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The Two Likeliest Political Outcomes for Mubarak

Egyptian society needs time to prepare for free elections and to remediate years of government oppression.

By Stephen J. Hadley

All eyes are now on Egypt and an Obama administration struggling to find its footing. The truth is that once revolutionary fervor emerges and a situation descends into crisis, any administration is largely hostage to events and the dilemmas are acute. Do we desert a longstanding ally, only to raise doubts about our staying power in the minds of other longstanding allies? Do we remain loyal to a longstanding ally even after he has clearly lost public support, only to alienate a people struggling to win their freedom? In the midst of a crisis like this, the options are few.

Before the current crisis, there were good options. They were urged on the Egyptian government by a series of American administrations—including especially the administration of George W. Bush, in which I served. The United States pressed President Hosni Mubarak publicly and privately to encourage the emergence of non-Islamist political parties. Our calls for action were generally ignored and non-Islamist parties were persecuted and suppressed.

The result was a political landscape that offered the Egyptian people just two choices: the government party (the National Democratic Party or NDP) and the underground Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. This sad outcome was President Mubarak's own creation. He did it in part so that he could argue to successive U.S. administrations and his own people that the only alternative to his rule was an Islamist state. But it didn't have to be this way.

Some critics argue that no U.S. administration went far enough in

pressing President Mubarak—including the administrations in which I served. As important as the "freedom agenda" was to President Bush, there were other issues—terrorism, proliferation, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to name a few—that required us to deal with the Egyptian government. Perhaps as important, the Egyptians are a proud people. No nation wants to be seen to be giving in to public pressure from another state—even a close ally. In the end, the decision was President Mubarak's. He made it, and he is now facing the consequences.

At present, the two most probable outcomes of the current crisis are a lame-duck Mubarak administration or a Mubarak departure from power in favor of a transitional government backed by the Egyptian military.

Under the first outcome, President Mubarak rides out the current crisis. Presidential elections are expected in September of this year. It seems unlikely that either President Mubarak or his son Gamal will conclude that under current circumstances they can run and win. That will leave President Mubarak presiding over a lame-duck administration. The issue will be whether he seeks to transfer power to another authoritarian strongman backed by the army or dramatically changes course and uses the upcoming presidential election to create a democratic transition for his country.

The precedents for this latter outcome are few but not nonexistent. It is essentially the role that the Bush administration urged on Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, which he played successfully in 2008. The resulting government is admittedly a weak one that continues to cause the U.S. real problems in Afghanistan. But it is a democratic government, and by its coming to power we avoided the kind of Islamist regime that followed the fall of the Shah of Iran and that has provoked three decades of serious confrontation with the U.S. and totalitarian oppression of the Iranian people.

Under the second outcome, President Mubarak surrenders power and is replaced by a transitional government supported by the Egyptian military. The presidential elections then become the vehicle for transferring power to a government whose legitimacy comes from the people.

Either way, Egyptian society needs time to prepare for these elections and to begin to remediate the effects of years of government oppression. The Egyptian people should not have to choose only between the government-backed NDP and the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. Non-Islamist parties need an opportunity to emerge to fill in the intervening political space. Time is short even if the presidential elections go forward as expected in September. The U.S. should resist the temptation to press for an accelerated election schedule. Hopefully wise heads in Egypt will do the same.

Time and a full array of political alternatives are critical in the upcoming presidential election and the parliamentary elections that undoubtedly will follow. If given an array of choices, I believe that the Egyptian people will choose a democratic future of freedom and not an Islamist future of imposed extremism. While the Muslim Brotherhood, if legalized, would certainly win seats in a new parliament, there is every likelihood that the next Egyptian government will not be a Muslim Brotherhood government but a non-Islamist one committed to building a free and democratic Egypt.

Such a government would still pose real challenges to U.S. policy in many areas. But with all eyes in the region on Egypt, it would be a good outcome nonetheless. With a large population and rich cultural heritage, Egypt has always been a leader in the Middle East. Now it has the opportunity to become what it always should have been—the leader of a movement toward freedom and democracy in the Arab world.

Mr. Hadley was national security adviser to President Bush.