



Back to Square One

The U.S. Government and Political Change in Egypt

January 2014



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Background

Human Rights First has longstanding ties with human rights defenders and civil society leaders in Egypt. In the past three years, staff members have made repeated visits to Egypt and produced numerous reports and dozens of statements intended to promote U.S. leadership in improving respect for human rights there. This paper was developed from consultations with long-time and new activists, government officials, journalists, academics, and international leaders, and draws on a fact-finding trip to the country January 14-20, 2014.

Contents

Introduction	1
Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders	3
Attacks on Religious Minorities	4
Conclusion	7
Recommendations for U.S. Policy.....	8

Introduction

After decades of supporting the repressive Mubarak regime, the United States government, after some initial hesitation, eventually enthusiastically applauded the successful challenge to the Mubarak government in early 2011. In a series of statements in February of that year after President Mubarak had stepped down from office, President Obama said “To the people of Egypt, particularly the young people of Egypt, I want to be clear: we hear your voices...Those who have exercised their right to peaceful assembly represent the greatness of the Egyptian people...the American people are moved by these scenes in Cairo and across Egypt because of who we are as a people and the kind of world we want our children to grow up in. The word Tahrir means liberation...We saw in those protestors the moral force of non-violence that has lit the world from Delhi to Warsaw, from Selma to South Africa.”

Since those early days of hope Egypt has been in a virtually constant state of political upheaval, and U.S. government policy towards the crisis, to the extent that there has been any clear policy at all, has often been opaque or confused. In spite of mounting evidence to the contrary, Egypt has generally been characterized by U.S. officials over the last three years as taking a bumpy path in the right direction to democracy; “There will be nothing neat or easy about [Egypt’s] road ahead,” said U.S. Deputy Secretary Bill Burns in Cairo in July 2013. When the interim government took power, following the military removal of elected civilian president Morsi in early July 2013, it pledged to follow a “roadmap to democracy” of its own creation. Predictably, the U.S. government was keen to support it, with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry saying in November 2013 that he “welcomed [Foreign] Minister Fahmy’s restatement of the interim government’s commitment to the roadmap that will move Egypt forward on an inclusive path to democracy and to economic stability.”

The United States’ cloudy approach toward policy in Egypt fails to address how these essential and desirable objectives of inclusive, representative government, and economic recovery and stability will be realized.

In fact, support for the current military regime has implicated the United States in the series of repressive measures taken by Egypt’s interim government in recent

weeks against several of the leading protestors from the original Tahrir Square demonstrations who President Obama enthusiastically supported three years ago. Egyptian authorities have also moved against human rights defenders and democracy activists, passing new anti-protest laws and sentencing peaceful activists to jail for exercising their basic rights. NGO offices have been raided and staff seized. Secret police agents are once again paying warning visits to those who criticize the government on Facebook.

But the U.S. government, in service of a few narrowly defined goals including maintaining military-to-military cooperation on counter-terrorism, stability in the Suez Canal, continued adherence to the Camp David Accords, and support for the U.S. manufacturing base, appears unwilling to move beyond an approach where it supports the central power in Cairo – whether Mubarak, direct military rule by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, the Muslim Brotherhood or the current military-backed government. As a result of this unwavering approach, virtually every political faction in Egypt distrusts the United States, undermining the ability of the United States to achieve these goals over the long-term. Similarly, further political unrest in Egypt threatens the future of these U.S. national interests.

One young activist prominent in the 2011 revolution told Human Rights First: “The U.S. government did so much wrong it might not be able to fix it. It’s a lose-lose for the U.S. The military is against them, the liberals are against them, the Muslim Brotherhood, the youth are against them. They really have no friends left.”

The U.S. government’s approach during the last three years has not only made it unpopular - compounding a legacy of distrust built on more than three decades of support for autocratic rulers in Cairo - but is also failing to bring about the radical change needed in Egypt to best safeguard U.S. interests by supporting the development of a vibrant democracy and a respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Egypt continues to be beset by problems of political instability, religious intolerance and large scale violence against women. Nazra and other women’s rights

organizations continue to report attacks on women, and there is a dire need for wholesale reform in the criminal justice system for dealing with sexual violence, including legislation redefining rape and sexual assault. There is a lack of forensic doctors and nurses to deal with assaults on women, and a lack of understanding throughout the criminal justice system on how to combat continuing assaults.

