



White Paper Series:

Voices from the Middle East on Democratization and Reform

A POLICY FOR PROMOTING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN EGYPT

By Dr. Hala Mustafa

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American policy-circles are in the midst of a vigorous debate about the wisdom and effectiveness of promoting democracy in the Middle East as a long-term weapon in the war against Radical Islamic Terrorism. In this White Paper series, we endeavor to bring into this debate the voices of those in the front lines of democratization in the Middle East: the civil activists, the dissident intellectuals, the opposition leaders.

As Editor-in-Chief of a Cairo-based publication on democracy, Dr. Hala Mustafa brings an insider's perspective on the struggle to liberalize Egyptian politics. She argues that the choice between authoritarianism and Islamism in Egypt is a false one. American policy towards democratization in Egypt can help pave a third path if it focuses on strengthening liberal democrats, and not just the democratic process.

There has been much talk about promoting reform and democratization in Egypt. Yet, the steps that have been taken so far have been limited, and have resulted in little more than cosmetic changes. It has not helped that most analyses on the prospects for political reform in Egypt are stymied by fears that the only alternative to the present authoritarian regime is an Islamist one. But is it really true that Egypt is inherently caught between authoritarianism and Islamism?

In fact, it is in the interest of the current regime to present this polarized view of Egypt's future, and to thereby deny moderate, secular, and liberal forces the opportunity to gain any significant traction.

This paper makes the case that the choice between authoritarianism and Islamism is a false one. Given its own liberal-secular legacy, Egypt has the potential to become a model for a modernizing, liberal, moderate, secular state—that is, if its democratization process is built upon these principles. In addition to its liberal legacy, Egypt also has the advantage of being a relatively homogenous society, unlike other countries in the region such as Iraq, Lebanon or Syria which confront ethnic and sectarian divisions that complicate any transition to democracy.

This paper provides an in-depth picture of the factors driving the relative strength of the regime, the Islamist opposition and liberal democrats. It concludes with several specific suggestions for American policies towards Egypt to help pave a third path—one that would give Egyptians a choice beyond authoritarianism or Islamism.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LIBERALISM IN EGYPT

There is a widespread misconception that Egypt lacks a liberal, secular legacy, and thus that it has no base upon which to build a genuine project of reform to confront the political challenges facing today's society. On the contrary, liberal ideas have deep roots in Egyptian society, and have been a coherent and consistent feature of Egypt's political landscape for decades.

Egypt's Liberal Legacy

The Liberal Age of Egypt began during the era of Muhammad Ali in the early 19th century, with the formation of a well-educated, open-minded Egyptian elite that embraced the distinctive features of liberalism and contributed to Egypt's modernization. Liberal figures emphasized the importance of law and order, judicial independence, national (versus tribal or religious) identity, individual and public freedoms, freedom of the press, public education, the rights of women and minorities, pluralism and trade unionism.

One of the landmarks of this era was the writing of Egypt's first democratic, liberal constitution in 1923. Its basic elements can be found in the most progressive parts of Egypt's current constitution. Egypt's Liberal Age was characterized not only by political liberalism and modernization, but also cultural progress, as the arts, cinema and music flourished during this period. Liberals also led one of the most important movements for religious reform and secular principles. Prominent thinkers

and influential writers of this era, including many with religious backgrounds and recognized as Islamic scholars (even from the prestigious Al-Azhar University), upheld the importance of secular rule.

The Consolidation of Autocratic Rule after the 1952 Revolution

The vibrant Liberal Age of Egypt, which lasted decades, came to a halt with the 1952 Revolution. The new regime that came to power, led by the Free Officers, took the country away from all the principles, progress, and traditions of Egypt's Liberal Age. Lacking a comprehensive political agenda of their own, the Free Officers embraced anti-liberal ideological trends which were gaining popularity at the time such as Pan-Arabism, socialism, populism, and Islamism, in order to build their legitimacy. The new rulers banned political parties and instituted a one-party system which continues to shape Egypt's political map to this day. The regime also created a bureaucratic-security apparatus to consolidate its power by monitoring and controlling all political life.

These features allowed certain new political traditions to take deep root in society, making them hard to overcome. One prominent example is the stagnant nature of the political elite, which consists only of those who are well connected to the bureaucratic-security apparatus, and excludes women and Copts entirely. The recruitment process for the elite is based solely on loyalty, rather than merit or professional credentials. The regime also continues to rely for its legitimacy on fighting “the outside enemy,” a mindset that came to the fore during the colonial era and is perpetuated to this day with new enemies, primarily Israel and America. The state-controlled media does not allow diverse opinions to be expressed, which reinforces and perpetuates these tendencies in the dominant political discourse.

