

Long Game, Hard Choices: The Obama Administration and Democracy in Egypt

Written by Nicolas Bouchet

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NICOLAS BOUCHET, SEP 6 2016

Three years ago, a military coup ended Egypt's shaky attempt at transition from decades of dictatorship to democracy. The coup has been followed by a sharp deterioration in human and civil rights in the country. Even before this, though, Egypt was the most important test for US democracy promotion under President Barack Obama as a result of the events since the 2011 revolution. How his administration handled this also illuminates broader points regarding this dimension of US foreign policy.

Obama's initial policy was much in continuity with previous US experience when it comes to democracy promotion and Egypt. Then, as a result of the revolution, there was a genuine but short-lived break from tradition in trying to support the transition. In Obama's final year in office, however, the United States has returned to the historically mainstream approach of mostly ignoring democracy in Egypt – and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

From Mubarak to Morsi to Sisi

American democracy promotion plays out in different contexts, depending on how the country concerned combines different characteristics – whether it is strategically important, whether it is a US ally, its domestic and/or international security situation, its degree and type of 'non-democracy', and whether it is experiencing internal democratization or counter-democratization pressures. During the timespan of most administrations, democracy promotion toward any country usually happens within one or two contexts. The experience of Obama's is unusual for having been faced in Egypt with effectively five contexts. They are:

- in relations with a long-entrenched autocratic ally under President Hosni Mubarak (2009–10);
- in reaction to a 'pro-democracy' crisis during the revolution (early 2011),
- in supporting an attempted transition under the military and then the elected Morsi (early 2011 to mid-2013);
- in reaction to an 'anti-democracy' crisis around the coup against President Mohammed Morsi (mid-2013); and
- in relations with an autocratic ally following a transition breakdown under Abdul Fatah al-Sisi (mid-2013 to date).

Throughout, Obama's handling of Egypt showed contradictions, with policy swinging toward and away from democracy promotion not just from one context to the next but also within each one. In the latter case, that is because there was to some extent a pattern in which the United States initially soft-pedalled democracy as it engaged with whichever rulers it was faced with at any point (Mubarak, the military or Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood) before becoming disillusioned and somewhat more critical. So far the second part of this pattern has not been noticed in relation to Sisi's regime, with the United States not showing any noticeable democracy pressure.

By the time Obama had taken office, a period of limited liberalization in Egypt in the mid-2000s had been followed by a wave of repression. The 2010 parliamentary elections were described as perhaps the most rigged in the country's history. Then the revolution against of 2011 was followed by two years of political turmoil as the military, the Muslim Brotherhood and other secular and Islamist forces confronted each other over a new constitution and political

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institutions as well as contesting parliamentary and presidential elections, while civil unrest grew. At the same time, the military worked to entrench its power and clashed with the Muslim Brotherhood and its elected president.

Since the military ousted Morsi in 2013, the political situation has deteriorated further with a severe crackdown on the Brotherhood and opposition forces. The curtailment of political and civil rights, the use of lethal force against protesters, the thousands of arrests and issuing of prison or death sentences for opponents, and the disappearance and torture of detainees has been extensively documented.^[1] Independent media and civil society have been suppressed systematically.

The deeply flawed process for a new constitution and the one-sided 2014 presidential election cast serious doubt over the military's "road map" for restoring democracy after the coup. In fact the military has re-established its dominance. The delayed and heavily criticized 2015 parliamentary elections excluded opposition forces and returned almost exclusively pro-regime candidates. After leading the coup and leaving the army to 'run' for president, Sisi has shown no commitment to democracy. In fact, political repression and human-rights abuses have worsened under him.^[2]

American Actions and Reactions

After the end of the Cold War, democracy promotion rose up the US foreign policy agenda to some degree in most regions of the world. The exception was in the MENA where security interests led to ruling out upsetting the regional order by criticizing or challenging deeply autocratic allies. Not only did the United States abstain from backing democratic change, it supported the status quo since most of the region's rulers followed its foreign policy line, whereas alternative ones that would be more accountable to domestic public opinion would likely not.^[3]