The Egyptian economy meanwhile appears fragile and vulnerable to political unrest. Its foreign exchange reserves are estimated at around \$17 billion, compared with \$36 billion just before the 2011 revolt against Mubarak. Its tourism sector is particularly damaged, with hotels in Cairo and holiday destinations like Luxor struggling with single digit hotel occupancy rates. Egyptian Tourism Minister Hisham Zaazou was quoted on January 21 2014 as saying that the country's tourism revenue fell by 41 percent from 2012, to \$5.9 billion in 2013.

Egypt's politics are poisoned by a dangerous polarization. Although the new constitution appears to have won an overwhelming 98 percent approval in the January vote, the turnout is estimated to have been around 38 percent, with Muslim Brotherhood supporters and the youth generally abstaining from the vote. This overwhelming endorsement of the constitution exposed the current government's drive to suffocate dissent by arresting those campaigning for a "No" vote and allowing virtually no media attention to those opposing the draft constitution.

The constitution itself contains 247 articles, and most human rights analysts agree that it is the best of the three drafts voted on in the last three years. While it contains worrying provisions about civilians being tried in military courts, about the Egyptian military getting to choose the Minister of Defense, and other concessions to the military on the lack of oversight on its budget and other operations, it also includes articles on the freedoms of expression and religion, and on women's political representation at local levels (with a 25% quota introduced).

But adopting a draft constitution, with language including safeguards for basic rights and freedoms, falls short of taking concrete action toward upholding these rights in practice. Under the noses of the electorate, flagrant violations of the right to freedom of assembly have recently been imposed. Thousands of the government's political opponents have been jailed and are subject to judicial proceedings that lack fairness and appear selective. Freedom of expression is being crudely suppressed, and

violence by the security forces has been unleashed against civilians with unprecedented ferocity. While the environment for rights has been in decline since mid-2011, things took a sharp decline in the aftermath of the July 2013 coup. The August 14 dispersal of pro-Morsi protests in Cairo left over 800 dead. Objections that some of the pro-Morsi supporters were armed and had used violence cannot excuse the disproportionate use of force.

Thousands of Muslim Brotherhood supporters have been detained with scant regard for legal due process; the organization has been banned and declared a terrorist group. Some media outlets have been closed while both state and private media have embarked on a witch hunt against Muslim Brotherhood supporters and, more recently, students and secular liberal activists. This is a dangerous trend, as the Brotherhood remains representative of a sizable portion of the population and is well-organized to operate as an underground oppositional force. These abuses do not point to a democracy or a country that will be stable anytime soon.

"We're back to Mubarak, or something worse," is a common sentiment among the 2011 revolutionaries.

The new anti-protest law, introduced in November 2013, effectively bans gatherings of more than 10 people without approval and requires notification of the authorities three days in advance. It bans demonstrations at places of worship and allows the secret police to prohibit gatherings and meetings. Penalties include a year in prison for anyone covering their face during a protest.

An early victim of the new public assembly law is the prominent activist Alaa Abdel Fattah. He was preparing to turn himself in to the police on December 1 to respond to charges that he had organized prohibited assemblies to protest the new law. However, reverting to the thuggish practices for which they became notorious in the Mubarak era, the state security police raided his home and took him into detention on November 30, beating him and slapping his wife while his young child slept in an adjacent room.

Abdel Fattah's detention provides him with the distinction of having been detained under Egypt's last three military-backed authoritarian regimes: Mubarak, the SCAF, and now the military-backed interim government.

The detention of activists like Abdel Fattah and the recent intensification of the crackdown on dissent make it increasingly implausible for the United States to maintain the narrative that it has favored for decades, and which

Secretary Kerry now seems to be seeking to rehabilitate, that Egypt is moving towards democracy.

Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders

The safe functioning of civil society is a key characteristic of a healthy transition to democracy. Human rights defenders and civil society leaders are representative of important segments of the population, and history shows they must be able to operate freely and constructively if a society is to achieve real stability.

The targeting in recent weeks of liberal secular activists prominent in the January 2011 revolution and of human rights defenders sends a chilling message to the small remaining community of independent human rights and civil society activists in Egypt. The government's iron grip on political discussion, its dominance of the media, overwhelming public support, muted criticism from international allies and the legitimacy it claims from a 98 percent endorsement of its constitution has enabled it to crack down hard on dissent.

"There is a new totalitarianism which means just that—total control by the government of everything," one human rights defender told Human Rights First. "It's partly revenge against the liberals, and they think they have to stop one [dissenting voice] today in case it becomes 100 tomorrow."

On December 19, 2013, Egyptian police raided the Cairo offices of the NGO the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights. Five of its members were blindfolded and detained for nine hours while another was held in custody.

Three days later three prominent activists associated with the April 6 revolutionary movement, Mohamed Adel, Ahmed Maher, and Ahmad Douma, were sentenced to jail terms under the new anti-protest law passed in previous weeks. Their appeal is now scheduled for February 10, 2014.

The following week, four journalists working for Al Jazeera's English channel were arrested in Cairo, three of whom remain in custody.

Also in December 2013, in a series of episodes on the private satellite channel Al-Qahera Wal Nas, television host Abdel-Rehim Ali aired recordings of phone calls made

by dissidents that included Ahmed Maher, Mohamed Adel, former MP Mostafa El-Naggar, and poet Abdel-Rahman Youssef. The host suggested the secretly recorded calls proved some of the activists were serving a foreign agenda.

One human rights defender in her twenties told Human Rights First that her e-mails were hacked and her political and private, romantic messages copied and posted on social media sites.

On January 19, 2014 prominent liberal academic Amr Hamzawy was charged with insulting the judiciary for a tweet criticizing a court ruling against three American NGOs promoting democracy in Egypt. In June 2013 43 employees of U.S. and German-supported NGOs were convicted of plotting to destabilize Egypt, and Hamzawy's criticism of the verdicts has now resulted in criminal charges against him.

"The government is in a frenzy to tarnish human rights defenders and it's proving successful," said Emad Mubarak, Executive Director of the Association for the Freedom of Thought and Expression. "The state is trying to rewrite history by saying security forces didn't shoot protestors in 2011 - some of the old Mubarak regime are back claiming the January 25 revolution was a conspiracy against Egypt that's now being corrected."

Claims that the history of early 2011 is being rewritten to exonerate the security forces of wrongdoing is common among human rights defenders, as is the fear that people in Egypt are increasingly believing the accusations of defenders being foreign proxies.

"Attacks on NGOs are likely to increase as is the campaign to smear liberal and human rights activists, to turn the public against them for being foreign agents," said Emad Mubarak. "NGOs also need to do a better job of showing people what they've achieved, like establishing Egypt's minimum wage."

Others cite a crackdown on any hint of media dissent as evidence of a new level of repression. Associated Press cameraman Hassan Abdullah Hassan was detained in mid-January 2014 after police officers saw his images being broadcast by Al Jazeera and wrongly believed he worked for the channel. Most media, including the privately-owned media, has been in lock-step, full-throated support of the government since it took power in July 2013.

When popular TV satirist Bassem Youssef mocked public enthusiasm for General Sisi in November 2013, his show was pulled from the air by private broadcaster CBC. He had become a media star for his lampooning of President Morsi, but went too far when he warned “that fascism in the name of religion will be replaced by fascism in the name of patriotism and national security”. Youssef’s show is due to return at the end of February, this time via the Saudi satellite channel MBC.

Other journalists have shown less enthusiasm for challenging the government. On January 14, 2014, local NGO the Cairo Institute for Human Rights produced an evaluation of media coverage of the referendum by 20 press outlets. It noted “intimidation of citizens participating in the referendum,” and charged that “the media became a one-note mobilization campaign, with the only dissonant note offered by al-Jazeera Mubasher Egypt [which itself] has also failed to provide professional impartial coverage of the referendum process.”

