

Opinion: Will Egypt Follow Pakistan's Troubled Path?

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In recent years, Washington backed a strong-arm ruler of a Muslim country who faced strong insurgent tensions within his populace. No, we are not talking about Hosni Mubarak but Gen. Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan.

The result was a fiasco for American foreign policy, one that offers important lessons for how the U.S. should handle the situation in Egypt and its aftermath.

In Pakistan, unwavering support from the U.S. and an open-aid spigot rewarded Musharraf's assistance in apprehending terrorists. But in 2007, when Musharraf ordered Pakistan's Supreme Court chief justice to either resign or face charges of influence peddling -- almost universally seen as an attempt to punish the court for what Musharraf would later call its "judicial activism" -- the gambit spawned a countrywide campaign for Musharraf's ouster and the return to civilian democracy.

The country descended into crippling and well-documented chaos virtually overnight.

Abdul Sattar, Musharraf's onetime foreign minister, characterized the public outcry that stemmed from the judge's suspension as justified. "Decent people are not coming forward to say a word in favor of the government," he said at the time. Sattar said the ensuing insurgency stemmed from accumulated grievances, from rampant corruption to the army's control over civilian affairs.

Until he finally stepped down in 2008, the remainder of Musharraf's tenure was marked by regular police beat-downs of unarmed protesters, ostracism from the international community and daily waffling about whether and when he would depart voluntarily.

Sound familiar?

The regime that has succeeded Musharraf's, led by former opposition leader Asif Zardari, is the poster child for U.S. headaches in the region.

Zardari, the husband of slain former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, was at one time jailed on corruption charges. He now presides over a precipitous downward economic spiral, marked by extreme civil unrest and widening fundamentalist influence. Insurgent forces chip away daily at Islamabad's influence over tribal regions and are now even more emboldened by current events in the rest of the Muslim world.

History is seemingly repeating itself in Cairo. Just two years ago, Global Integrity, an independent watchdog that tracks governance and corruption around the world, reported, "Government accountability remains a significant challenge across all branches of government in Egypt. The media remain under pressure by the government, as witnessed in a recent case where the courts sentenced a journalist to six months in prison for 'spreading false news pertaining to the health status of the president.'"

Last week, despite Mubarak's call for an orderly and peaceful transition, reliable reports indicate that his regime sent swarms of armed thugs to crush peaceful demonstrators.

Despite the Egyptian public's pervasive feeling of disenfranchisement, U.S. aid continues to flow. Late last month, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters, "We will be reviewing our assistance posture based on events now and in the coming days." The very next day, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told ABC News, "There is no discussion as of this time about cutting off any aid. We always are looking and reviewing our aid."

While there appears to be confusion over administration talking points, that is understandable given the unsavory options facing U.S. policymakers. Many of them openly concede that Mubarak's reign is unsustainable, but fear that whoever replaces him may be worse. As was often the case in Pakistan, the

clear power broker in Egypt will be the country's large and powerful military, and it is too early to tell where that institution will align itself politically for the long haul.

U.S. policymakers should temper their expectations with realism and not think that they can micromanage Egypt's internal politics. However, if U.S. foreign aid to Egypt continues, it should be strictly contingent upon Mubarak stepping down voluntarily. Better yet, Washington should critically re-examine its policy toward Cairo and suspend foreign aid indefinitely.

Some continued cooperation with whatever government holds power in Cairo is important. But recent history demands that Washington cease support for an oppressive security apparatus and a political system with a proclivity for presidential autocracy.

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