

Why the West should relinquish Mubarak

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»» Egypt is at a critical juncture. In the run-up to the election marathon of 2009–10, destined to determine both the future role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian politics and succession to the incumbent autocratic president Hosni Mubarak, the country is simmering with anger and civil disobedience. Following the Shura Council (upper house) elections in May 2010 and parliamentary elections in November, at the presidential elections in September 2011 the ageing Mubarak is expected to cede power to a groomed heir. The appearance of former International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) head and possible Mubarak rival Mohamed ElBaradei on the domestic scene spurred hopes that political change in Egypt is within reach. A real power shift is practically impossible – the authoritarian power structures are too entrenched, the opposition too weak and divided and the pressures from the outside too insignificant. With or without ElBaradei, Mubarak's reign will soon be over. The West, with great stakes in Egypt as a regional power hub, would be well advised to forge new alliances.

THE MEANING OF ELBARADEI

As an internationally respected figure and Nobel Peace Prize winner, ElBaradei has a profile that the Mubarak regime will find very hard to discredit. The same state media that celebrated ElBaradei as a national hero when he received the Nobel Prize in 2005 now stress his lack of political experience and his long absence from Egypt. ElBaradei's lengthy absence from the country also means that his file at the Egyptian secret service is thin and the regime has little material to incriminate him. The 'National Association for Change' (NAC), a loose coalition of academics, activists and opposition parties supporting his candidacy,

HIGHLIGHTS

- Although Mohamed ElBaradei's chances of taking over the Egyptian presidency are slim, the mobilisation for his candidacy may pave the way for a real power shift in the future.
- With or without ElBaradei, Mubarak's reign will soon be over.
- The West, with great stakes in Egypt as a regional security hub, urgently needs to forge new alliances before it is too late.

»»»»» has launched a signature campaign to gain support for compliance with international electoral standards, which ElBaradei has put forward as a precondition for his candidacy.

Their demands include the end of the three-decade-long state of emergency; allowing electoral monitoring by local judges and international monitors; the right to vote for Egyptians abroad; term limits for the presidency; and eliminating official obstacles to an independent presidential candidacy. The changes demanded by the coalition would need three constitutional articles to be amended. Without such amendments, ElBaradei's only way of running for the presidency would be to join one of the already licensed (toothless and/or co-opted) opposition parties, an option he has firmly rejected. ElBaradei thus faces a dilemma: by joining one of the licensed parties he would implicitly accept the rules of the game predetermined by the Mubarak regime and renounce his current credibility. But having explicitly declared that he would only run if the Constitution was amended, he has given the regime an extra reason not to do so.

Egypt is riding the wave of ElBaradei euphoria. ElBaradei's 'fans' on Facebook skyrocketed in a few months to over 150,000, contrasting with Hosni Mubarak's 240 and his son Gamal's 6000. For the time being, however, the former IAEA head campaigns mainly on his demands for constitutional reform, but has yet to formulate a substantial presidential platform. Moreover, the coalition still needs to build a popular grassroots base to ensure that demands for broader change do not remain an elite concern. ElBaradei's credentials will not nurture him forever, and simply being the 'anti-Mubarak' does not offer any solutions to the Egyptian people's pressing concerns.

Even if ElBaradei's campaign was to gain in substance and grassroots support, few people in Egypt – probably including ElBaradei himself – truly believe that he or any other potential opposition candidate will be able to override the regime's grip on power in the near future. That does not, however, deprive the current pro-ElBa-

radei campaign of meaning. The increased mobilisation is likely to push boundaries further, form new alliances and leaders, and may thereby pave the way for a real power shift in the future. Moreover, the former IAEA head's image and campaign draw domestic and international attention to the tremendous shortcomings of the Egyptian electoral process and the undemocratic constitutional framework.

AGAINST 'SUCCESSION', DIVIDED WE STAND

The mobilisation and dynamism surrounding ElBaradei is the latest mushrooming of popular unrest in Egypt in recent years. Not all of these movements have been political. Due to the economic crisis, the government is finding it increasingly difficult to pay off hungry rioters and discontented workers angered over poverty, deteriorating living and working conditions and escalating food and fuel prices. The largest demonstrations have been organised by the dynamic labour movement. Since the riots of April 2008, during which tens of thousands of textile workers across Egypt protested over working conditions, the labour movement has become a massive, nationwide grassroots movement. Consciously staying aloof from political parties and more explicit political activity, it has started to voice demands not only concerning concrete social and economic working conditions but also political rights such as labour rights and freedom of association.

