

Editorial: U.S. must let Egyptians hash it out

Protests in Egypt aimed at regime change have resurrected longstanding questions among many Americans about the role the United States should play in other nations' internal conflicts. Up until Tuesday, when his administration quietly advised Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak not to seek reelection, President Barack Obama walked a tightrope of diplomatic-speak attempting to not encourage protesters while at the same time not offend Mubarak, a longtime U.S. ally.

CAIRO, EGYPT - FEBRUARY 01: An anti-government protestor waves a shoe, in a gesture of anger, after President Hosni Mubarak announced that he will not seek reelection on February 1, 2011 in Cairo, Egypt. Protests in Egypt continued with the largest gathering yet, with many tens of thousands assembling in central Cairo, demanding the ouster of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarek. The Egyptian army has said it will not fire on protestors as they gather in large numbers in central Cairo. (Photo by Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images)

When uprisings seek to change the political course of a country – as difficult and potentially opposed to American interests as they might be – U.S. foreign policy should err on the side of liberty. In the case of Egypt, this involves the freedom of the Egyptian people to choose their leaders and governing system. But, in so doing, Americans ought to recognize that revolt and, thus, instability, do not guarantee the emergence of democracy; to the contrary, the vacuum created when one regime is driven out may be filled by extremist elements or theocracies. Regardless, it is the choice of the Egyptian people.

Mr. Mubarak announced in a Tuesday evening television broadcast that he would not seek reelection in September, a move seemingly intended to quell record numbers of protesters gathered in Cairo, calling for an immediate end to Mr. Mubarak's three decades in power. Even with the announcement, many variables remain uncertain; the most important being: Who will fill the power vacuum? The Egyptian military? Ikhwan? The Muslim Brotherhood Islamist organization?

Egypt is a strategic U.S. ally, militarily and otherwise. With over 80 million people, Egypt is the largest Arab nation and it controls the Suez Canal, a vital waterway for international trade and oil distribution. Egyptian unrest is particularly of concern to Israel, whose Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Monday, “In a state of chaos, an organized Islamic group can take over a country. It has happened. It happened in Iran.”

Regardless though, as the libertarian Cato Institute's foreign policy analyst Malou Innocent said, “[E]ven if Egypt's revolution does not bring about the political or economic freedom that Washington deems fit, it is not for the United States to decide whether Egyptians choose wisely the interests and concerns that lie within their limited grasp.”

