

What should U.S. do about Egypt? Very little.

By Ted Galen Carpenter

Though the spectacular events in **Cairo** have ended with **Hosni Mubarak** stepping down, pundits on both the left and the right increasingly chide the Obama administration for not being more supportive of popular movements challenging authoritarian regimes in the **Middle East**.

Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, proponents of a more high-profile U.S. role on behalf of democracy in the Muslim world cite Washington's strong (and ultimately successful) support for **Poland's Solidarity** movement and other anti-Soviet campaigns in the latter stages of the **Cold War**.

But with the uprising in **Egypt** likely to embolden other democratic movements in the region — and with pressure sure to remain on the Obama administration to openly support them — Beltway types would do well to keep in mind the very different perception of the U.S. in Eastern **Europe** circa 1989 versus the present-day Middle East.

Why less is more

In the face of an intense media appetite for sweeping **White House** pronouncements about events in the region, the administration's best course is to resist temptation, and embrace a policy of saying and doing less instead of more.

To most people residing in the Kremlin's empire, the **Soviet Union** was a meddling, imperialist oppressor. America's moral support was welcomed because they saw the U.S. as the **USSR's** principal adversary. Even if America had not been a beacon of freedom and democracy, there would have been positive feelings toward the avowed enemy of their imperial overlord.

The situation in the Middle East is vastly — and depressingly — different. Populations in that part of the world generally view the U.S. with great suspicion. Indeed, all too many Middle Easterners regard Washington as the meddling, imperialist power that is responsible for their unsatisfactory lot in life. A succession of U.S. administrations has reinforced that negative image by backing corrupt, authoritarian regimes that looted and brutalized their people.

The result is a deep reservoir of hostility toward Washington. A June 2010 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 82% of respondents in Egypt had an unfavorable view of the United States, and 79% in Jordan did so. That negative assessment is not confined to the Arab portion of the Muslim world. In Pakistan, the unfavorable rating was 68%, and in Turkey 74%.

Such pervasive animosity makes it difficult, perhaps impossible, for Washington to play a major constructive role in the political transition that we're now beginning to witness in the Middle East. Put bluntly, even if U.S. officials profess to support the goals of democracy and liberty, those statements have very little credibility with populations in that part of the world.

Even if Washington's pro-freedom sentiments are genuine, the U.S. cannot overcome the reputation it has acquired from decades of support for autocratic regimes. It would be as if a reformist Soviet regime had belatedly backed free elections and other features of democracy in Eastern Europe. Such a change in policy would have been seen as much too little, much too late.

The danger of meddling

U.S. policymakers understandably want to see secular, democratic forces emerge victorious from the current turmoil and see the **Muslim Brotherhood** and other Islamist forces marginalized. But embracing secular factions could easily backfire. Anti-American factions would almost certainly cite such support as evidence that Washington is continuing to meddle in their country's internal affairs, and they would use it to discredit their secular opponents.

Even democracy-promotion efforts by American non-governmental organizations could prove counterproductive. Although officially such organizations are private sector ventures, most overseas populations do not make a distinction. And the often cozy cooperation between some NGOs and the U.S. government contributes to the perception that they are merely extensions of the White House, the State Department, or the CIA. Ostentatiously endorsing secular democratic factions in revolutionary settings in the Middle East could be the kiss of death for those movements. Like it or not, the United States needs to adopt a low-profile role during these turbulent days.

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