

Confronting Egypt's Dangerous Decline

by Issandr El Amrani

SUMMARY

Egypt's recent parliamentary elections and the exacerbation of sectarian tensions with the Alexandria church bombing confirm fears that the Egyptian regime has little interest in genuine reform and that its attempts to maintain stability through repression are failing.

Efforts by both the Bush and Obama administrations since 2006 to encourage political reform and address human rights concerns have essentially been ignored by the Egyptian government, demonstrating the need for an alternative framework for U.S. engagement with Egypt on these issues.

Although radical changes to the underpinnings of the U.S.-Egypt relationship are unlikely at this time, the U.S. can and should take modest but meaningful steps in 2011 to uphold the credibility of its democracy promotion goals in the country.

These should include enhancing engagement with a variety of Egyptian opposition actors, downgrading U.S. relations with institutions such as the People's Assembly, and encouraging the Egyptian government to address key concerns of the Coptic community.

At the outset of 2011, the political scene in Egypt appears bleak. Egyptians began the new year with tragedy: a brutal bomb attack on an Alexandria church during New Year's mass exacerbated already rising sectarian tensions. Meanwhile, Egypt's recent parliamentary elections confirmed fears that the Egyptian government has no interest in reform, but is instead closing political space ahead of this year's presidential elections and a looming leadership transition. After years of half-hearted attempts by two U.S. administrations to promote democratic reform and human rights in Egypt, these unabashedly fraudulent elections clearly show that such efforts have been insufficient. In addition, the recent violence and ensuing anger towards the Egyptian government demonstrate its inability to maintain stability through repression, underscoring the need for the United States to readjust its democracy promotion efforts in the context of the broader bilateral relationship.

Given the importance of Egyptian cooperation on counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and military coordination, the U.S. is reluctant to put overt pressure on Cairo, particularly if it will result in little gain. Nonetheless, Egypt's political stagnation has diminished the country's influence in the region and called into question its strategic value for the United States. As such, the administration should make clear but measured changes to the current policy, which will send a consistent message from Washington that not only is the U.S. committed to greater political pluralism, better governance and an improved human rights climate in Egypt, but that the absence of progress in these areas will inevitably lead to a downgrading of Egypt's importance for the United States.

THE LATEST SIGNS OF REGRESSION

The Alexandria bombing, which killed 23 and injured 96, is the latest and most alarming indicator of Egypt's worsening political climate. It is not merely the attack itself that is troubling, but also the recriminations and the rioting that have ensued. In recent months, the Coptic Christian minority has become more assertive in voicing its anger at the government for inadequate protection and increasing discrimination. While the grievances of this community are unique, it is just one of many Egyptian groups that have grown ever more indignant at the state. The latest sectarian violence comes at a time when Egyptians are still reeling from parliamentary elections marred by a level of fraud and intimidation not seen in years.

That the elections were flawed was not surprising: since 2006, elections have

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become increasingly fraudulent as President Hosni Mubarak’s regime reverses the modest political opening of 2004 and 2005. This is in part because judicial supervision over the electoral process, which had earned popular trust, has been replaced by a weak and illegitimate High Election Commission. The commission was created through a controversial package of constitutional amendments in 2007 that was not endorsed by the opposition.

In the lead-up to the elections, the government restricted media, arrested thousands of Muslim Brotherhood candidates, and resisted calls by the international community to allow international election observers, while severely limiting the number of permits for local monitors. The pre-election climate was so repressive that administrative courts ruled to cancel elections in several districts, which the Interior Ministry ignored.

Despite this backdrop, the flagrancy of the violations went beyond what anyone anticipated, leading the Muslim Brotherhood and Wafd Party to withdraw after the first round. Local civil society monitors — most of whom were barred from entering polling stations— reported direct interference of security forces against opposition candidates, widespread vote buying, and blatant ballot rigging. These measures enabled the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) to capture 93 percent of seats compared with 73 percent in the previous People’s Assembly.

