

Democracy & Society

A PUBLICATION of the CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY and CIVIL SOCIETY

Promoting Democracy in Egypt

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Even though President Obama's historic speech in Cairo last June was widely perceived as a "home run," the sections of the speech on democracy were riddled with ambiguity and ambivalence. It left many people wondering what, practically speaking, the fate of democracy promotion under the current administration would be, particularly in Egypt. Until the speech, little more than silence had come publicly from the Obama administration on the issue of democracy promotion in the Middle East, which led many to believe that the failures of the Bush administration in this regard had definitively closed that door for a while. In fact, the few early signs that came from the administration indicated a conspicuous attempt to undo Bush's democracy promotion efforts and to re-establish strong diplomatic ties with U.S. "allies" in the region around the 3 D's: development, defense, and diplomacy. This new policy of "pragmatism" was underscored when Obama contacted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on the first day of his presidency to consult on the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as by Secretary of State Clinton's remarks during a March visit to Egypt mentioning her friendship with the Mubaraks and downplaying the country's serious human rights violations. Despite this seeming retreat, some activists continued to hope, counting on President Obama's personal experience as a community organizer and his campaign's rhetorical commitment to human rights and dignity.

Despite its relative quiet regarding democracy assistance, the Obama administration has mostly continued the Bush-era programs. In its 2010 budget request, the administration asked for a 10 percent increase in its Middle East democracy and governance programs. But Egypt is the exception to this trend. During the congressional appropriations process in March and the president's subsequent budget request, this funding for Egypt was cut by an unprecedented 60 percent.

Some analysts believe that the Obama administration is headed toward eliminating democracy assistance to Egypt in favor of efforts to aid development. A few prominent Middle East scholars have come out publicly in favor of this trend, arguing that democracy assistance to Egypt has failed, and that U.S. aid should be funneled solely into economic development efforts. They argue that the exclusive focus on development would lead to concrete advancements in the social, economic, and educational spheres, creating an informed and engaged citizenry that could more effectively drive

democratic reform. But while it is true many of the democracy support programs under Bush were naïve and poorly designed, that is a weak argument for abandoning them completely. On the contrary, the failures in promoting democratic reform under the Bush administration warrant greater engagement now on political reform, especially since Egypt is a remarkably influential country in the region.

Looking Ahead

Egypt, with its population of 80 million, is the trendsetting heart of the Arab and Muslim worlds. As home to Jews, Baha'is, Shi'ites, and the largest Christian population in the Middle East, Egypt was until the early- to mid- 20th century a symbol of vibrant (albeit imperfect) pluralism.

But now it is a breeding ground for religious intolerance. Egyptian society, fueled by a government complicit in increased sectarianism, has adopted a worldview that is increasingly centered on religion. Under the Mubarak regime, sectarianism has witnessed unprecedented growth, culminating in acts of violence against religious minorities and marked by government unwillingness to address inequalities substantively or extend the equal protection of the law to all religious minorities.

And since the assassination of President Sadat 28 years ago, Egypt has been ruled by emergency laws which suspend the basic rights of the people. Torture, arbitrary detentions, and unwarranted military tribunals of civilians all combine to fuel extremist sentiment and popular sympathy for it.

Meanwhile, the Mubarak regime derives its international legitimacy from a false political dualism that offers the international community only two choices for Egyptian governance: the current regime, or Islamic extremists. This dichotomy does not represent Egyptians' real political beliefs; more than 77 percent of Egyptians refused to vote in the last parliamentary election because they were not offered a middle path. The regime has destroyed all secular, liberal political parties that might present a stronger appeal to the population. And since there is no official plan for presidential succession in Egypt, the argument that 81-year-old Mubarak is the only stable option for the country may prove a risky proposition.

At the same time, U.S.-backed autocrats like Mubarak continue to feed the ideology of extremists not just in Egypt, but across the region. Rhetoric decrying Arab autocrats' mistreatment of their peoples is a permanent feature in the speeches of figures like Osama Bin Laden and Hassan Nasrallah, because they know it resonates powerfully with the peoples of the region.

Internationally, Egypt has become active in a growing network of alliances among dictators, blocking efforts to ensure international human rights enforcement in entities like the United Nations (UN). Recently, Egypt banded with other autocracies to reject the Democracy Coalition Project's application to gain consultative status at the Economic and Social Council of the UN.

While the U.S.-Egyptian alliance is important and often mutually beneficial, Mubarak has delivered little in terms of substantive advancement on regional peace with Israel. He has also failed to deliver on internal development, as Egypt has witnessed regression on numerous development indicators under Mubarak's 28 year tenure.

If the West wants -- as do many Egyptians -- a credible alternative to the religiously inspired political movements in Egypt, a true commitment to decreasing sectarian tensions, and a stable partner in promoting regional interests and peace, it must support democratic forces in their efforts to organize and carve out an inclusive and participatory political space. Not only is support for the legitimate democratic aspirations of the Egyptian people in the strategic interest of the United States, but backtracking now on democracy promotion simply rewards the regime for its brutal crackdown against secular democracy activists. There is no reason why pursuing strategic interests should come at the expense of sound and effective democracy promotion policies; in fact, seeking both simultaneously will strengthen each other.

