

EDITORIAL: U.S. must let Egypt hash it out

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Protests aimed at regime change in Egypt have prompted many Americans to wonder, yet again, what role the United States should play in the internal conflicts of other nations. Until Tuesday, when his administration quietly advised Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak not to seek re-election, President Obama had walked a diplomatic tightrope, trying not to encourage the protesters while also trying not to offend Mubarak, a longtime U.S. ally.

When uprisings seek to change another country's political course, 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 their governing system. But Americans should recognize that revolution and the resulting instability do not guarantee democracy will emerge. To the contrary, the vacuum created when one regime is driven out may be filled by extremist elements.

Ultimately, it is a choice the Egyptian people must make.

Mr. Mubarak announced Tuesday night he would not seek re-election in September, a move clearly intended to quell the protests. Even with the announcement, many variables remain. The most important: Who will fill the power vacuum after Mubarak departs? A hand-picked successor? The Egyptian military? The Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist organization?

Egypt is a strategic U.S. ally, militarily and otherwise. With more than 80 million people, it is the largest Arab nation. It controls the Suez Canal, a vital waterway for international trade and oil distribution.

Egyptian unrest is of particular concern to Israel, which benefits from a long-standing peace treaty with Egypt. Israeli 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."

Nevertheless, as Cato Institute foreign policy analyst Malou Innocent said, "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."