There is also an alarming rise in the extreme nationalist rhetoric of state and privately-owned media against suspected “foreign agents,” and criticism of the regime from all quarters is typically attacked as unpatriotic. In recent months, the major state newspaper al-Ahram has carried several claims on its front page of lurid conspiracy theories that the U.S. government has joined forces with Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood to divide up Egypt into smaller countries, and to spread chaos across the country.

On January 17, 2014 prominent Egyptian newspaper editor Mostafa Bakry appeared on a major TV talk show, where he warned President Obama and his “puppets” that “we will enter their houses, and we will kill them one by one.” He speculated that the U.S. government planned to assassinate General Sisi. “There is a plot to kill General Sisi, and the security services know it well,” he said, and suggested that this in turn could lead to Egyptians rising up in a “revolution to kill the Americans in the streets.”

While Egypt’s foreign ministry later issued a clarification from Bakry, explaining that he is “opposed to any violence, including any violence against US citizens...,” it is hard to take any other meaning from Bakry’s chilling and explicit threats.

Some civil society figures wearily conclude that things are “back to 2010,” or even worse, that mid-2011 were the “glory days,” that the euphoria marked by end of Mubarak is only matched by depth of disappointment under Sisi.

“We looked to the Serbian revolutionary model before the revolution that said get rid of Milosevic and sort everything else out afterwards,” said one liberal activist. “We were wrong to do that, we should have organized before about what to do after the dictator falls.”

The split in Egyptian civil society is especially painful, with some former activists who defended human rights principles under Mubarak and Morsi seeming to have abandoned them since the new regime took power.

“What’s worse than under Mubarak is now there’s popular support, even celebrations, about the violations,” said one young human rights defender. “And the judiciary is worse than before. There’s not even any pretending now that there isn’t political interference. And now civilian judges are willing to hold court hearings in prisons—before only military trials were held there.”

Another prominent human rights defender asked not to be identified for safety reasons, but suggested to Human Rights First that “Some things are better than under Mubarak—there’s no administrative detention, and torture is not systematic. But other things are worse—mass killings are new, media criticism of the government is even less than before and people wouldn’t have been arrested for campaigning for a no vote in a referendum. You didn’t have NGOs supporting the Mubarak regime the way some are supporting the government now. The judiciary under Mubarak wasn’t independent but there were some standards. The anti-protest law is new. Mubarak used anti-protest laws from 1914 but after 2005 some demonstrations were in practice tolerated, and there was a sort of mutual understanding between the regime and the opposition about what was allowed. Now we’re not just back to the Mubarak era, we’ve become 1960s Eastern Europe.”

Attacks on Religious Minorities

The protection of religious minorities is vital to the future stability of Egypt. In President Obama’s May 2011 speech about the new Middle East he declared that “... tolerance is particularly important when it comes to religion. In Tahrir Square, we heard Egyptians from all walks of life chant, ‘Muslims, Christians, we are one.’ America will work to see that this spirit prevails – that all faiths are respected, and

that bridges are built among them. In a region that was the birthplace of three world religions, intolerance can lead only to suffering and stagnation. And for this season of change to succeed, Coptic Christians must have the right to worship freely in Cairo.”

Ongoing attacks on Coptic Christians and other religious minorities are undermining Egypt’s prospects for stability as sectarian violence increases. Religious persecution is not new in Egypt, Coptic Christians have been attacked for centuries under various governments. For decades, institutionalized discrimination against Christians resulted in official unwillingness to investigate violent attacks on Christians or to hold perpetrators or those who incite violence criminally accountable. Toleration of sectarian hate speech in the media, including the government-controlled media, have contributed to chronic problems of persecution and insecurity for the approximately 10 percent of Egypt’s 85 million population who are Coptic Christians.

Mass killings of Christians have happened before: in 1981 81 were killed in the Zawya al-Hamra neighborhood of the capital, 21 more killed in al Kosh in 2001, a drive by shooting left six dead in Nag Hammadi in 2010, and a car bomb outside a Christian church in Alexandria on January 1, 2011 killed 21 more.