There were thus only minimal US attempts at nudging allies in the MENA toward superficial reforms and some assistance to unthreatening civil society and political actors.^[4] The presidency of George W. Bush saw the first break with the MENA exception in democracy promotion. In Egypt there were diplomatic efforts to encourage reform and greater support for more politically substantive civil society for a couple of years in the mid-2000s. But Bush ultimately was unwilling to challenge Mubarak as repression rose. After 2006, funding for democracy assistance continued but diplomatic pressure ended. The United States reverted to the non-confrontational approach of encouraging economic reforms that might create the preconditions for democratic progress.^[5]

In 2009–10, the Obama administration's policy toward Egypt mostly continued this approach, with more attention focused on partnership over the Palestinian-Israeli peace process and counterterrorism. There was low-key and unpublicized engagement with the issue of democracy, which could have been stronger without affecting the overall attempt to walk back from Bush's more controversial positions on democracy promotion. Obama made democracy a central element of engagement with the Arab world in his 2009 Cairo speech. This did not directly challenge the region's autocrats, being rather another example of trying to nudge them into reforming. At the same time, however, there was not much of an effort to support Egypt's civil society and only limited criticism of Mubarak for muzzling it or for rigging the 2010 elections.^[6]

The Egyptian revolution of 2011 was the greatest democracy crisis-management test of Obama's presidency. His handling of it was above all pragmatic, trying to preserve US interests vested in the relationship with Mubarak and the military while attempting to push for an 'orderly transition' once it became clear he could not survive.^[7] The immediate US reaction was ad hoc and reactive, but it is hard to see how it could have been much better. The administration used its ties to the military to discourage the use of force against protesters. In a strategically important country, it not only gave up the traditional US preference (nudging an ally) but also its second-best option (regime-managed transition).^[8] The change of policy toward Mubarak showed a quick adjustment to a rapidly changing situation in favour of democracy that compares well with reactions to similar cases in the past.

From 2011 to 2013, the Obama administration tried to support Egypt's increasingly turbulent transition under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and then under Morsi. It made public statements on democracy and supported holding elections for transferring power to a legitimate parliament and president. Its acceptance of elected

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Islamists and attempt to work with them was a major break with previous policy. But then there was also the gradual failure of this policy in keeping up with a deteriorating situation shaped by the democratic shortcomings of the Muslim Brotherhood and the military alike.

In May 2011, Obama stated that the United States would 'support reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy' with economic support and democracy assistance. Many saw this as a landmark US statement on the side of democracy in the MENA but follow-through was disappointing and hampered by inability to provide large-scale economic assistance. The administration's efforts to help the transition did not erase the primacy of security interests either. Thus it did not react much to the SCAF's neutering of the transition or to authoritarian moves by the Brotherhood. Even the prosecution of American and local employees of US democracy NGOs did not lead to a strong public response. The administration did not sanction Morsi for his behaviour since he did not challenge US foreign policy. Rising US frustration only led to a slow increase in criticism, but mostly in broad terms and by lower-level officials.

The Obama administration appears to have underestimated the danger of the situation in the lead-up to the coup against Morsi in July 2013 and reacted too late to try to dissuade the military. Just how hard it tried is also in question. The decision not to call Morsi's removal a coup was a greater failure. While it may be understandable in the wider security context, purely in terms of democracy promotion this failure to apply a minimal standard regarding the fate of an elected leader undermined US credibility in this field across the region and globally. It is hard to find anything positive in the policy toward Egypt since the coup with regard to democracy and human rights. The long to-and-fro over the suspension of military aid effectively achieved nothing. There has been some criticism of the Sisi regime, including in the Department of State's annual human-rights reports, but this has not been given a high profile, especially placed alongside the frequent praise by senior officials like Secretary of State John Kerry, including for supposedly implementing the democracy road map. Three years since the coup, and with the country's growing domestic security problems, the United States is effectively back to its Mubarak-era policy toward Egypt.

The Long Game and Hard Choices

The experience of the Obama administration with Egypt sheds light on key themes regarding its democracy promotion in the MENA and globally. The first lesson – and one from which others flow to a great extent– reaffirms the centrality of the beliefs, personality and foreign-policy approach of each president to how US democracy promotion plays out. Given how concentrated in the White House the foreign policy process has been under Obama, and the fact that his administration's main democracy advocates have been mostly in the White House staff rather than the State Department and other agencies, his personality and views maybe even matter more than did those of his predecessors.

