

# Reform Prospects during Mubarak's Fifth Term

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Brief Analysis

On September 27, Hosni Mubarak will be sworn in for a fifth consecutive term as president of Egypt. Mubarak was reelected according to new electoral procedures introduced earlier this year that allowed for a competitive election between multiple candidates. The opposition, united in its calls for more democracy, criticized the reforms, claiming that they only aimed at strengthening the regime's grip on power. For his part, Mubarak pledged to introduce further political reforms during his fifth mandate. What would a reform program look like and what would its prospects be?

## The Best-Case Scenario

For the first time in more than fifty years, despite Egypt's emergency law and continuing restrictions on the right of assembly, there are regular, small demonstrations all over the country. The recent presidential elections gave a new momentum to political life. Were Mubarak and the reformers in his ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) so inclined, they could build on this momentum to implement a comprehensive political reform program with a clear objectives and timeframe. Such a program would entail:

- Engaging in a serious national dialogue, including representatives of all political forces, addressing issues of constitutional and political reforms.
- Ending the emergency law. This would limit the unchecked powers of the state. (Mubarak has promised to do this, but only by replacing the emergency law with antiterrorism legislation.)
- Allowing the formation of new political parties. The regime controls the creation of political parties, which makes it difficult for serious opponents to organize themselves.
- Facilitating the creation of private newspapers and television broadcasters, and creating an independent authority that would govern state-owned media.
- Granting the freedom of assembly, which is still restricted by law.
- Making the judiciary independent by letting judges govern their own budget and promotions.
- Allowing international observers to oversee the electoral process.
- Increasing the power of parliament. The government should answer to, and be held accountable by, parliament rather than the president.
- Creating serious checks and balances to reduce the concentration of power in the institution of the presidency.

These reforms are needed as to create a partnership between the regime and the opposition in genuine and comprehensive political reform. If reform is to succeed, the opposition should be a partner in the reform process, not merely an observer.

By contrast, maintaining the status quo and ignoring opposition demands could prove to be hazardous for the stability of Egypt and the region. The regime's reluctance to make genuine reforms swelled the ranks of the opposition. The recent events in Lebanon and election in the Palestinian Authority and Iraq helped to reduce

Egyptians' fear of political change. The regime's failure to improve living conditions, coupled with the lack of liberty, would provide an ideal environment for producing extremists. The growth of extremism in Egypt will not help to win the global war against terror.

### Good Prospects for Democracy

If Mubarak expresses a serious willingness to make democratic reforms, he could rally the opposition behind him and secure a safe and stable transition to democracy. Unlike Georgia or Ukraine, the opposition's focus is on constitutional reform, not on replacing the current leader. Indeed, though the opposition parties cannot agree on a single candidate to replace Mubarak, they are united in their call for democratic reforms. To be sure, the opposition would be skeptical of Mubarak's intentions even if he were to announce reforms. He would have to take measures proving his determination for real reform and meet the various demands of the opposition. Still, the tripartite alliance of major opposition groups -- Wafd-Tagammu-Nasserite -- did not call for Mubarak to step down; instead, it urged Mubarak to resign from the ruling NDP, make the necessary constitutional change, and appoint a neutral government to oversee elections.

A transition to democracy in Egypt could prove less complex than other Middle Eastern states. Egypt is not going through a nation building process. It is the oldest nation-state in the region; it has clear boundaries and a strong sense of national identity. The country has well-established government institutions. Its first legislative assembly dates back to 1866, and despite an authoritarian rule since the early 1950s and irregularities in elections, the parliament has never ceased to exist. Egyptians are familiar with the concepts of parliament, the judiciary and executive branches, political parties, and elections. Finally, Egypt has no ethnic or tribal divisions. Most of its population is Muslim, with a large Christian minority. Christians are found in all social classes and in all regions of the country, and represent 10-20 percent of the population (figures vary depending on the source). Such a large Christian minority will help counter Islamic extremism in democratic elections.

### U.S. Support for Reform

The United States faces two problems in communicating its message of support for democratic change in Egypt. First is the reluctance of reformers to acknowledge U.S. efforts. Fifty years of Egyptian rhetoric about the threat of "foreign domination" means that opponents of the state are labeled as agents of foreign powers whose aim is to destabilize the country. This label has been applied to many human rights and prodemocracy groups when they have been critical of the regime. In an effort to appear authentically Egyptian, opposition movements seek distance from any appearance of foreign backing.

Egyptians are less sensitive to the threat of foreign domination from U.S. assistance when such programs are done in coordination with the European Union or other democratic nations.

A second problem is that the traditional perception that the United States supports Mubarak's authoritarian regime raises doubts in Egyptian minds about the sincerity of the American calls for reforms. For more than two decades, Egypt has been the recipient of the United States' second-largest package of foreign aid, which many Egyptians see as supporting Egypt's authoritarian regime, not its people.

Given this background, there is great sensitivity among the educated public to any sign of ambiguity in the U.S. call for reform. Reformers pay great attention to how vigorously the United States encourages the adoption of a comprehensive democratic reform program -- that, rather than the fate of Mubarak, is the issue of concern. A key indicator of whether such a program is under way is the extent to which the regime is willing to work with the opposition on matters related to political reform.

There could be a considerable impact in Egyptian public perception if a larger share of the U.S. aid package to Egypt were directed toward programs that promote democratic principles -- through non-governmental organizations

(NGOs), educational institutions, and media programs. The same would apply if a larger share of the U.S. aid package were directed away from the state and to NGOs, especially to mainstream groups providing social services such as education and health care in areas now served by charities affiliated with religious extremist groups.

When addressing the International Republican Institute earlier this year, President George W. Bush explained that all successful democracies are built on the common foundations of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, a free economy, an independent judiciary, and freedom of worship. Egypt has all of these democratic foundations in theory, but it has a long way to go to see them fully realized in practice. Helping Egypt and the Mubarak regime in a successful transition to democracy will have a positive effect on the entire region, and it will help to grow a stronger and more sustainable partnership between the United States and Egypt.

Khairi Abaza is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute.

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