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# Stalled Reform: The Case of Egypt

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In November, politically engaged Egyptians and other Arabs watched the American midterm elections transfixed by the victory of the opposition. This memorable example of democracy at work was all the more notable because it came at a time when the United States seems to have lost enthusiasm for promoting political reform and democracy in Arab states.

The promotion of democracy in the Middle East has been a focus of the Bush administration. It was the centerpiece of the president’s 2005 inaugural address, in which he declared: “It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.” While the democracy initiative provoked extraordinary skepticism in the Arab world about US motives, it also produced considerable excitement and healthy debate. Authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and several of the smaller Gulf states responded to American demands by actually opening up more space for free debate, and even allowed freer elections than are customary. In Saudi Arabia, municipal elections were allowed for the first time.

Democratic activists in the region embraced and applauded George W. Bush’s rejection of the premise that only stability serves US interests and his focus instead on promoting freedom. The US emphasis on democracy empowered reformers to expand their activities and to speak out more openly. Equally important, with America looking over their shoulders, Middle Eastern rulers were begrudgingly cautious about quashing dissent.

They were, that is, until recently. While wooden official statements from Washington insist that democratic reform remains the US agenda, few

people in the Arab world today take this boilerplate seriously. Instead, especially in the wake of elections in Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt, where Islamist figures hostile to US interests have won office, there is little doubt that the United States is backing away from its agenda. Not surprisingly, crackdowns on democratic activists are again on the rise.

## PRIVILEGED ISLAMISTS

An interesting anomaly thus emerges: although authoritarian regimes in the Middle East treat Islamists harshly, the Islamists are given much more political space than are liberal reformers. Reformers are arrested and physically mistreated and their activities are often declared illegal. It is the Islamists who enjoy privileged access to the media and who are even permitted, within limits, to campaign for political office.

In Egypt, this policy may be traced to the presidency of Anwar Sadat, who was strongly sympathetic to the Islamist group the Muslim Brothers. When Sadat entered office in 1970, after the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser, few observers expected him to stay in power. Sadat, however, made overtures to the religious right, reflecting his own social origins, and allowed the Islamists to operate more or less openly, including on university campuses, where Muslim associations grew explosively.

While Sadat is often credited with opening up political parties in Egypt, he did so in a very modest way. The most enduring domestic legacy of his presidency is the increasing Islamization of Egypt, including an amendment to the Egyptian constitution proclaiming that Islamic law (Sharia) is the “main source” of law. This represented a significant departure from the liberal legacy of Egypt’s 1923 constitution.

In the past quarter-century, which is to say during the tenure of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt has witnessed a steady process of Islamization with significant state complicity. Islamist parties today enjoy privileged access to the political system. Indeed, a tacit and

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in some ways bizarre alliance persists between the regime and the formally banned Society of Muslim Brothers (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun).

The Ikhwan never reveal how many members their society has, and outsiders tend to exaggerate its membership. If it were true that the Muslim Brothers represent the strongest political faction, as is occasionally assumed, the whole political scene would be very different. The Muslim Brothers do not have the potential to overthrow the regime or to take over the political system entirely. While the Ikhwan did well in Egypt's November 2005 parliamentary elections, winning 88 of 454 seats, these gains occurred in a system in which the regime does not permit viable secular parties to operate. Many of the votes for the Ikhwan were protest votes that would be allocated differently if the political system offered real choice.

The political elite in Egypt today is restricted to those who are well connected to the bureaucratic-security apparatus. This elite excludes almost all genuine liberals, almost all women, and Coptic Christians (who account for 5 to 10 percent of the population). Egypt exhibits no more than a superficial multiparty system. Outside of the hegemonic National Democratic Party (NDP), the 19 approved political parties are small, docile, and not influential. The regime permits them to play no more than a cosmetic role.

Even new parties typically offer policies similar to those of the NDP, as is the case with the "opposition" Kefaya ("Enough") movement, which favors a blend of Islamism and socialism. Not only is all political life under surveillance and control, but the regime also controls approval of new parties. The generically named Political Party Committee, actually an organ of the NDP, routinely disapproves applications for party registration.

As the US commitment to substantive reform has waned, Egypt's liberal activists find themselves subject to increasing surveillance and intimidation from state security services. The Mukhabarat, an intelligence agency, may conduct intimidating "conversations" with reformists. Mild criticism of the regime is sometimes met with veiled threats. It may be hinted that meetings with American officials will be understood as potentially disloyal, and should be curtailed. In general, outsiders tend to underestimate the extent and reach of the security apparatus. Over the past year, ruling elites across the Middle East have felt freer to clamp down, particularly on lib-

eral reformers. In some notorious cases in Egypt and Syria, the response has been harsh and unforgiving.

REPRESSED REFORMISTS

In contrast to the interdependent relationship between the Egyptian government and the Islamists—defined by clashes over power-sharing but not over ideology—the relationship between the regime and liberal reformers is marked by a clear disagreement over political principles. As a result, the conflict between the regime and liberals is much fiercer than that with the Ikhwan.