But violence against Copts and other minorities has spiked in recent years, fueled by the political turbulence of the post-January 2011 period. The mass protests in early 2011 that brought down the 30-year presidency of Hosni Mubarak were actively supported by many Christians, and religious coexistence was a key demand of the protestors.

“I was part of the Coptic Youth Front in 2010,” one young man told Human Rights First. “After February 2011 we dissolved because we thought there would be no need to lobby for Christian concerns any more when Mubarak had fallen.”

A general decline in public safety since those days has left vulnerable minority communities at risk of violence, with little hope of protection or justice from the police or local authorities. In some cases, the security forces either stood by and allowed attacks to happen or participated in the violence.

When attacks against Christians continued in the weeks after the fall of Mubarak, some young Coptic activists formed a new organization in March 2011 to address sectarian violence, the Maspero Youth Union (MYU).

Encouraged by its church leadership, including exhortations from the pulpit, to play a fuller part in society, many Copts – especially youth – want to be part of the new politics, and many are found in two new secular parties, New Egypt and the more leftist Social Democratic Party.

The MYU held a series of demonstrations in 2011 outside media offices at Maspero in central Cairo. At a protest in October 2011, when the military government was running the country before President Morsi was elected, dozens of protestors were killed by the army. A 23 year-old Coptic activist told Human Rights First “It was about 6.30 in the evening when we arrived at Maspero after a protest march. Some people were already there protesting and I saw four or five military vehicles. They were driving away but I saw one do a U-turn and attack the crowd—there were women and children in the crowd and the army were shooting at us and driving their vehicles into us. The attack lasted about half an hour and we ran—people in nearby homes opened their doors to us. I sheltered in one for about 30 minutes and then went to the hospital to find the injured. When I got there, there were already 22 dead, from being run over and from bullet wounds.”

The Egyptian state media was also responsible for incitement against Christians in October 2011, and should be held accountable for its part in creating the sectarian climate surrounding the killings.

Dr. Mina Elkess is a 28 year-old ophthalmologist and General Coordinator of the MYU. He was an activist for religious and human rights several years before the January 25 2011 revolution and helped found the MYU because “we wanted to leave the umbrella of the church and go onto the street—to think as Egyptians and not just Christians,” he told Human Rights First. “We operate with other youth movements and aren’t confined to Coptic issues. After the Maspero massacre many Copts withdrew from activism, intimidated away.”

The Morsi government further fueled a climate of anti-Christian intolerance. Supporters of Morsi including the Muslim Brotherhood, have long propagated anti-Christian sectarian statements, speaking about the need for an Islamist Egypt in which the Copts would be, at best, second-class citizens. The more open media environment since the overthrow of Mubarak permitted the emergence of a variety of Islamist media outlets, some of them backed by funding from extreme religious movements in the Arab Gulf region. Hateful sectarian rhetoric targeting Christians,

Jews, Shi'ite Muslims, and non-Islamist critics of Islamic extremism became more commonplace.

A Morsi-backed constitution in November 2012 restricted religious freedoms, and April 2013 saw an attack on the Cairo Coptic cathedral, where police stood by as mob violence surrounded the funeral of five Copts killed in sectarian violence. The popular protests which led to Morsi's fall in July 2013 were enthusiastically supported by Copts and millions of other Egyptians, but Copts became particular targets for vengeful attacks by Morsi supporters. The disproportionate blame attached to the Christian community by Morsi supporters after July 3 has made the community more exposed and vulnerable to the violence that followed.

In early July, Islamic extremists claiming to be supporters of President Morsi took control of the town of Dalga in Minya governorate, expelling the police and carrying out a pogrom against the Christian population. Churches and Christian homes and businesses were burned and vandalized, and Christians were forced to pay protection money to their Muslim neighbors, termed a "jizya" to give it some supposed legitimacy in terms of Islamic law. More than a hundred Christian families are reported to have fled from the town.