In the wake of such controversy, many questioned the legitimacy of the new parliament and sought ways to discredit it. Several opposition groups announced the formation of a parallel parliament, while others challenged the legality of the People’s Assembly by filing lawsuits. The Coptic community, which has generally supported the NDP in return for protection, decried its lack of representation in the new parliament and the arrest of hundreds of Copts who protested an order to halt construction on a church in Giza. Despite these appeals, the regime has defended the conduct of the elections and appears intent on full domination of the political scene.

The elections and the escalation of sectarian tensions are not merely indicators of regression, but the most recent and egregious signs that on the one hand, the Egyptian regime has little interest in genuine political reform and on the other, its efforts to maintain stability by repressing an increasingly disgruntled populace are failing.

U.S. SUPPORT FOR REFORM INCONSISTENT AND INEFFECTIVE

When President George W. Bush identified Egypt as a core target of the Freedom Agenda in his 2005 State of the Union speech, democratic development in Egypt gained greater prominence than at any time since the U.S.-Egypt alliance was cemented in 1975. In addition to exerting public pressure on Cairo, the Bush administration offered incentives for political reform, modeled on successful efforts to encourage economic reform in 2004. It also carried out punitive measures, such as ending negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement in response to the incarceration of opposition leader Ayman Nour, and delaying the delivery of economic and military aid.

But by early 2006, after elections had resulted in victories for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in the Palestinian territories, the Bush administration abandoned serious democracy promotion. Even when Congress conditioned \$100 million of Egypt's 2008 military aid package on progress toward curbing police abuses, increasing the independence of the judiciary, and preventing weapons smuggling into Gaza, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice quickly exercised an option to waive all conditions.

By the time Barack Obama took office in 2009, democratic reform in Egypt had already been relegated to secondary importance. As such, the oft-heard claim that the Obama administration made a radical break with democracy promotion in its Egypt policy is patently untrue. Nonetheless, Obama's priorities in Egypt have disappointed democracy activists. Initially, the Obama administration downgraded human rights concerns in an effort to repair what it saw as a relationship "damaged" during the Bush years. In the summer of 2009, the U.S. and Egypt initiated a new Strategic Dialogue, thus boosting the bilateral relationship. During these talks, Washington endorsed Cairo's central role in addressing inter-Palestinian divisions and in mediating with Hamas as part of resolving the larger Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Moreover, in choosing Cairo as the location of his first major diplomatic initiative towards the Muslim world in June 2009, Obama signaled that Egypt had regained its privileged position as a key U.S. ally. Although Obama also extolled American preference for democracy and religious freedom in this platform, he spoke from a country undergoing an important regression in its political space — sending an inherently mixed message.

The administration has also sent contradictory messages through its economic assistance to Egypt. While funding for certain democracy promotion programs, notably under the Middle East Partnership Initiative, has increased, the administration has also returned to the past U.S. practice of effectively giving the Egyptian government the right to designate civil society recipients of USAID funding.

Although democratic reform appeared to be absent from the U.S.-Egypt relationship for most of 2009, the Obama administration has since begun pressing the Egyptian government on this issue. Prior to the parliamentary elections, the Obama administration made repeated pronouncements that it hoped they would be free and fair, and monitored by both domestic and international observers. These appeals were ignored or rejected outright by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an unacceptable form of "foreign interference." Such statements underline the unwillingness of Egypt to show even token consideration for U.S. democracy promotion goals.

A FRESH APPROACH NEEDED

Immediately following the parliamentary elections, the State Department and White House issued statements expressing their disappointment. Soon thereafter, Assistant Secretary of State Michael Posner urged the Egyptian

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government to implement promised political reforms in a *Washington Post* op-ed. While these realistic post-election assessments are welcome, they are reminiscent of statements issued before the elections that clearly failed to impact the Egyptian government’s behavior. Unsurprisingly, the Egyptian regime has once again dismissed such comments as foreign meddling.

Thus far, efforts at elevating democratic reform and human rights concerns on the U.S. policy agenda have been inconsistent and insufficient. In the absence of tangible policy changes, Egypt will not be compelled to initiate major reforms, especially before presidential elections later this year. But an Egyptian regime that clings to outdated institutions while stifling political freedom lacks the dynamism to lead the region as it once did, diminishing the country’s importance as a strategic ally for the United States. Moreover, the recent escalation of violence casts serious doubt on the ability of the Mubarak regime to even ensure basic stability through repression.