The degree to which the current wave of mobilisation will have a real impact on Egypt's political panorama depends above all on the different opposition and protest movements uniting to form a common front. As its demands explicitly address workers' daily concerns, the labour movement strikes a chord with the broader population at grassroots level – something which neither ElBaradei's NAC campaign nor previous movements for political reform such as Kefaya have managed. What are a few hundred intellectuals and NGO representatives holding up signs at the

airport compared to tens of thousands of workers besieging entire industrial towns? Aware that the idea of an alliance between broad political reform demands and the nation-wide grassroots scares the Mubarak regime, labour leaders have carefully avoided just such a link.

The prospect of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) joining a broad coalition for democratic change is even bleaker. The MB, while increasingly being forced by the regime to retreat from political contestation, remains the only political opposition group in the country with both an articulate programme and a broad grassroots connection.

A popular coalition for change that excludes the Brotherhood's Islamist constituency would be unlikely to succeed. Despite the MB's attempts to mend fences with some of the secular opposition parties and rumours of a presumed backdoor

deal with the regime to guarantee the MB's continued presence in parliament, it is widely expected that the Brotherhood's new conservative leadership and its predicted losses in the upcoming legislative elections will shift the group's focus away from political contestation.

THE WEST: IN MUBARAK'S STABILITY TRAP

Western governments' efforts to support democracy in Egypt have had a limited impact. Probably more than any other country in the region, US and EU governments' bilateral relations with Egypt are deeply embedded in the regional context, focusing on Egypt's role as a regional power broker. US and EU concerns with Egypt's domestic situation are routinely overshadowed by security concerns in the region's many hotspots, for which the Mubarak regime is considered an indis-

pensable partner. Destabilising this reliable partner, so the reasoning goes, would risk losing a key supporter of Western security interests. This argument is highly flawed, for several reasons.

One, the Egyptian regime shares the West's main regional security and trade interests and will not cease to back these causes if the West strengthens its support to democratic participation. Unlike Europe and the US, Egypt is within reach of both Iranian and Israeli missiles, which makes nuclear disarmament in the region a pressing Egyptian priority. Bordering Gaza, Egypt has a number of tangible interests in a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the current stalemate in Gaza.

Two, the assumption of a trade-off between democratic governance and security in the MENA is wrong. The fragile kind of 'stability' that Western powers have played on in the region is coming to an end. Mubarak is not the only long-standing autocratic leader in the region who will soon leave his post. Due to age, sickness or both, a whole generation of North African dictators will have to yield power soon. In Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria, debates on 'successions' to a designated heir are underway.

Three, the West's clinging on to old Arab autocrats' flawed regional stability trade-off perpetuates the West's (and especially the US's) credibility deficit in the region. International rights groups and experts recently warned that continued Western support to authoritarian governments in the Arab world will only worsen the 'cycle of suspicion and discord' between the US and Muslim peoples, which Obama vowed to break in his Cairo speech.

Four, the short-sighted conception of stability has already begun to oust Islamist groups (including the Egyptian MB) from political participation, possibly heralding the reversal of a trend of moderation and participation of political Islam across the Arab world over the last decade. Widespread Western fears that Islamist forces might come to rule the EU's immediate neighbourhood have

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»»»»» halted any impetus to support alternative power schemes in the region. Political analysts' mantra-like urge that Western policy-makers must engage with alternative political actors, including Islamists, were largely in vain. By stubbornly clinging to a short-term vision of stability in the region, the West has very likely missed its opportunity to empower the moderation of Islamist forces and help to forge broader societal integration, away from the current secular-Islamist divide promoted by Arab regimes.

OBAMA DISAPPOINTING, EU SITTING IT OUT

Surely, few of those who shouted 'we love you' from the audience in response to Obama's remarks on democracy and human rights at his Cairo speech in June 2009 would have imagined then that, one year on, they would remember George W. Bush's Egypt policies with a certain melancholy. Under Barack Obama, the confrontational Bush approach has given way to a decidedly partnership-based one. As initial enthusiasm for Obama is wearing off, Egyptian democracy activists sharply criticise the US's stronger focus on regional issues, to the visible detriment of US democracy support in Egypt.

Open US criticism of Egyptian human rights and democracy shortcomings is largely a thing of the past. In the new US-Egyptian relations, criticism is mainly voiced behind closed doors. The timely release of opposition politician Ayman Nour was seen by many observers as a tacit asset swap in the run-up to Mubarak's official visit to Washington, meant to bring Egypt back in from the cold after frosty relations during the Bush years. Beyond emblematic individual cases, however, discernable pressure to end oppression of political activists has been negligible or, in the case of Islamists, inexistent.