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While in the 1970s Egypt experimented with pluralism and a multiparty system (called *infitah*, meaning “open door”), this was a highly controlled experiment that did not fundamentally change the country's political structure. The relative openness Egypt witnessed during this period was curbed by a number of rules and regulations that were adopted at the same time to limit—if not abolish—what little freedom and diversity remained. Thus, constitutional amendments were passed allowing an unlimited number of terms for the president, and affirming Islam as the main source of legislation. Anwar Sadat's policies were not driven by a principled commitment to liberal ideas, and increasingly reflected a pragmatic resort to Islamic principles. Because Sadat did not give great attention to undertaking deep-seated structural reforms, his experiment with pluralism had a limited impact, and so far has remained the exception in modern Egyptian politics.

The current politically stagnant situation in Egypt can thus be traced to the inability of the regime to move beyond the one-party system, and to its pursuit of legitimacy in ideas that contradict the concepts of pluralism and democracy. Over the years, the furthest the regime has been willing to reform the system was to transform it from a one-party (Arab Socialist Union) system to a hegemonic one, where the National Democratic Party (NDP) remains dominant in a multi-party system. Political parties are non-influential and docile as the regime permits them to play no more than a merely cosmetic role.

The two main political forces that have remained outside the party system are the Islamists, and liberal reformers. The next two sections examine their relative strength and position in Egyptian politics, and their relationship with the ruling regime.

THE STATE OF ISLAMISTS IN EGYPT

The steady rise of Islamist political forces, represented primarily by the Muslim Brotherhood, was a natural consequence of the weakness and stagnation of political life. In particular, legislation restricting the establishment of political parties and the weakness of officially recognized political parties resulted in a situation where, for nearly five decades, the mosque has been the only available venue for expressing political opinions and opposition to the regime. But the conflict between the regime and the Islamists is driven less by ideological differences than simple power politics.

The Complicit Role of the Regime in the Rising Influence of Islamism

The ruling regime never developed a coherent vision to take the place of the Islamist-socialist vision that has defined it since 1952. In 1981, the regime established Shari'a (Islamic law) as the main source of legislation, and banned any secular movement from establishing its own party or platform—a principle that is also reflected in the law organizing political party life. As articulated in the current constitution, Islam is the primary source of the regime's legitimacy. Therefore, the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood compete to a large extent on Islamic grounds in their struggle for power and influence.

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In order to not legally recognize the Muslim Brotherhood, the regime has resorted to an increasing islamization of its policies, at the expense of the rights of women and minorities. This comes in addition to the restrictions it places on freedom of thought and innovation, according to which expressions that might contradict the principles of Islam (according to the regime), are banned. The regime has similarly sought to compete with the

Islamists by expressing Islamic principles and opinions in the official media and press. The regime has allowed Islamists to enter legislative elections, either under the umbrella of official political parties or as independents. Running in official political parties, Islamists won 8 seats in the parliamentary elections of 1984 and 30 seats in 1987. Running as independents in the 2000 elections, the Muslim Brotherhood won 17 seats. Running as independents in the elections held in November 2005, they made tremendous gains, capturing 88 seats (out of a 454-member parliament).

The regime has also permitted the Muslim Brotherhood to field candidates in professional syndicate elections and thus infiltrate them. Typically, in a silent political agreement between the regime and the Brotherhood, the Muslim Brotherhood wins the majority of the seats on the board but the head of the syndicate is reserved for the NDP. The Brotherhood is also permitted to control many social charity associations, reflecting Egypt's strong relationship with Saudi Arabia, which supports the Brotherhood and its associations.

The Difficulty of Assessing the Actual Strength of the Muslim Brotherhood

It is difficult to evaluate the actual political weight of the Muslim Brotherhood, or even its size, since the organization never reveals the number of its members. In addition, it is difficult to separate the manifestations of society's Islamization that can be attributed to the regime's policies as opposed to the Brotherhood's influence. This includes, for example, the growing number of mosques and their use as political platforms, the noticeable increase in veiled women, the banning of alcoholic beverages in some public areas, and the resort to religious discourse on the state-level, which can all be attributed to both the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Furthermore, the prevailing trend of the de-politicization of society, reflected in a lack of political participation, probably also means that the silent majority is not represented in comparisons of strength between the ruling party and other political forces. If it were true that the Muslim Brotherhood represented the strongest political faction, as is occasionally assumed, the whole political scene would have already changed. Therefore, it is safe to assume that presently the Muslim Brotherhood does not have the potential to overthrow the regime or take over the political system entirely.