There has been a growing view as Obama's presidency unfolded that he is a realist. This image is also reinforced by the fact that he is less given than his predecessors to wrap his talk of democracy in the banner of America's special mission as champion of freedom. This impression can be overdone, however. Obama's analysis of international issues and of what the United States can and cannot do in the world is fairly realist, but he also expresses liberal understandings and prescriptions, including concerning the importance of democracy and human rights.

Obama shows a mix of realism and liberalism in his worldview – and this is how he sees himself[9] – while in his actions (and inaction) he has been above all pragmatic and cautious. This makes him more a temperamentally realistic president than a purely intellectually realist one. There does appear, though, to have been a shift to greater realism, or maybe pessimism, in Obama's views with regard to democracy promotion, at least in the MENA as result of the outcomes of the Arab Spring and the conflicts that have erupted in the region since. His personality and mix of realism and liberalism have set the broad lines within which his administration's democracy promotion toward Egypt, the MENA and elsewhere has developed.

Key themes stand out. Most important is recognition and acceptance of the limits of US power and agency, in general and especially in the political development of other countries. There has been a consistent stress in the administration's democracy talk and practice on the impossibility of the external imposition of norms and institutions.

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While this has long been part of US rhetoric, under Obama it has been given more than lip service, leading to accusations of timidity in advocating democratic values. Connected to recognition of the limits of US power, democracy promotion has also been shaped by Obama's overall strategy of retrenchment through a strong prioritization of issues, regions and countries as well as a willingness to cut losses.[10] It has also been shaped by his wish to avoid too costly commitments abroad and to disengage from existing ones, especially in the MENA.

The ebb and flow of Obama's democracy and Egypt policies need to be seen in the context of their respective salience in MENA policy, and also in the context of the relative importance of the region in his wider foreign policy. Just as retrenchment has led to a strong attempt at prioritization among regions, issues and countries in overall foreign policy, so within overall democracy promotion countries like Egypt have been demoted when it began to look the US efforts would have limited near-term returns. Prioritization within MENA policy has also been evident in Obama's second term with a tighter focus on Iran, Syria, Islamic State and counterterrorism, and the relegation of countries like Egypt and issues like democracy to the regional second rank.

From the start, the Obama administration showed willingness to assess situations realistically and to change tack where it saw that its wishes regarding democracy were not easily realizable, as well as to admit frankly and publicly that the United States' actions sometimes would not accord with its proclaimed ideals. This was a welcome development in light of the exaggerated language of previous administrations, but in Obama's second term explanations as to why the United States sometime relegates democracy in the interest of security in the MENA have sounded more like a regurgitation of the old 'friendly tyrants' argument than refreshing candour. With regard to Egypt in particular, the reaction to the coup and what has followed has left the United States once more wide open to accusations of hypocrisy and double standards.

Perhaps the most important consequence of Obama's overall mindset for democracy promotion has been that taking a long-term view – the 'long game' – became increasingly a central feature of the administration's discourse, focusing on more gradual and developmental change, as well as making policy less interventionist and respectful of other countries' choices. This welcome move has taken place alongside the consolidation of a narrative that the MENA transitions were hijacked by extremists and, with a nod to Egypt under Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, that elected governments also have to govern justly – but also that democracy will be achieved in the long term however bad the situation in most countries may now be. Obama has spoken frequently about the inevitability of democracy, as part of his tendency to speak of 'the arc of history' and being on the 'the right side of history'. In his second term, the concept of strategic patience (as exemplified in the 2015 National Security Strategy) came to reflect this long-term view, which in the MENA was reinforced by the turbulent aftermath of the Libya intervention in 2011.

While Obama influenced democracy promotion toward the long-term, his pragmatism has led to talk that it should be more opportunistic and select targets where results can be achieved as and when they present themselves. Patience and opportunism do not necessarily have to be in contradiction. Both can be suited to the reality of what has been described as the new 'global marketplace of political change'. But the mix of the long game and pragmatic opportunism could easily turn into reactivity, passivity or even inactivity, providing excuses to wait for something to happen in countries rather than trying to support proactively democratization processes and actors in the more difficult contexts. The long game therefore risks morphing into a wait-and-see approach in which the United States need not do much at any given moment to move things along toward democracy, especially if it is eventually inevitable.

