

Ambassador: Egypt's VP, military key to way forward

By John T. Bennett - 02/06/11 12:26 PM ET

The key players in guiding Egypt through the political storm that has shaken that nation and the Middle East are now its new vice president and military, former U.S. ambassador Thomas Pickering said on Sunday.

Washington and its allies must work with Egyptian Vice President Omar Suleiman and senior military there as a way forward is sketched after dramatic protests drove President Hosni Mubarak last week to announce he will step down later this year, said Pickering on "Face the Nation."

How are Suleiman and the military performing their new roles during an uncertain time for Egypt? "So far so good," said Pickering, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel, Jordan and the United Nations.

As Washington attempts to track the volatile situation from afar -- and help mold a plan for what follows Mubarak -- many have sounded dire warnings about the dangers of certain opposition groups taking over.

But Pickering on Sunday was upbeat, saying he is "hopeful this could turn out quite well."

Martin Indyk, Brookings Institution vice president, gave the Obama administration high marks.

President Barack Obama "has gotten the basic policy right -- get on the side of change" and then largely allow the reform movement without trying to drive it, said Indyk, who was assistant secretary of state for mid east affairs during the Clinton administration.

There are myriad unresolved issues about how the Egyptian situation will play out, the former diplomats said. And few answers are clear just yet, they added.

Pickering said U.S. officials will be looking for signs on whether "there is any linkage between the people in the [streets] and the opposition parties" that are expected to enter candidates in an eventual presidential election.

Another issue U.S. policymakers will watch, according to Pickering: "Can a transition be managed, or does there have to be a clean break" from Mubarak's regime?

The unrest in Egypt comes amid talk of declining U.S. foreign aid budgets as lawmakers look to shave the federal deficit. Both the House and Senate committees that oversee State Department spending proposed cutting foreign aid programs in 2011 spending bills that have yet to be acted upon.

Jim Thomas of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments said Sunday that Egypt shows foreign aid will be "more important than less important."

“I mean, you look at a transitional government like Egypt. This is exactly the time when you’re going to need to think about antying up for not only foreign aid, but military aid because there are going to be other parties on the sidelines waiting to take our place,” said Thomas on “This Week in Defense News.”

But some senior foreign policy lawmakers are worried the deficit situation will lead Congress to enact cuts to programs under which Washington provides assistance to other nations.

Several senators last week, including Senate Armed Services Committee ranking member John McCain (R-Ariz.), said securing a likely \$3 billion State Department funding hike for its takeover of U.S. activities in Iraq will be an uphill fight.

Chris Preble of the CATO Institute said Sunday he is betting “there will be a lot of energy behind [foreign aid cuts]in the House but the Senate will block it.”

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