How to Move Forward

As critical as development assistance is, the truth is that development aid has allowed an autocratic and corrupt regime to prevent the formation of an open society that would foster homegrown

economic development, foreign investment, and democratic citizen engagement. Meanwhile, effective support for political reform in 2004 and 2005 had the concrete effect of assisting in the formation of precisely the robust constituency for change and growth that would successfully drive positive reform if sustained.

While change comes from within, it can be supported from the outside, and giving up on democracy promotion programs and policy in favor of "technical assistance" would simply consolidate the extremely unpopular status quo. If the U.S. and the community of democracies remain neutral on issues of democracy in Egypt, this will amount to a de facto endorsement of repression.

The early success, and ultimate failure, of U.S. pressures on Egypt in 2005 proved one very important fact: strong verbal support for political reform and for the efforts of activists, coupled with consistent (non-military) action, is an effective tool for democracy promotion. This type of democracy promotion is compatible with other U.S. interests; at no point during this brief opening did Egyptian cooperation on vital U.S. regional interests stop.

In order to avoid charges of interventionism, the U.S. and the West should not take the side of particular political actors, but instead support reforms that enjoy wide support among the population. These include reforms that Mubarak himself pledged to undertake in his last presidential campaign, like repealing emergency law and other restrictive legislation; upholding the rule of law and an independent judiciary; lifting the restrictions on political parties and civil society; supporting a free media; and increasing governmental accountability. While programs that aid impoverished farmers are essential and should continue, no less critical are governance programs aimed at promoting basic rights and a peaceful transition to democracy.

Other ways of moving forward include helping to effect a more genuine political process that eliminates the current dichotomy of autocrats versus theocrats and encourages a more accurate representation of the Egyptian political landscape. This will require applying pressure to eliminate laws and practices that restrict the registration and operation of civil society organizations, political

parties, and other political forces. This may include Islamists, provided that they are committed to the democratic process beyond mere rhetoric and demonstrate respect for the rule of law, human rights, and equality of all citizens before the law. The process of expanding Egypt's political space should ultimately contribute to the participation of diverse candidates in the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2010, as well as the presidential election of 2011. Western powers should push for transparency and local and international monitoring in both elections.

The U.S. administration should establish a regular forum on U.S.-Egyptian bilateral relations where a new strategic dialogue to address issues of political reform can take place. This forum should monitor and engage regularly with the Egyptian government and defend human rights activists when they are persecuted, both publicly and privately. It should also include regular consultations with independent civil society actors.

Efforts to promote political reform are most successful when pursued in a multilateral framework. The relationship Egypt enjoys with Europe avoids some of the pitfalls associated with an exclusive U.S.-Egypt relationship in this regard, and it has had past success in supporting Egyptian civil society. Europe and the U.S. should join forces to create positive incentives for reform. This multilateral framework for human rights protection should include international organizations and non-governmental actors. Joint action should be directed at pressuring Egypt to abide by its existing treaty and convention commitments, with positive incentives built in for adherence to those commitments. Undoubtedly, this requires the U.S. and participating governments to set an example themselves. For instance, Obama's renewal of the U.S. policy of no tolerance for torture helps restore U.S. credibility and moral standing and allows it to apply this kind of pressure.

Because the Egyptian government has been successful in stalling on reform in the past, the U.S. government should consider offering new financial incentives such as trade advantages in exchange for advances in political reform. Well-crafted but tough incentives along the lines of the Helsinki Accords, which led to the fall of dictators in Eastern Europe, should also be considered as a model. Benchmarks for advancements should be based on those of international rights organizations or be

intelligently negotiated, and should be tied to an established time table. Progress on those benchmarks should be closely monitored and assessed by the proposed political reform forum. Egypt's inclusion in the global market and its status as a key diplomatic player on the world stage should be tied to its commitment on democracy and human rights.

Conclusion

With the initial euphoria now having generally waned in the aftermath of the Cairo speech, President Obama is nonetheless still to be commended for raising democracy as one of the key issues in his message. But his abstract treatment of the subject has left many activists and pro-reform advocates feeling that it was nothing more than an exercise in public relations that lacked substance and vision. Moving forward, Obama needs to take steps to demonstrate that this reaching out is sincere, is directed to the people and for their betterment, and is not simply an exercise in appeasement with the same underlying motivation to maintain the status quo.

The challenge with Egypt is real, and will require serious, ongoing commitment, including financial support. Now is not the time to decrease democracy assistance funding. With an upcoming presidential succession in Egypt, now is the time to transfer Obama's words into real action, and demonstrate support for the legitimate aspirations of Egyptians for freedom. This will have important ramifications not just for Egyptian society, but for broader regional and global security goals.