

A Way Ahead in Egypt

Written by Andrew Friedman

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ANDREW FRIEDMAN, DEC 16 2013

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Policy Recommendation:

Egypt is facing a cult of personality problem that has been so prevalent in authoritarian governments throughout history. The best way to stave off an authoritarian backslide is for Egypt and the international community to renew focus on civil society that will provide an alternative to the all-consuming power of the state and serve as a democracy training ground for future leaders. Developing and advancing a robust civil society in Egypt will go further than any other programs in ensuring the country moves towards real representative government.

Analysis:

To say that Egypt is at a crossroads for democracy and human rights has become so cliché that I will do my best to say it just this one time in this post. Egypt is at a crossroads for democracy and human rights. Since the removal of former President Hosni Mubarak things have taken several unexpected turns that have resulted in the ascendance to power of another General and could end in his Presidency. Perhaps no one has better summarized this historical anomaly than Egyptian politician Amr Hamzawy:

“Since July 3, countless secular political parties and movements have stood under their liberal and leftist banners, among them Communists, Socialists, Nasserists, and Arab Nationalists, in support of a military intervention into politics. They supported the removal of an elected president, without early presidential elections. This was despite the fact that elections were a main demand of the crowds that filled the streets on June 30. They supported suspending the constitution (my own opposition to it aside), and establishing ‘democracy’ without recourse to a popular referendum and its ballot boxes.”

Democracy advocates standing center stage and advocating the overthrow of an elected government and a suspension of a dually adopted constitution by the military. If that is confusing, have no fear. I had to read that sentence multiple times, and I’m the one who wrote it.

In addition to this background is the troubling deification of the country’s *de facto* leader, Defense Minister General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. In one example, Dr. Bassem Youssef returned to the air with his political satire show *al-Bernameg* this past Friday to critical reception from both sides. Supporters of the ousted Muslim Brotherhood claim that Dr. Youssef was too easy on the General while the al-Sisi’s supporters decried any attacks while he still wears his military uniform. The strange climate also led to one of the greatest op-eds in human history, mocking the “al-Sisi mania.”

The General’s continued rule is becoming more and more likely with an ever increasing number of ordinary citizens hoping he seeks the Presidency. He is also, apparently, the choice of the military officers who hold huge sway in the country’s body politic. The country’s biggest Salafist party, and something of a kingmaker, Al-Nour, has also recently gone on record stating that they have no objections to an al-Sisi presidential run. The General himself may have

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developed a taste for power, initially saying he would not run but more recently leaving the possibility open.

It is within this context that a cynically minded individual can begin to see an unfortunate pattern. A long-time military leader was ousted by the military to (ostensibly) pave the way for a democratic transition. When elections brought about Muslim Brotherhood dominance and the group appeared to anti-democratically consolidate power they were thrown from power by the same military to (again, ostensibly) bring about a democratic transition. The military has been heralded in both situations from most corners of Egyptian life. Now the military's leader is being anointed in a way that would put him above criticism in the run-up to elections that could easily put him in the Presidential Palace.

Such cycles are what keep democracy advocates in Egypt and worldwide awake at night. A generation of Egyptians has woken up under the totalitarian thumb of military dictatorships with a brief respite for elections and a semi-totalitarian Muslim Brotherhood. So how can the country (and similarly situated states) turn the tide on such self-perpetuating cycles? The answer can only be found in an increased focus on developing civil society institutions.

Civil society, including advocacy groups of all stripes and (especially) an increased focus on *independent* and voluntary unions, could do more to give democracy a soft landing than any other policy shift. Among the areas where civil society is vital and has been successful in previous democratization or reconstruction efforts are:

1. Limiting the total power of the state
2. Exposing Corruption
3. Promoting popular political participation
4. Ensuring *positive* engagement with the state structure
5. Developing democratic values through elections/mass participation
6. Ensuring *positive* civic education in schools and mass media participation
7. Acting as interest/advocacy outlets for diverse groups
8. Promoting connections outside ethnic, linguistic, tribal or religious circles
9. Acting as a training ground for future political leadership
10. Mediating and resolving conflicts within the group and diverse memberships

These areas read like a laundry list of eve- present issues within Egypt and most transitioning states. An increased focus on the development of civil society within Egypt serves to create a fertile ground for democratization and avoid the type of authoritarian backslides that so trouble democracy advocates.

There has been some movement towards this within the country along with indications from foreign leaders that future internationally funded programs will include a "...cross-section of civil society." but this rhetoric needs to be backed up with concrete efforts and a profound commitment. It has been said that when historians look back at the Arab revolutions they will see that the greatest success was that citizens of long-time autocracies learned they were able to collectively stand up and demand rights. No one knows what the immediate future holds, but a well-developed civil society is the only way to ensure that the brave citizens that have repeatedly taken to Tahrir Square will have the skills and networks to break the troubling authoritarian cycle.

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Andrew Friedman (@AndrewBFriedman) is a human rights attorney and consultant who works and writes on legal reform and constitutional law in post-atrocity settings.