Representatives of the regime like to present a simple model of political attitudes, according to which there are those who support the political status quo and those who wish to make Egypt an Islamic republic. This bifurcation totally ignores the millions of Egyptians who endorse neither the Muslim Brothers nor the present security state.

Egypt boasted at least the rudiments of a liberal political system before the military coup of 1952, and many educated Egyptians recall that period with affection and longing. If the zenith of the liberal era was the 1923 constitution, Egyptian constitutional law since then has become an admixture of liberal and

populist provisions, often capriciously applied. One reminder of the populist origins of the regime that came to power in 1952 is a provision added to the constitution requiring that half of all members of parliament be peasants or workers.

Today, Egypt's non-Islamist opposition finds that nearly any serious effort to organize politically is snuffed out by the regime, and access to the state-controlled media is typically prevented. Why is this so? Because, as in other Middle Eastern countries, Islamists are unlikely to be regarded by the United States and other major Western powers as a palatable alternative to the existing regimes. So who cares if they are afforded space in the arena of ideas? This allows government officials to wag their fingers at the Americans, mumble " Hamas," and say, "Is that what you want?" It suits the interests of the rulers that the Americans should hear only one credible voice in opposition, uttering views that are considered dangerous. The legitimization of thoughtful, committed, liberal reformers who give voice to an attractive, secular, alternative view of politics is to be avoided at all costs.

Until 2005, presidential elections in Egypt were plebiscites in which voters, for all practical pur-

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poses, affirmed or rejected the candidate as president-for-life. The reality of a contested election in 2005 momentarily provided an uncommon and healthy political debate in Egypt. But the taste of democracy did not last long.

The constitutional revision that permitted contested elections is so restrictive that, unless it is revised, it is unlikely that there will even be a competitor in the next election. As a result, the parliament is now engaged in amending its amendment to ensure that there is the appearance of competition. Egyptians widely view this move as a preparatory measure for the ascendance of the president's son, Gamal, to the presidency. This is far from the model of free elections that Americans often have in mind when they think of political reform. Unfortunately, even the most efficiently run and elegantly designed elections contribute little to human freedom unless they occur in a context where men's and women's rights are not just acknowledged but respected.

Political reform is not an all-or-nothing issue. It is an incremental process of change that seeks to foster a diverse marketplace of ideas in which serious economic, social, and political problems may be addressed freely. This cannot occur unless the grip of the state's security machinery is loosened. Reformers do not seek to replace or topple governments but to foster freer, more inclusive governance. This requires that the sponsors of reform display patience and a firm commitment to fundamental goals. In contrast, the United States clearly expected the diplomatic equivalent of instant gratification in Iraq and Palestine, as though an election could magically transform a political climate through "creative chaos" and reverse decades of autocratic political engineering.

### AMERICAN LEVERAGE

A more fruitful approach would emphasize the sustained promotion and protection of liberal rights and freedoms. Now is a moment for supporters of Egypt, not least the United States, to insist firmly that the presidential succession process, however it may be designed, includes palpable liberal reform. This means there must be demonstrably increased respect for the rights and freedoms of individuals and their ability to organize politically, as well as measures to ensure that the state media in Egypt cease being simply an instrument for regime propaganda and Islamization.

American policy makers need to remember that they have significant potential leverage with Egypt, the recipient of about \$2 billion in annual US aid.

This assistance effectively subsidizes authoritarianism in Egypt and anti-Americanism in the media, and the annual aid would not be easily replaced if it were reduced.

This fact was driven home in November 2006, when a large state delegation led by President Mubarak visited China. Expectations ran high that Mubarak would bring back lucrative economic agreements. Talks did produce various statements and references to realms of cooperation. But the delegation returned home with empty hands. The distressing truth is that Egypt is simply not competitive in an international marketplace where efficiency, technical sophistication, and quality control are expected. The Chinese are interested in beneficial partnerships and trade relationships; they are hardly anxious to provide Egypt blank checks.

Egypt remains plagued by a stultified economic system as well as a calcified political system, both of which reflect the paucity of political reform in the country. The 2006 Index of Economic Freedom produced by the Heritage Foundation and *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, finds Egypt below every country in the Arab world except Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and in the bottom quartile globally.

The United States needs to stop fighting itself, which is exactly what it does when it turns a blind eye to regimes that make nice in closed-door meetings but afterwards actively oppose much if not all of the US agenda. Sustained progress toward freedom is a crucial objective not only for American foreign policy but also for the people who live in the Middle East. The United States needs to recommit itself to promoting reform and liberty, and insist on concrete changes in the laws of the states in which it promotes reform. In Egypt, for instance, a quarter-century after the assassination of Sadat, is it unreasonable to expect that emergency security laws might be lifted?

As Iraq shows so tragically, stability is crucial for positive change to occur. However, this does not mean that returning to business-as-usual static stability is the answer. Instead, the United States should emphasize a dynamic stability that valorizes orderly change and the opening of political space—the marketplace of ideas that is a fundamental component of reform. Chief among goals in the region should be the promotion of freedom built on shared values that respect the dignity of the individual. The United States needs to start in those countries where it has the most influence, especially in Egypt, which might indeed provide a model for the entire Middle East. ■