In 2009 USAID bowed to the Egyptian government's pressure and decided to stop funding any NGOs that are not registered under the Egyptian Associations Law. In practice, this amounts to acceptance of a funding clearance and the Egypt-

ian government's veto of foreign funding to Egyptian NGOs. This self-constraining policy stands in stark contrast to an October 2009 USAID internal audit which ascribed direct civil society funding the greatest impact among all USAID governance programming in Egypt. It is particularly unfortunate in light of the regime's plan further to tighten restrictions on NGO activities via a new draft Associations Law. While other US agencies and programmes (MEPI, DRL) still directly fund local NGOs, their funding levels are negligible compared to USAID's.

USAID's budget for democratic governance has been halved since 2009. USAID is the most important foreign donor in Egypt in terms of funding. The agency's budget for democracy and governance fell from an annual average of USD 51 million in 2006–2008 to USD 20 million in 2009 (later increased to 25 million for both 2010 and 2011). According to USAID officials, this reduction is proportional to the overall gradual reduction of US development assistance to Egypt. Cuts in direct civil society funding, however, are especially severe (73 per cent compared to 2008). Total US annual bilateral assistance going to Egypt amounts to USD 1.56 billion, 1.3 billion (84 per cent) of which is military and security aid. Finally, the US government is considering its Egyptian counterpart's request to pay US aid to Egypt into an endowment directly administered by the Egyptian government. The creation of such a 'Mubarak endowment' would remove direct US Congress oversight over the use of US economic aid to Egypt.

Europeans have not been much more useful than the US when it comes to supporting Egyptians' strive for change. The EU is seen by Egyptian activists as a quiet, bureaucratic funding source, a good listener with decent intentions but little political clout. EU member states, it is commonly argued, see Egypt as a business and security hub, to the detriment of a stronger focus on human rights and democracy. While EU bilateral policies towards Egypt are based on a far-reaching positive conditionality rationale, in practice they are only incoherently applied. Bilateral deals with

specific member states (such as Italy) on visas or trade often outweigh EU community policies and torpedo the latter's conditionality rationale on a regular basis. Under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) that governs bilateral relations between Egypt and the EU, the Egyptian government has been keen to obtain an upgrade similar to the 'advanced status' recently granted to Morocco. In doing so, however, the Egyptian government resisted any EU attempts to link this upgrade to greater commitments to political reform. The Mubarak regime's hesitance to formulate its vision of the content of such an upgrade suggests that its main incentive is the symbolic acknowledgement of the 'strategic relationship' between Egypt and the EU, rather than the actual policy substance.

In terms of funding, EU assistance for human rights and democratic governance is mainly channelled through the European Commission (EC). EU member states' separate activities in this area have been very limited in volume and ambition. Through bilateral programmes, EUR 39 million has been earmarked for human rights and good governance issues for 2007–2010, accounting for 7 per cent of total bilateral assistance to Egypt (EUR 558 million). All bilateral EC funding is going to or channelled through the Egyptian government, and supports semi-governmental structures such as the National Council of Human Rights. The only funding instrument under which the EC is able to fund NGOs directly and without government clearance is the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Funding under this instrument is, however, very limited (EUR 900,000 to Egypt in both 2008 and 2009) and will be further reduced in coming years.

EC officials complain of the Egyptian government's unwillingness to commit to deeper reforms, and the EU's limited scope to press any further. They partly blame the huge US development and military aid levels to Egypt, which substantially reduce EU leverage with the Mubarak regime. But of course, EU member states would also have to deliver a more consistent message.

EC officials are pessimistic about both the outlook for political change in Egypt and their own leverage over the Egyptian government. Europe, they admit, is 'waiting for succession'.

CONCLUSION

Western democracy programmes nominally meant to strengthen Egyptian democratic reform barely scratch the surface of the entrenched authoritarian power structures. For Egyptian activists, the reason for this is clear: the overarching interests of Western governments and the Egyptian government match. Both sides want to keep the Mubarak regime stable, implement a minimum political liberalisation and broad economic and social modernisation, and avoid Islamist rule by any means. Western governments' leverage in Egypt is higher than US and EU officials admit, yet they are not willing meaningfully to employ this leverage to support grassroots political change in Egypt. Against the background of the upcoming leadership transition in Egypt and elsewhere in the region and the increasing risks inherent in the authoritarian time bomb, this is a grave strategic mistake.

The perceived trade-off between security and democracy in the Middle East only exists in the heads of short-sighted Western politicians incapable of looking beyond their horizon of their electoral mandate. In their own immediate strategic interest, the EU and US must abandon their old stability paradigm of relying on ageing dictators in the region before it is too late.

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