom House gave Tunisia its worst score for political rights, and Egypt scored just one point better. In the civil rights category, the countries received the same score. In understanding the contrasting U.S. and international

response to unrest in Tunisia and Egypt, perhaps the most relevant difference between the two is not culture or politics, but the strategic importance of each to the United States.

But there is a strong case to be made that Egypt's strategic importance to the U.S. makes it more imperative, not less, that Washington support a peaceful transition to democracy there. It was in Egypt in 2005 that then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice famously stated, "For 60 years, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in the Middle East -- and we achieved neither." While stressing that "successful reform is always homegrown," she called on Egyptian authorities to hold free and fair elections, allow international monitoring of those elections, and allow free expression and assembly for the opposition, among other things. Initially, it seemed hopeful that Egypt was moving in the right direction, as the ruling National Democratic Party lost 73 of its 403 seats (out of a total of 518) in parliament. But eventually, these gains were reversed: as of the latest elections the NDP now holds 420 seats, more than it did before the 2005 gains.

But the question is not whether change will come to Egypt, but when, and what sort of change it will be. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak will turn 83 this year, and must decide whether to try to extend his 29-year rule in the September 2011 presidential elections or stand down and allow power to pass to another. It remains a mystery whether he has a preferred successor -- though many believe he has privately tapped his son Gamal -- or for that matter whether a hand-picked successor would be able to successfully establish himself in light of the considerable political discontent among Egyptians and the apparent popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood.

For many years, U.S. diplomats have sought to persuade President Mubarak that the surest way to leave a positive legacy and prevent Egypt from falling into the hands of extremists would be to nurture real political pluralism and allow a democratic transition of power. Clearly he was unconvinced, and if unwilling to transfer power magnanimously through political reform is unlikely to step down in the face of popular protests.

That the Obama administration should be reluctant to urge him to do so, and that it prefers orderly democratic transitions to inherently unpredictable street protests, is understandable. Egypt remains an important ally, given its persistence in peace and engagement with Israel, opposition to Iran and terrorism, and broad cooperation with the United States on regional matters. But ensuring that U.S.-Egyptian friendship is deeply rooted and sustainable beyond an Egyptian political transition means that the bilateral relationship cannot rest solely on President Mubarak. If Egyptians do not see the United States as a friend or accept the logic of Egypt's strategic cooperation with the United States, our cultivation of close ties with the Egyptian leadership will eventually backfire.

There may be a way forward, however, which allows the United States to preserve its close cooperation with Egypt while fulfilling the aspirations of the Egyptian people. President Mubarak had asserted that the 2010 parliamentary elections would be "free and fair" and "reflect the will of the voters." This did not happen. But he will have another chance to keep this pledge with the September 2011 presidential elections. The United States should urge President Mubarak to begin work now to ensure that those elections truly are free, fair, and competitive, including by allowing opposition parties to organize and campaign freely and allowing international monitors to observe the elections. It should also publicly press for the other steps required for a peaceful democratic transition in Egypt -- the lifting of the emergency law, the release of political prisoners, and independence for judges, among other things.

It is frequently pointed out that democracy means more than holding elections, and this is correct. Real democratic stability rests upon the full panoply of democratic institutions, such as political parties, civil rights, courts, and more. But you cannot have a democracy without elections. When Tunisian President Ben Ali fled, the United States stated that Tunisians "have the right to choose their leaders." So should Egyptians, and indeed all people everywhere. The choice between democracy and stability is really one between the short-term stability of dictatorships and the long-term stability of democracies. U.S. national security demands that we favor and promote the latter.

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