Egyptian human rights groups condemned the slow response of the authorities to this violent assault on the Christian community in Dalga. Only on September 16, after more than 76 days of the town being under the control of armed Islamic extremists—during which time a fourth century Christian church was burned to the ground—did the security forces move in to reclaim control of the town.

In August 2013, armed police backed by the military used force, including live ammunition, to clear two protests in Cairo that had been established after Morsi's dismissal on July 3. Hundreds of people were killed in the worst incident of political violence in Egypt for many decades. Total fatalities from clearing the sit-ins are estimated at over 800, with dozens of members of the security forces also losing their lives. In another serious incident, some 55 pro-Morsi protesters were killed at a single demonstration in Cairo on October 6. Well over 2,000 people have been killed in political demonstrations since August 14, 2013.

Once again, vulnerable Christian communities were attacked by Muslim Brotherhood supporters in revenge for the killings. In a letter to President Obama dated

September 12, 2013, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) noted that over 130 Coptic churches and Christian religious structures, homes, and businesses were attacked after August 14. Around 45 churches and religious structures came under simultaneous attack in the immediate aftermath of August.

For many Copts, General Sisi is a hero who helped save them from a Morsi government. Relief at the apparent elimination of the threat from the Brotherhood trumps any criticism of the present government for many Copts, who are reluctant to criticize the military's responsibility in the 2011 Maspéro killings. The security force's failure to protect churches is also commonly explained as part of a general failure on the part of the police and military to maintain law and order, and not confined to Copts.

"They see Sisi as a savior," said one younger Christian activist. Mariam, a Coptic activist in her twenties, said some older relatives are ready to excuse the present government of almost anything, and they suggest that "Baradei [who resigned as Egyptian vice-president in August after the attacks on the Rabaa protests] and [secular revolutionaries] April 6 were in league with the Muslim Brotherhood, and that the real revolution was June 30, 2013."

The new constitution contains important protections for religious minorities. "The constitution is the Copt's 'reward' for siding with the military in the push against Morsi," said a Christian commentator.

It includes a prohibition against discrimination on religious grounds, and an unusual constitutional article requiring the new Parliament, when it is elected, to pass a long-discussed uniform law on the repair and construction of religious buildings. This law would aim to address official obstacles that have existed for decades to the repair and construction of churches, and to facilitate the repair of the many churches damaged in recent protests. At the same time, there are elements of the draft that raise human rights concerns, including the official recognition of only three religions—Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

It continues to be the case, as it was under Mubarak, the SCAF, and the Morsi government, that the Egyptian authorities need to enhance the protection for the Coptic community, to be more responsive to complaints from the Christian community of assaults or harassment from extremists, and to hold accountable those who incite and take part in sectarian violence. The current government

also should remove some of the long-standing restrictions on freedom of religion and deconstruct the building blocks of legal and societal discrimination targeting religious minorities, which would include repealing abusive laws prohibiting blasphemy and defamation of religions, repealing the decree banning Baha'is, and implementing a unified law for the construction and repair of all places of worship that protects the rights of religious minorities. Religious minorities other than Christians continue to be targeted and vilified. Several Shias were lynched in Cairo in June 2012, following sectarian incitement from government leaders including President Morsi, as they attempted to assemble from a religious ceremony in a private home, and in January 2014 Egyptian authorities stopped a group of 61 Canadian Shia pilgrims at Cairo airport and denied them entry to the country.

But the authorities who would have to make these changes are the same ones who have been in power in Egypt for many decades. They are unlikely to change their ingrained habits of giving low priority to the complaints of persecuted Christians, and have little concern for the rights of other minorities. Some Egyptian political leaders may even see some advantage in assaults continuing against Christians, as it enables them to portray such attacks as the work of extremists and to support a case for being engaged in a struggle against terrorists and extremists. There need to be incentives to prioritize this powder-keg issue now.

A key challenge is how Egypt can move beyond this current binary political contest between military-backed authoritarianism represented by General Sisi, and an Islamic extremism currently portrayed in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood has been declared a terrorist organization, thousands of its leaders are in jail, and journalists from Al Jazeera and other media that the government suspects are sympathetic to the Brotherhood have been harassed or arrested.