Conditions for Safely Integrating the Islamists in Egyptian Politics

An important question that deserves attention when assessing the Muslim Brotherhood is whether its presence and participation in politics would necessarily lead to a decrease in radical, violent "jihadist" activity. The empirical answer is certainly no: when the Muslim Brotherhood enjoyed its largest political representation in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a noticeable increase in radical groups and militant violence. Based on this experience, it seems unlikely that legally recognizing the Muslim Brotherhood would automatically lead to the containment or reduction of Islamist-inspired terrorism. The opposite is more likely to occur. Betting on the legitimacy of the Brotherhood could lead to more political Islamization, and provide fertile ground for the growth of Islamist groups, whether violent or non-violent.

So how can the Muslim Brotherhood be dealt with? While the near-term legalization of the Muslim Brotherhood as a political party is problematic, the issue of their inclusion in political life must be considered for the long-term. It is possible to do this safely within a liberal, secular political system, as is illustrated by the case of Turkey. In the Turkish model, the political integration of the Islamists was only possible because the state is neutral regarding religion and the constitution is secular, providing a safeguard against an Islamic party attempting to transform Turkey into a theocratic state. This political system is upheld by the army, which is the guardian of the secular principles instituted by Ataturk.

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Unfortunately in most, if not all, of the Arab and Muslim World, military institutions do not act as safeguards of secularism. Therefore, a key step in Egypt to pave the way for a liberal, secular political system is a constitutional amendment to reduce the role of Shari'a, which currently serves as the main point of reference for the Egyptian political system. Guaranteeing the neutrality of the state with respect to religion in the constitution would make it more feasible to limit the islamization of the state and society, and thereby allow political and intellectual diversity to flourish.

At the same time, the Brotherhood should only be integrated in Egyptian politics on the condition that it revises some of its core political principles—specifically its position that Shari’a be the main source of legislation. At present, the Brotherhood tolerates pluralism only within this restricted framework. Unless the Brotherhood compromises and accepts that Shari’a should be one of many sources of the law (or “a main source”), and not the sole one, the Brotherhood will not be able to coexist in a political system together with liberal and secular groups.

Is the Muslim Brotherhood ready to compromise on this issue? As a political movement, the Brotherhood seeks to achieve certain political goals, including international recognition. Over the years, it has become skilled at striking political deals, and it might be ready to negotiate a compromise on the constitutional amendment suggested above in return for political recognition.

THE STATE OF LIBERAL REFORMERS IN EGYPT

In contrast to the complicated and interdependent relationship between the regime and the Islamists—defined by clashes over power-sharing but not over ideology—the relationship between the regime and liberal reformers is characterized by a clear ideological disagreement. This deep ideological difference makes the regime’s conflict with liberals much fiercer than with the Brotherhood.

Liberalism Presents a Real Ideological Threat to the Regime

The Free Officers who led the 1952 revolution did not adhere to any particular school of political thought. In order to bring down the monarchy, they formed a temporary and pragmatic alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, the Free Officers became largely dependent on Islamic principles to compensate for their own lack of ideology. This group of officers excluded Copts entirely, which is consistent with their exclusivist mindset that continues to impact the present political situation in Egypt, as reflected by the ongoing lack of political representation for Copts and women: in the 2005 parliamentary election, the ruling NDP had only one Copt and six women candidates on its list of 444 official parliamentary candidates.

Socialism served as the other source for the regime’s political doctrine. When the regime formed an alliance with the former Soviet Union in the 1960s, raising the banner of hostility to the West and the United States, it also assimilated socialist ideas into its program. This was reflected in the establishment of a large state administration and bureaucracy, the importing of a single-party system, and the centralization of the economy. These socialist-inspired attributes remain deeply rooted in the regime to this day.

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The regime’s bureaucratic, militaristic, Islamic, socialist, populist and Pan-Arabist background is reflected in various aspects of Egypt’s political life and has influenced its political elite for the past five decades. Political parties that have been allowed to play a role in the opposition have shared this ideological background, including more recently formed political movements like the Kifaya (“Enough”) Movement. Although the regime initially took a harsh stance towards

Kifaya, in the end it has tolerated it and allowed it to function because its ideological paradigm—a mix of Islamist and socialist principles—does not threaten the regime’s legitimacy at its core.

Liberal reformers, on the other hand, and the liberal school of thought, remain politically isolated. They are intentionally excluded from political life because they reflect the views of the pre-revolution elite. The space given to liberal writers, intellectuals and academics in public forums is virtually nonexistent compared to those articulating other ideas, particularly Islamism.

