

OPENING STATEMENT

Egypt is at a critical turning point. It is facing substantial leadership changes in the near future without a fair and transparent process. However, with three sets of elections coming up over the next 18 months, Egypt now has the opportunity to energize a process of political, economic, and social reform. If the government responds to demands for responsible political change, Egypt can face the future with strong domestic and international support. If, on the other hand, the opportunity for reform is missed, prospects for stability and prosperity in Egypt will be in doubt.

This would have serious consequences for the United States, Egypt's neighbors, the US-Egyptian relationship and regional stability. As a close partner of Egypt and a provider of substantial military and economic assistance, the United States has a stake in the path Egypt takes. The United States is known by the friends it chooses to support. American support for authoritarian regimes tarnishes U.S. credentials, contributing to what President Obama has called the "cycle of suspicion and discord" between the United States and Muslim peoples and undermining America's credibility as a champion of universal principles. At a time when the United States is bringing international pressure to bear on what Secretary Clinton has called the "military dictatorship" of Iran, the United States risks being charged with hypocrisy if it ignores the need for political reform in an allied nation such as Egypt. If the United States is to advance its interests across the broader Middle East, then it must uphold its democratic values and urge its friends to choose the rule of law and free and fair elections.

Political reform is in Egypt's own best interests. It is wrong to assume that Egypt can continue to grow and prosper in the absence of political reform. Stasis is not the answer. Egypt is facing a challenge from a growing youth bulge requiring hundreds of thousands of new jobs over the next few years. To fulfill expectations and prevent the onset of frustration and radicalism, Egypt has a strong interest in expanding citizens' say in how they are governed. Successful reform would also bolster Egypt's leadership in the region, for it will inevitably help shape politics in the Middle East and the Arab world in beneficial ways.

The choice is not between a stable and predictable but undemocratic Egypt on the one hand, and dangerous instability and extremism on the other. There is now, still, an opportunity to support gradual, responsible democratic reform. But the longer the United States and the world wait to support democratic institutions and responsible political change in Egypt, the longer the public voice will be stifled and the harder it will be to reverse a dangerous trend.

Therefore, we urge the U.S. government – beginning with the President and the Secretary of State and proceeding throughout our foreign policy bureaucracy – to view as a high priority the promotion of democratic reform in Egypt and to give advocacy for such reform a top spot on the agenda of U.S.-Egyptian relations. Specifically, we urge the U.S. government to work for the inclusion in Egyptian law and practice of the following universal principles:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 21) lays out standards for free elections:

"(1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

(2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.

(3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures."

By this measure, the U.S. should urge Egypt to modify both laws and practices in order to hold parliamentary and presidential elections in 2010 and 2011 that could be deemed free and fair.

(1) In order to guarantee citizens "the right to take part in the government," the U.S. should urge Egypt to:

- Ensure that all candidates can register for parliamentary elections;
- Allow candidates to campaign freely and have access to all media;
- Cancel the three-decades-old state of emergency, which significantly restricts the freedom of assembly that is critical to political campaigns, and legislate in its place a comprehensive anti-terrorism statute which respects civil liberties
- Modify the Political Parties Law to lift legal and practical restrictions on the formation of meaningful new political parties;
- Amend Article 76 of the Constitution to lift restrictions on the nomination of party and independent candidates for the presidency;
- Modify Article 77 of the Constitution to reinstate term limits for the president.

(2) In order to guarantee "universal and equal suffrage," the U.S. should urge Egypt to::

- Allow voting on the basis of the National ID card instead of voter cards and outdated lists, which would increase eligible voters by an estimated 20 million;
- Keep uniformed and plainclothes security forces away from polling places in order to prevent coercion and allow voters full access.

(3) In order to guarantee "free voting procedures," the U.S. should urge Egypt to:

- Permit and facilitate international and domestic monitoring of the entire electoral process, from the registration of candidates to the announcement of results;
- Amend Article 88 of the Constitution to reinstate full judicial supervision of voting and counting in elections.

We believe these measures – virtually all of which were endorsed by the United States in its recent statement on Egypt to the United National Human Rights Council in Geneva -- will guarantee that the people of Egypt enjoy free and fair elections in accordance with universal principles, an essential building block of a healthy and vibrant U.S.-Egyptian strategic partnership.