A fearful "with us or against us" mentality has taken hold with little immediate prospect of agreement between Christians and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. "At the moment, in the Coptic mind, there is no such thing as a moderate Islamist," said a Christian commentator. But unless an accommodation can be made with at least some former supporters of Muslim Brotherhood which encourages them back into the political process, the environment will develop into an even more dangerously exclusive one, encouraging greater intolerance for

Christians and other religious minorities and leading to heightened violence.

Conclusion

In May 2011, President Obama gave a speech outlining a vision for U.S. engagement with the Middle East. It was, he said, "a new chapter in American diplomacy". He said Egypt "can set a strong example through free and fair elections, a vibrant civil society, accountable and effective democratic institutions, and responsible regional leadership...Because democracy depends not only on elections, but also strong and accountable institutions, and the respect for the rights of minorities."

But by September 2013, speaking to the United Nations General Assembly, he was striking a different tone, explaining how now his government's "approach to Egypt reflects a larger point: the United States will at times work with governments that do not meet the highest international expectations, but who work with us on our core interests," earlier defined in the speech as "the Camp David Accords and counter-terrorism." It is dangerously short-sighted to imagine these interests can be sustained without an explicit strategy to promote the values of universal human rights. A common complaint from Egyptian human rights activists is the lack of a coherent U.S. government strategy for prioritizing human rights in Egypt. Excerpts from former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' new book are being translated and featured in Egyptian newspapers. "They reveal a division at the heart of the U.S. government on Egypt, where it's unable to make a consistent policy," said one Egyptian human rights defender.

Leading civil society activists see a vacuum of ideas and leadership on human rights from the American government. Khaled Mansour is executive director of prominent NGO the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. "I'm surprised at how fast the US has abandoned its claims to be pushing a human rights agenda. The ink is barely dry on the May 2011 Obama speech but they're reverting to the old days of so-called realism," he told Human Rights First. "U.S. foreign policy is motivated by too much short-termism. Many American officials don't think further than a year or two ahead, when they'll have moved onto another job and Egypt policy will be someone else's problem."

Statements of support from U.S. senior officials for the Egyptian government's roadmap, including from Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in December 2013, exasperate Egyptian human rights activists. Although Secretary of State John Kerry's response to the referendum vote in January 2014 rightly noted that "it's not one vote that determines a democracy, it's all the steps that follow," and said that the U.S. government hoped Egypt would move "towards an inclusive political process based on the rule of law and respect for the fundamental freedoms of all Egyptians," he missed an opportunity to spell out how it might get there, or what the U.S. might do to help.

While some U.S. officials are promoting long-term American interests in Egypt by pushing for human rights and the rule of law, U.S. leadership in Egypt is now suspect. It is easy to argue, as many do, that the U.S. lacks leverage in this fluid situation and should keep a low profile. But this is a self-fulfilling prescription for U.S. policy failure in an unresolved situation in which multiple outcomes are still possible. There is no need for the United States to surrender its values and further tarnish its international reputation as a global leader on human rights in its relationship with a key regional partner and long-time ally. U.S. efforts should be focused on using the significant leverage it still has, and developing further avenues of influence in a critical relationship for U.S. interests in the region.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Current U.S. policy prioritizes counter-terrorism cooperation, continued implementation of the Camp David accords, maintenance of transit through the Suez Canal and generating contracts to support the U.S. defense manufacturing base through sustaining a steady high level of military assistance to Egypt. The current U.S. trajectory, however, is not on the correct course. An additional priority is necessary—an eventual return to civilian rule through promotion of human rights and the rule of law—in order to advance the stability in Egypt that is essential in order to protect these other interests over the medium and long-term. To implement this priority, the United States should re-orient its approach on how it engages with the Egyptian government and the Egyptian people. Rather than giving its support and seeking cooperation with successive

authoritarian leaders in Cairo for the immediate interests at the expense of human rights and the rule of law, The U.S. should withhold support—and be seen to be doing so—when the government fails to protect universal rights. The United States should do this even if in the short-term other interests might suffer. If this risks immediate anxiety to the bilateral relationship, the consistent message—especially if delivered with other like-minded governments—will produce the intended benefits over time, strengthening those in Egyptian politics who can achieve stability in the long term.