Another consequence of Obama's realist-idealist mix was that, in his first term, he and his aides regularly indulged in the traditional US rhetoric proclaiming a false choice between pursuing democratic ideals and other foreign-policy goals. At the same time, as noted above, they were also frank about sometimes having to choose other interests over democracy. This was more an evolution away rather than a sharp break from the optimistic pronouncements since the end of the Cold War about the ease of promoting simultaneously democracy and security and economic interests.

In Obama's second term, though, there has been a shift to a rhetoric of hard or imperfect choices in the traditional security-democracy dilemma. This has been particularly noticeable in relation to the increasingly prioritized agenda of countering violent extremism (CVE), which is mostly directed at the MENA. Obama and others argue that democracy

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and human rights are a necessary part of CVE (in continuation of the earlier inclusion of democratization as a remedy for terrorism under Bush) but they do so while also stressing more that the United States finds itself forced to make imperfect choices. So far, though, the choices relating to CVE across the region have fallen usually on the security side rather than the democracy one.

The Obama administration does not like the democracy and human-rights situation in Egypt under Sisi but this is not deemed critical enough to warrant changing radically a bilateral relationship now heavily framed by the CVE agenda. The danger, however, is that the coup and repression of the Muslim Brotherhood and other regime critics has galvanized violent radical Islamists, notably in the Sinai Peninsula, and led to a rise in Jihadi attacks against state targets and the prospect of a wider armed rebellion. Obama's choice in Egypt, starting with not making a coup determination, has been to live with an unsatisfactory status quo in which democracy lost out. In fact, in his second term his administration has backed away in Egypt and in the region from the hard choice of taking the long-term democracy bet and taken the easier, reflexive short-term security option.

Finally, during Obama's presidency, the United States has recognized increasingly the threat posed to democracy and democracy promotion by the 'closing space' – i.e. attempts by governments to curtail the freedom of civil society and to cut it off from outside support. The administration has tried to combat this trend and has created funds and institutional structures to that end, including multilateral ones in the Embattled CSO Assistance Fund and the Open Government Partnership. As well as reacting to a global phenomenon that predates Obama's presidency, this focus on defending civil society and reaffirming its right to receive transnational support is a logical component of the view of democratization as an organic process that must be 'owned' locally with external actors in a background supportive role. While not only a MENA issue, the closing space is clearly a central element of the deteriorating situation in Egypt, as shown by the prosecution of democracy NGOs and civil society actors in general. So far, however, there has been little evidence that the administration's growing stance against the closing space globally has led to a significant rethink as to how and how much to support democratic civil society in Egypt against the wishes of the vociferously nationalistic Sisi regime.

Conclusion

Egypt can be seen as the key case in the partial attempt by the United States to abandon the long-established MENA exception in democracy promotion. Under Bush and Obama, there was, if not a wholehearted embrace of democracy promotion in the region, willingness for the first time to incorporate it to some extent at least in policy. The United States' reaction to events of the last five years there, however, especially in Egypt since the 2013 coup, suggests that it may have returned to the MENA exception. If that is true, then Egypt exemplified the initial opening toward democracy promotion and its subsequent closing off.

It looks as though the MENA democracy promotion exception is back for now, given the security situation in the region and the increasingly dominant CVE agenda. After the Cold War, US administrations leaned toward greater inclusion of democracy promotion in foreign policy, including eventually to some extent in the MENA. Obama's second term may have witnessed the start of a turning away from that choice in the region. If this is confirmed over a longer time, it might even prove a harbinger for US democracy promotion globally since the questions of hard choices between democracy and other interests, and those of declining US leverage, are likely to be replicated in other regions in light of long-term power shifts at the global level. Future presidents could find themselves confronted with a world in which the exception that was reserved for MENA may have to be applied elsewhere – or even becoming the norm.

However, while the Obama administration has retreated in democracy promotion compared to its engagement in Egypt in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, it may be premature to say that the wheel has turned completely back to the MENA exception. For one thing the experiences of the Arab Spring, good and bad, cannot be erased and the United States will eventually have no choice but to factor in its foreign policy the popular political aspirations in the region. It is unlikely that it will be able simply to go back to the status quo ante.

Notes

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