

U.S. Should Stand With the Egyptian People

Oppressed people rarely get opportunities to express their anguish and disillusionment. Today in Egypt for the seventh straight day, thousands of ordinary citizens are pouring out onto the streets, demanding the expulsion of President Hosni Mubarak, calling for an end to emergency laws giving police extensive powers of arrest and detention, and claiming the legitimate right to run their own country. It is well past time for U.S. policymakers to stand with the Egyptian people and rethink Mubarak's purported role as an "anchor of stability" in the Middle East.

Many in Washington fear that the path Egypt takes after Mubarak might not lead to a freer and more prosperous future and that an Islamist government led by the Muslim Brotherhood, or the Ikhwan, will assume power. This concern, however legitimate, is largely beside the point.

First, the Ikhwan is popular for very legitimate reasons. Like Hezbollah, Ikhwan's social-welfare programs provide Egyptians cheap education and health care. Opposition leader Mohamed ElBaradei has even formed a loose union with the movement, which over the years has become relatively more moderate.

Second, even 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. Events have certainly moved quickly, and fundamental change is a gradual and often painful process, but Americans should not be reluctant to embrace a political emancipation movement for fear that it might be worse than whatever it replaces. After all, history shows that forces erected to suppress individual freedoms eventually break down or unravel, often in spite of the United States. Even if the Brethren does take control, it's emergence would be a natural consequence of the lifting of Mubarak's repressive police state. Over the weekend, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton insisted repeatedly that Egypt's future will be decided by the Egyptian people, not by Washington, even though the notion that U.S. officials can be neutral simply by not taking sides is demonstrably false, as protesters are being arrested by a U.S.-backed security apparatus and sprayed with tear gas manufactured in the United States.

Third, it is not clear at all that Mubarak is a reliable American client. Yes, he has kept peace with Israel, but the veneer of control under this Caesarist despot has faltered in the past several days. His curfew, rather than discourage Egyptians from rising up, has given them the opportunity to stand on the threshold of a political renaissance. In fact, reports on the ground suggest that lives may have changed completely. For instance, what was depicted over the weekend as a massive prison break was apparently Mubarak releasing criminals from jails in order to unleash terror in the streets and punish Egyptians for recent riots. Is Mubarak really the political figure that America should be supporting? Does this question really need to be asked?

The Obama administration can extend diplomatic support to a political emancipation movement in Egypt, thereby visibly abandoning its long-time dictatorial client and pushing other U.S.-backed autocrats to end censorship, political repression, and address their people's demands for economic and political reforms. This change, however belated, can help salvage a decent relationship with a successor government and with the population of the country-- similar to moves President Ronald Reagan made during the 1980s toward both South Korea and the Philippines. Although such a stance would likely do little to limit recruitment levels of militant outfits in North Africa, it does have the potential to substantially enhance America's image in the Muslim world.

Although Mubarak has promised reforms, economic growth cannot act as a substitute for political liberty. Mubarak oversees a corrupt and exploitative political system that relies on patronage and cronyism. Economic opportunity and political expression have stagnated over the last fifty years (not just the last 30). Mubarak is now grasping at straws, pledging to institute economic reforms and policies that will just keep him in office longer. Despotism like Mubarak's love to adopt pseudo-economic reforms to mask their coercive measures and perpetuate the status quo, but in the end, the institutionalized oppression imposed by ruling elites cannot endure. Sooner, rather than later, Washington and Cairo must acknowledge and embrace the Egyptian people's instinctive desire for freedom.