Regime Tactics to Squash Liberals

No liberal elements have been accepted into the regime’s political elite, with the exception of a small group of businessmen from whom the regime has sought to benefit through economic privatization. However, this group’s acceptance by the regime has been conditional upon its willingness to not challenge the underpinnings of the regime or demand any fundamental policy changes, including in economic policy. As a result, this group did not make any real contributions towards political reform; and even in the area of economic reform, progress has been stumbling. The Heritage Foundation/Wall Street Journal 2006 Index of Economic Freedom ranked Egypt below every country in the Arab World except Libya, Syria and Yemen, and compared to other countries outside the region, Egypt’s record is even more unimpressive: the survey ranked Egypt 128th out of the 157 countries that were considered in the study.

If the regime has not allowed liberal reformers to play a role in the ruling party, has not allowed them to express themselves in the opposition either. Of Egypt’s 19 opposition parties, the Wafd party is the only one that reflects a liberal influence from the pre-1952 era, but since its return to political life in the mid-1970s (after Egypt’s period of one-party rule), it has been subjected to a certain degree of control by the regime. Another example of a liberal party is the al-Ghad party of Ayman Nour, which was granted a license in October 2004. But just a few months later, the regime sought to restrict its influence. Recently, both liberal parties have been subjected to regime interference that has sowed internal divisions and weakened them considerably.

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Independent liberal writers and intellectuals face systematic restrictions on their freedom of expression, especially in the media. In this way, the regime deprives them of opportunities to challenge and revise the closed political discourse of the regime’s monolithic voice. Another tool used by the regime to contain liberal forces is to try to co-opt them with initiatives such the NDP’s Reform Committee that was established three years ago. As expected, the committee only ended up empowering a very small group of businessmen, as well as a small number of technocrats and academics who were sufficiently connected with the bureaucratic-security authorities to act as phony reformers. They transformed the committee into an interest group rather than a genuine vehicle for reform—which is why the conflict between the “old vs. new” within the NDP is in reality one over interests and influence, as opposed to over any meaningful reform agenda.

PROMOTE GENUINE POLITICAL REFORM IN EGYPT

Political Reform Should Be the Focus of Bilateral Relations with Egypt

The United States must give priority to political reform over issues that have traditionally been the focus of its relations with Egypt, such as economics, trade and Egypt's role in maintaining the regional status quo. When the United States focuses its efforts on these issues, it allows the regime to deflect attention from its poor performance with regards to political liberalization. In short, attention given to the economic sector has come at the expense of political reform.

Relations between Egypt and the United States rest on a weak foundation and have been reduced to Egypt's role in the Arab-Israeli Peace Process (with little achievement on this level) and intelligence sharing regarding terrorist cells and threats. But the regime's own policies create the social and political environment that breeds extremism and terrorism. Therefore, encouraging the regime to undertake genuine political reform and open up the political system is a much more effective a long-term strategy for reducing terrorism, which is a threat to the safety and stability of both countries.

The United States Must Revise its Approach to Democracy Promotion

America's traditional approach to promoting democracy in the Middle East has been based on two pillars: supporting civil society and pushing for "free and fair" elections. Both of these strategies have shown very limited results on a practical level, especially in Egypt. While the first strategy is appropriate for some Arab countries, it does not necessarily fit Egypt, because of the central and controlling role of the state, and the interference of the state security apparatus in political life which prevents civil society activists from leading a reform process and making any major progress from within. Likewise, reducing democracy to the ballot box in Egypt has unfairly empowered just one political power—the Islamists—without giving an equal chance to other political groups to be represented. This is unquestionably the result of the tight constraints the regime imposes on these secular political groups.

The right approach must begin with direct pressure on the regime to liberalize the political system and the media. Until this is done, the impact of current reform efforts by the United States and the international community will remain limited, and the burgeoning reform process risks grinding to a halt, jeopardizing the steps that have already been taken. U.S. strategy should focus on strengthening liberal democrats, not just the democratic process, and should focus on the following priorities:

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM TO EMPHASIZE LIBERAL AND SECULAR PRINCIPLES

Egypt's current constitution is built on contradictory principles and ideas, making it an incoherent mosaic. Some articles, such as the those that deal with civil rights, were carried over from Egypt's Liberal Age. Others, such as those that give the state a leading role in economic development, or require that workers and farmers represent 50 percent of Parliament, reflect the influence of socialism. And the constitution's endorsement of Shari'a as the main source of legislation makes it Islamist. Clearly, a complete revision is needed to make the constitution internally consistent, as well as to infuse it with a spirit of pluralism and more liberal and moderate, secular principles.

