

Egyptians Believe U.S. Supporting an Illegitimate Government

by [J. Scott Carpenter \(/experts/j-scott-carpenter\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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As Egypt prepares to go to the polls this weekend, official Washington is scrambling to sort out what it thinks about them. Two weeks ago Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit and Director of Defense Intelligence, Omar Soliman. According to the press conference afterwards, not one word was spoken about the upcoming elections signaling a profound disinterest. Just a few days later, after many who participate in Fikra Forum expressed private outrage, the State Department's press spokesperson released a [statement \(http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/11/150930.htm\)](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/11/150930.htm) that meekly called for transparent elections and the participation of international observers. The Egyptian government reacted as if it had been stabbed with a hot iron, howling at U.S. interference in Egypt's internal affairs.

The irony, of course, is that whatever the United States says about these elections would be too tepid. The fact is the coming elections in no way meet international standards and cannot be seen as performing the legitimating function elections are supposed to play. As explained by fellow Fikra Forum member Dina Guirguis, the [legal framework for the elections \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/parliamentary-elections-in-egypt-and-next-years-presidential-vote\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/parliamentary-elections-in-egypt-and-next-years-presidential-vote) effectively prevents any real competition while the abdication of the High Election Commission responsibilities to the Ministry of Interior means that the elections can be manipulated in any number of ways. So why do these elections matter? Wouldn't it be better to simply ignore them altogether? Not in my view.

The National Democratic Party seeks to use these elections to legitimize its government program. (Why else would Gamal Mubarak claim that these elections will be "historically transformative?") The regime's hope, it seems to me, is to get through these elections as quickly and as violence-free as possible so that they can claim a huge mandate for themselves and claim that the Muslim Brotherhood was trounced. They also hope the United States and the rest of the international community will simply applaud the diminution of the Islamists and the anticipated lack of violence and let the Egyptian government move on. The United States should not fall for this.

These elections matter not for what they mean in and of themselves but for what they portend. Egypt is entering the last phases of a critical transition in which the regime craves legitimacy above all else. As presidential elections approach, the United States and the rest of the international community should make clear that legitimacy can only properly flow through transparent elections in which citizens have real choice to elect leaders who truly represent them. The time to make that case as loudly as possible is now when the stakes are lower.

In conversations I have had with senior members of the Obama administration over the past two weeks, they seem to understand this but don't think they should go this far either publicly or privately. They claim concerns that such a statement could backfire but I sense a deeper worry: if the administration calls the legitimacy of the Egyptian government into question, it will become even clearer that the United States is supporting an illegitimate government. They should realize, though, the most Egyptians believe we already are.

J. Scott Carpenter is the Keston Family fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and director of Project Fikra.

One Response to Egyptians Believe U.S. Supporting an Illegitimate Government

Michele Dunne says:

November 28, 2010 3:09 am

In the final days before elections, the National Democratic Party is showing an ugly side, striking out in all directions. See, for example, this page one commentary by editor in chief Osama Saraya of al-Ahram. Really, when a ruling elite has to strike out this aggressively at think tank scholars in another country, one has to begin to wonder about its confidence and durability. Similarly, the recent relentless campaigns against the Muslim Brotherhood—refusing to register a quarter of its candidates, outlawing its slogan, arresting its supporter in large numbers—seem hard to fathom. Isn't it enough that the Brotherhood, beaten down after several years of particular repression, was already going to run for the same or even a smaller percentage of parliamentary seats as it did in 2005? Did having the Brotherhood occupy 20 percent of the parliament's seats over the last five years cause any significant problem for the NDP? Why is all this aggression necessary? It seems that the regime already is failing in its goal of wiring everything in advance in order to have a nice quiet election day on Sunday. ❖

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