The inability of the U.S. government to successfully promote reform underscores the need to more broadly recalibrate the relationship. No U.S. administration in the last two decades has been willing to consider a change in approach to the foundations of Egypt-U.S. relations, most notably the Camp David accords and the accompanying military and economic aid packages to Israel and Egypt. This has remained true despite the fact that, after more than 30 years of peace between Egypt and Israel and increased Egyptian-Israeli security and economic ties, the risk of renewed conflict between the two countries is negligible. Moving beyond the Camp David basis to Egypt-U.S. relations would allow for a fresh start, freeing U.S. policymakers to seek a relationship based on both Egypt’s strategic value to the United States (e.g. Suez Canal and Egyptian overflight and refueling services for the U.S. Air Force) and on democracy and development goals.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Such radical changes to the current U.S. approach are unlikely, especially in the short-term. Nonetheless, policymakers should immediately begin developing an alternative framework for engaging with Egypt, building on existing military cooperation and intelligence-sharing efforts rather than Egyptian-Israeli relations or the Arab-Israeli conflict. The United States could also send a signal that the current sense of entitlement felt by Egyptian officials is misplaced by commissioning a study from the departments of State and Defense to examine policy alternatives.

In the meantime, the Obama administration may consider more modest steps. Cairo’s management of the elections and the troubling implications of the recent violence in Alexandria make a counter-response necessary to maintain the credibility of U.S. democracy promotion. A response in 2011 could include the following four actions:

- *Endorse more explicitly goals widely shared by the Egyptian opposition, such as the National Association for Change’s six-point list for reform.*
The post-election political climate has provided an opportunity for the

movement led by Mohammed ElBaradei to help unify the opposition. For more than a decade, a credible opposition force has been absent in Egypt. While Washington should refrain from backing specific candidates and parties, it should encourage the opening of political space that would allow the formation of an effective opposition alliance. Such an alliance may in time present a coherent proposal for reform - even if it includes political forces like Islamists and the far left who are hostile to U.S. foreign policy.

- ***Downgrade relations with the Egyptian People’s Assembly in recognition of its lack of legitimacy after the last election.*** This could range from ceasing USAID projects with the People’s Assembly to not scheduling meetings between U.S. and Egyptian parliamentary representatives. Meetings with NDP personnel can be arranged in any case in their capacity as party officials rather than elected officials.
- ***Adopt a policy of meeting regularly with all nonviolent opposition voices including movements not officially sanctioned by the Egyptian government.*** Until now, the Embassy has most often met with members of official opposition parties and, in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, has generally met only with leaders in their capacity as elected members of parliament. U.S. visitors including congressional delegations should also be encouraged to meet with representatives of any credible opposition, and especially with independent leaders such as Mohammed ElBaradei. The status of Mr. ElBaradei as a Nobel Prize winner also provides a ready-made pretext for a meeting with fellow laureate President Obama.
- ***Stress to the government of Egypt the importance of addressing key concerns of the Coptic community, including the passage of a long-awaited unified law on places of worship.*** This law would give Christians the same rights to build and repair churches that the Muslim majority currently enjoys with regard to mosques. Although President Obama was quick to condemn the Alexandria bombing and the U.S. deserves credit for consistently stressing its concerns with regard to sectarian issues, the recent escalation highlights the need for concrete steps by the Egyptian government.

CONCLUSION

The U.S. needs to send a strong, clear signal to both the regime and Egyptian reformers that addressing political reform and human rights concerns in Egypt is a priority. Given the recent shift in Congress, the Obama administration will not have the political capital to press for radical changes that would separate the U.S.-Egypt relationship from the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nonetheless, the administration can make meaningful course corrections to existing policies, particularly by empowering a nascent opposition whose prospects for unification are stronger in the aftermath of fraudulent elections. The government of Egypt, after its most poorly conducted parliamentary election in decades and its failure to address escalating sectarian tensions, has offered Washington an opportunity to resolve the ambiguities and contradictions of its current approach.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process. Through dialogue, research, and advocacy, we work to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support democratic reform in the Middle East.

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