

Political Change in Egypt: A Role for the United States?

Nov 18, 2010



Brief Analysis

This is the third of a three-part series on Egypt's political future. [PolicyWatch #1717 \(/templateC05.php?CID=3267\)](#) discusses the country's upcoming parliamentary elections, while [Policy Watch #1718 \(/templateC05.php?CID=3268\)](#) addresses Egypt's use of constitutional and executive power.

Recognizing that the Egyptian regime has set the stage for an undemocratic father-son transition, nearly one million Egyptians have joined the campaign by Mohamed ElBaradei, former chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency, to call for constitutional and political reform before the presidential vote next year. Mofid Shehab, minister of parliamentary affairs, recently ruled out further constitutional amendments, explaining that they "are not in the cards now for a simple reason, namely that the last constitutional amendments were carried out only three years ago, and since constitutions enjoy stability, it would be inconceivable to amend the constitution every two or three years." National Democratic Party (NDP) media head Aly El Din Hilal has also joined the chorus, stating that "any country that changes its constitution for one person is ridiculous."

The irony of Hilal's reference to ElBaradei's call for change was not lost on the Egyptian people, who realize that the constitution was, in fact, amended for just one person on successive occasions within a few years. Egypt's skewed constitutional framework, manipulated as it is to favor the ruling party, is just one of a series of handicaps resulting in political restrictions. [Credibility of Elections in Doubt](#)

Numerous statements from Egypt's National Council on Human Rights and the leader of Egypt's election commission that explicitly reject international observers for the upcoming parliamentary elections, combined with the experience of the last two Shura Council elections -- in which major restrictions were placed on domestic monitoring groups -- are additional bad omens for the integrity of Egypt's elections. At the same time, there has been a conspicuous increase in government crackdowns on the media -- the last potential bastion of independence during the election season -- including closure of several popular television stations, cancellation of some shows, and the firing of Ibrahim Issa, editor-in-chief of the widely read independent newspaper Ad Dustur. Meanwhile, the Egyptian opposition perceives an increasingly restrictive climate at home and a changed international climate in which the United States and its European allies no longer support a robust reform agenda in Egypt. Accordingly, ElBaradei is leading the call for a general boycott of parliamentary elections.

Understanding that there is likely little to be gained from participating in a system where the "books have been cooked" to achieve the ruling party's agenda, some opposition groups and parties have officially joined ElBaradei's call for a general boycott. However, the decision by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wafd Party (in a close General Assembly vote) not to support the boycott has undermined its impact.

The Egyptian opposition, therefore, finds itself in a real dilemma, required to choose one of two extremely limiting options. On the one hand, it can participate in an imperfect system where sweeping gains by the ruling party are a near certainty. While its participation would potentially bestow legitimacy on the regime, at least it would provide a narrow opportunity for the opposition to assert itself in the political process and reach out to voters. Alternatively, it can participate in a divisive and divided boycott that may be ineffective, given the overall dismal rate of public participation in the electoral process.

The current constitutional setup in Egypt guarantees a woefully flawed electoral process. A draconian Emergency Law and a massive internal security apparatus -- whose job is to secure the regime's interests in a time of transition and whose history during elections is tainted -- have the combined effect of preserving authoritarianism.

Egyptians Strike Back

Egyptians are awakening to this reality and demonstrating creative outlets of resistance. Understanding that no one will bring change to Egypt but Egyptians themselves, many regime opponents are working for change at great personal risk. Indeed, several opposition groups are coalescing around the rejection of father-to-son succession, out of a concern that an undemocratic transition will allow Egypt's authoritarianism to deepen, weakening the country domestically and internationally. Egypt's ailing infrastructure and aging institutions and leadership are juxtaposed against an increasingly bold media, unprecedented youth connectivity through new media, and rising expectations prompted by economic growth, all of which are creating opportunities for change, but also possible instability. In a report earlier this year on Egypt's growing labor activism, the Solidarity Center, which promotes the rights of workers worldwide, noted that "workers' protests, strikes, sit-ins, and various types of job actions have reached a crescendo, becoming daily, weekly, and monthly events threatening the stability of Egypt's economy and social structure, and without doubt having an effect on the political regime."

Conclusion

Belatedly, the Obama administration has begun to articulate a new security paradigm that recognizes that alliances with stable, pluralistic democracies provide the best guarantees for U.S. interests. Paradoxically, this shift in policy occurs, according to Freedom House, as the number of free countries worldwide is decreasing. As President Obama acknowledged in his recent UN General Assembly speech, leaders continue to abolish term limits, crack down on civil society, and smother entrepreneurship and good governance through corrupt practices, while democratic reforms are deferred indefinitely. And yet, the president noted, "experience shows us that history is on the side of liberty -- that the strongest foundation for human progress lies in open economies, open societies, and open governments. To put it simply: democracy, more than any other form of government, delivers for our citizens."

Egypt offers a powerful example of both deferred freedoms and an opportunity for the United States to have a positive impact on change. While thirteen members of the U.S. Senate have responded with S. Res. 586, the executive branch has thus far proved unwilling to rock the boat on Egypt for the sake of so-called regional interests, failing to recognize that the country's internal woes undermine its regional clout.

In the past six months or so, the administration has increased its rhetoric on human rights abuses, and it should receive due credit. However, sporadic and purely reactive statements are no substitute for a coherent strategy to monitor and influence Egypt's domestic political transition in the coming years. Specifically, the administration should take the initiative to target known Egyptian human rights abusers, much as it supports the targeted sanctions in the Iran sanctions bill. Likewise, during the lame-duck session of Congress, the administration should consider dropping its opposition to forward-leaning S. Res. 586 in support of freedom in Egypt.

The resumption of the strategic dialogue between the United States and Egypt offers a good starting point for a discussion about the Egyptian political situation. Reports that the administration intends to expand this dialogue to incorporate the Egyptian Ministry of Interior and civil society representatives may be a positive development. While dialogue is an important avenue for expressing U.S. concerns about Egypt's troubling domestic situation, other tools -- such as the creative leveraging of Washington's \$1.3 billion in annual assistance to Cairo -- should also be examined. Additionally, Washington may want to consider appointing a special envoy to explore particular issues related to Egypt's domestic agenda, such as upcoming elections or minority rights. And meetings with Egyptian dissidents at all levels should not stop, but accelerate and increase. Throughout each of these measures, the United States must avail itself of all its public diplomacy tools in continually communicating its message and actions to the Egyptian people, including through the Egyptian media.

Egypt's constitutional reform in the past five years has not contributed to an expansion of pluralism, but to consolidation of the regime's power. The result is a system designed to elevate Gamal Mubarak to the presidency while leaving the door open to less obvious NDP choices, through the independent candidate route offered via the amendments. This process, as well as additional executive maneuvers, has been designed to create the impression of the rule of law while ignoring its requirements. The challenge to the United States is how best to respond to a process that may appear legal but is perceived by the Egyptian people to be wholly illegitimate.

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