

WebMemo



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Bringing Freedom and Stability to Egypt

James Phillips

Rocked by escalating protests, on Friday embattled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak announced he would appoint a new government. Mubarak's eleventh-hour attempt to embrace reform is unlikely to appease the growing opposition, which includes a broad spectrum of diverse political groups. Egypt, an important American ally, is likely to plunge into much deeper political uncertainty as the power struggle intensifies.

The U.S. should demand that any new government that emerges act in the best interest of the Egyptian people—ending violence and putting the nation on a path to a free civil society and more liberal economy. This is the surest means to meet the needs and aspirations of the Egyptian people and retain an important ally and a force for peace and stability in a tumultuous region.

Status Quo Unlikely to Return. The United States has pressed Mubarak for years to open up Egypt's political system with minimal results. Egypt's current troubles are a legacy of a repressed civil society and lack of economic freedom. The regime in Cairo bears much of the responsibility for the anger in the streets.

It is not assured, however, that protests against the regime will inevitably lead to greater liberty in Egypt. Egypt's populist protest movement is an ad hoc coalition of disparate political groups united only by their opposition to the current regime. Many factions within this broad coalition of protest groups (such as the April 6 Movement) have cast their demands in pro-democracy rhetoric. However, some groups harbor Islamist goals that are incompatible with genuine democracy, and there is a

distinct danger that the anti-Western Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's biggest and best-organized political group, will be well-positioned to hijack the revolt. The Muslim Brotherhood now undoubtedly sees a golden opportunity to exploit the mushrooming political unrest to replace the Mubarak regime with an interim government that the Islamists hope to dominate. This would ultimately be a disaster for freedom in Egypt, as the Brotherhood would seek to impose an Islamist and anti-American agenda on the Egyptian people.

Washington should focus its efforts on helping Egyptians build a free society led by a responsive and responsible government. This is an extremely difficult and risky task, given the lack of a genuine democratic tradition in Egypt, growing economic and social problems, and a quickly expanding population.

The Way Forward. The surest path to a stable and free political system lies in a gradual evolutionary process, but the Mubarak regime has squandered that opportunity despite years of American economic aid, support for civil society groups, and diplomatic cajoling. Egyptians are now confronted with the need for much more rapid and drastic reforms in a tense and overheated atmosphere that favors the ascendancy of radical groups over moderate reformers.

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(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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The most constructive role that the U.S. can serve is to make clear its expectations that any government that emerges from the current crisis will respect the freedom and human rights of Egyptians. If Egypt's army—the backbone of all of its governments since Egypt's 1952 coup—takes power, then Washington should encourage it to pledge to return power to a civilian government after a new constitution that is broadly acceptable to Egyptians is devised.

To give Egyptians the greatest possible prospects for liberty, the Obama Administration should seek to press any government that emerges to:

- Pledge to minimize the use of force and the loss of life in its efforts to restore order;
- Agree to open up the political system to allow meaningful participation by Egyptian citizens in forming a representative government;
- Restore Internet service and access to the world; and

- Release opposition leader Mohamed ElBaradei from house arrest.

The Obama Administration should review U.S. assistance to Egypt and make further assistance contingent upon undertaking these actions.

Helping a Friend in a Time of Need. Egypt has long been a friend of the United States, and America has long been a champion for the cause of liberty and economic freedoms in the Middle East. During these troubling and difficult times, the United States has a special obligation to assist the Egyptian people in their time of need. To do so, Washington should make future aid to whatever government emerges from this crisis contingent on that government's respect for the freedom of Egypt's long-suffering citizens.

—*James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*