Egyptians must take the lead and assume responsibility for resolving their own political crises. There are many practical steps that the U.S. government should take to demonstrate that it will support Egyptians who take risks to help move the country towards inclusive, civilian government rooted in the rule of law and respect for international human rights standards. If it does not take this opportunity, the United States will inevitably continue to lose credibility and influence in a country it desperately needs to be stable and free if Egypt and other countries in the Middle East are to remain U.S. partners over the long-term.

- The U.S. embassy in Cairo needs to work with embassies from like-minded countries to show consistent and public support for independent civil society, and to explain to the Egyptian public how and why it is supporting democratic values. Through the media and at public appearances U.S. officials should emphasize U.S. commitment to promoting and protecting universal values of human rights throughout the world and not just in Egypt. The U.S. embassy in Cairo should translate into Arabic, and post on its website and otherwise publicize and promote the State Department's policy on engaging with human rights defenders worldwide that was released in March 2013.
- President Obama should signal, in his appointment of the new ambassador to Cairo, someone who brings a fresh, innovative approach to the U.S.-Egypt relationship, someone capable of helping to transform the old and failing approach to government-to-government engagement into something more modern and responsive to the needs of the U-S Egypt partnership. Although it would be unorthodox and might meet resistance in the State Department, a

political appointment rather than a career foreign service appointment should be considered.

- The U.S. still has unmatched leverage on the economic recovery and political reform in Egypt because U.S. approval for the actions of the government in Cairo would trigger support and investment from many other governments, international lending institutions and private investors. Egypt's economy desperately needs liquidity, but an IMF loan absent human rights reforms is a recipe for a new economic crisis and continued instability. Working with its donor partners, the United States should establish sizeable, sustained economic incentives for Egypt's leaders that should be conditioned on Egypt adhering to democratic norms and international human rights standards. The U.S. should use its vote and influence at the IMF to withhold loans to Egypt until sound economic policies are in place and meaningful progress is made on human rights and the rule of law.
- The State Department and USAID should continue to find ways—bilaterally and/or multilaterally—to use targeted funding to support civil society efforts to combat human rights abuses and promote an enabling environment that advances religious pluralism and tolerance.
- Political Islam cannot be excluded from the democratic process if Egypt is to achieve the stability it needs. There must be clear, uniform conditions set for the registration and operation of political parties that agree to be bound by the rules of peaceful, democratic contestation. Promoting sectarian hatred should not be part of any legal party's platform, and those who espouse violence should not be included in the new politics. Claiming inspiration from the nonviolent values of religious traditions, however, must be accommodated.
- The administration was right to set human rights and democracy conditions on military aid to Egypt in July 2013. The Egyptian military leadership holds effective political power in Cairo and if it wishes to benefit from a close, cooperative military relationship with the United States then it must use this power to move Egypt back on to a path of peaceful, inclusive, civilian-led governance. The language of the recently adopted FY14 Omnibus Appropriation appears to weaken human rights and democracy conditions attached to U.S. foreign assistance, which is primarily military assistance, to Egypt. The U.S. is vulnerable, however, if it prioritizes this aid as vehicle to finance U.S. manufacturing lines. Instead, senior U.S. administration officials need to clarify how they proposes to use this lever to promote human rights and democracy in Egypt within this new legislative framework.
- There is a need for much clearer, sustained and consistent public statements from Washington on its assessment of what it thinks is happening in Egypt and the ramifications for U.S. interests, including human rights and democracy. An opaque and political message from the United States on Egypt's political direction has not helped. Top U.S. officials should stop saying that Egypt is on the path to democracy, or that one faction or another has stolen Egypt's revolution.
- In bilateral discussions, senior administration officials should push the Egyptian authorities to investigate all incidents of violence against Christians, assaults on their property and institutions, and hold accountable those responsible. The USG, through the Justice Department, could also make resources available for prosecutions and police trainings.



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