LEGAL REFORM TO OPEN UP THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Egypt's laws regarding political parties, political activities and civil society must be changed. For example, the current law regarding political parties requires that all new political parties endorse the same Islamic and socialist principles, impeding the revitalization of political life and preventing any true differentiation between parties. These laws should be revised to emphasize principles such as political freedom and pluralism, which would give new liberal, secular parties a chance to flourish, even if they do not yet have a strong popular base. New political parties based on liberal principles would inject into the public debate ideas that have long been missing from Egypt's political life, and ensure that it is no longer dominated exclusively by Islamist, pan-Arabic, populist and socialist rhetoric.

RESHAPE THE POLITICAL ELITE

Beyond urging the regime to change its policies, the United States must also encourage it to change who is responsible for implementing and consolidating them. Liberal figures must be brought into key government and media positions, so that they can lead the process of shaping and implementing reforms, modernizing the political discourse, and creating a political framework that will be more receptive to the democratic transition.

A specific example for how to do this is to change the selection process for key government positions. Currently, only individuals who are connected to the bureaucratic-security authorities, or who have technocratic backgrounds are considered. The regime must revise its recruitment process (even on a partial basis) to include new figures who are liberals and independent, and who can inject fresh ideas into the political system.

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While the United States has pressured the regime for years to include economic reformers in government, it has not done the same for political reformers. Yet, it is independent political reformers who have the real potential to push the reform process forward.

OPEN UP AND LIBERALIZE THE MEDIA

The state-run print and broadcast media should be liberalized so that the political discourse includes new perspectives, which will in turn accelerate change in other areas. Since the central authority of the state is so strong—and will likely remain so for a long time—privatizing the media is not the “magic solution” because the state would still be able to play a controlling role. While privatization may succeed in the long-term, the short-term focus should be to liberalize all the media. Because this sector has the largest impact on orienting public opinion and strongly defends the status quo, changing it is a real taboo.

While the state media has undertaken technical modernization, progress in the realm of discourse and rhetoric lags behind, as it still reflects the “one voice” of pan-Arabic, socialist, Islamist discourse which has dominated the Egyptian media for decades. The United States must urge the regime to give more space to diverse views in the press and media.

EMPOWER WOMEN

Empowering women politically deserves particular attention, since women remain marginalized from the political elite and are excluded from leadership roles. The 2005 annual Arab Strategic Report ranked Egypt at the bottom of the list with regards to the political and social status of women (75 out of a total 87). The report indicated that women in Egypt are completely barred from joining the main political structure and decision-making circles. This results from a culture of discrimination, which in turn fuels more fanatic and extremist tendencies which allow Islamic extremists to gain ground in Egyptian society.

The regime must be pressured to include more women in key leadership positions, including at the highest levels of policy-making. Even if this process begins modestly, at least it would begin to change the traditional, patriarchal mentality that prevails in Egyptian politics. In addition, new laws should be enacted to guarantee a higher representation of women in political institutions such as the government, the state-owned media, administrative boards, and Parliament. Currently, only 1.6 percent of members of Parliament are women. In the 1970s, 30 out of the 444 seats in Parliament were guaranteed for women, but this law was revoked in the early 1980s.

REVISE THE ROLE OF THE SECURITY APPARATUS IN POLITICAL LIFE

Egyptian political life suffers from the growing role of the security apparatus, which has no limits on its ability to manipulate politics. This does not refer to the visible clashes between police forces and political demonstrators, but to the way in which security forces control all aspects of political life, from the basic structure of the ruling party to the recruitment process for all public offices and institutions, including the media. Unless the security establishment is separated from political life, the political system will never open up.

CONCLUSION

The policy recommended in this paper is not revolutionary, but rather consists of a realistic approach for transforming the regime from within by promoting liberal ideas and figures in Egyptian politics. This has the potential not only to change Egypt's internal political situation, but would also enable Egypt to pave the way for a regional transformation towards a more open, moderate, stable, and peaceful environment.

On a regional level, the stagnant political environment that prevailed for decades has been broken, and there is currently a momentum for change throughout the entire Middle East. Discourse and debate on political reform is at its peak, both internally and externally.

For years, Palestinian-Israeli peace has remained unachievable, and the recent ascendance of Hamas casts new doubt on the prospect for peace. The situation in Iraq is unstable, Syria presents a greater challenge than before, and Arab satellite stations are at the peak of radicalizing viewers. All of these factors necessitate a moderate state in the region with a more sophisticated agenda, one which could serve as a cornerstone for promoting a liberal, moderate discourse. Egypt has the potential to play this leading role, and to this give real meaning and effectiveness to the American strategy of fostering democracy in the Middle East.

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