



Constitutionalism and Political Reform in Egypt

Speakers

- Dr. Nathan Brown, Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, The George Washington University
- Dr. Samer S. Shehata, Visiting Professor, Georgetown University

Moderator

- Ambassador Nicholas Veliotes, Chairman, USEF

On February 16, 2005, the United States Egypt Friendship Society (USEF), in conjunction with The George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, hosted a presentation on constitutionalism and political reform in Egypt at The Elliott School.

Professor Brown opened the event with a brief history of Egyptian constitutions. The nation began experimenting with constitutionalism in 1882 and succeeded in creating a document that achieved some success in circumscribing the power of government. However, the document was largely pushed aside as the British asserted more control over Egypt in the coming years. In 1923, a new commission was formed and given the task of drafting a constitution for what would become a constitutional monarchy under British tutelage. This second attempt to bring constitutional rule to Egypt rule was largely unsuccessful as neither the new monarchs and their British backers nor their successor, General Gamal Abdel Nasser, were willing to surrender much power.

In 1971, shortly after Nasser's death, Egypt drafted a new constitution which remains in effect today. However, this constitution, like its predecessor, has had little success in setting limits for government. This failure is the result, in part, of problems with the document itself. Given that Egypt is essentially a single party state, much of the document's wording is inherently circular and allows the party to be its own check on power. In addition to these problems with the document's democratic robustness, those in power have decided on numerous occasions to disregard the document entirely.

Through the 1970's and 1980's there were moves to bring out the more liberal elements of the constitution, but these generally stalled. There has been a long-standing effort to end the state of emergency rule that has existed since 1981, and, more recently, reformers have pushed for a constitutional amendment to ensure open presidential elections. Brown concluded by saying that he saw little chance for the reformers to overcome the government's opposition to these changes unless they could mobilize more widespread popular support.

After this historical overview, the presentation shifted to Professor Shehata and his observations on the current state of political reform in Egypt. Professor Shehata noted

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that there have been efforts to reform the government from the inside over the last few years, but the more interesting developments, in his opinion, were occurring outside of government where there is a growing desire for change.

Professor Shehata outlined three “crises” that have helped give a political voice to average Egyptians. Downturns in the economy and the depreciation of the Egyptian pound have affected the standard of living for many and sparked discontent. Debate over a successor to President Mubarak has intensified in recent years as Mubarak, who will turn 77 this year, has shown signs of poor health. Finally, there has been growing willingness amongst the masses to mobilize and risk government reprisals during protests. The targets of these protests have often been U.S. policies in the region – thousands have demonstrated against the U.S. invasion of Iraq and many have joined in boycotts of U.S. goods. The protesters have often linked this anger towards America to their dissatisfaction with the management of Egypt’s internal and external affairs.

The last six months have brought accelerated political and economic change to the country. As the presidential election approaches, the voices for reform have grown louder, and the regime has responded by trying to manage the political discourse and demonstrate progress. Despite the increased debate, Mr. Shehata echoed Mr. Brown in saying that wide-scale change will remain elusive until opposition leaders succeed in fully mobilizing average citizens.

The floor was then given over to Mr. Khaled Dawoud who gave a brief history of the Egyptian media and discussed the contemporary news environment. In 1960, the Egyptian media was nationalized and the print media consolidated into three main government-run papers, one of which is Mr. Dawoud’s *Al-Ahram*. While the spectrum of journalistic freedom has expanded and contracted over the years, the media continues to function as a government mouthpiece.

Today the government still exercises a good deal of control, but Dawoud, like Shehata, remarked on the surprising changes he has seen in Egypt over the last few years. Criticisms of the government that would never have appeared before now run in the government press, and no one is quite sure where the “red lines” of censorship are drawn. Dawoud concluded by saying that the government remains in a difficult position of trying to balance the desire for openness and debate with the need for stability.

Q&A Highlights

Q: What would happen if the ban on religious parties were rescinded?

A: So far the government has been reluctant to allow any religious parties to join the system. A party that is a milder form of the Muslim Brotherhood was recently denied party status which is unfortunate because it would be good to allow religious young people a voice in the political debate.

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Q: Is there a role for outside powers such as the United States in starting democracy in Egypt? What would that role be?

A: It is important for the United States to recognize that there is already an on-going dialogue about democracy in Egypt and that any efforts it makes are likely to be greeted with cynicism and suspicion. The United States has already spurred dialogue inadvertently through its policies towards Iraq and Israel. These actions have forced many in the opposition to distance themselves from the United States. However, the United States and the European Union still hold a great deal of leverage over official Egypt through their generous foreign aid contributions. By tying aid to a timetable for political reform, the United States could force greater openness and participation in the system. Indeed, outside powers have a long history of spurring structural changes in Europe.

Q: What has been the effect of satellite television on the media environment?

A: International satellite stations and their live broadcasts have made it more difficult for the government to hide what is happening in the country.

Q: What can be done to keep the government from using its instruments of organized violence against the people of Egypt?

A: The government's domestic security force now stands at 400,000 men, while the national army has only 300,000 personnel. Clearly the government is concerned about internal security and has the capability to quash dissent. Many in the opposition are taking a legalistic approach and trying to change the laws under which the state operates. Others, such as those associated with the Ibn Khaldoun Center, are trying to spark change through civil disobedience. Recently, individuals associated with the center staged protests in four cities without obtaining permits. By bringing foreign media reporters with them, these protesters managed to avoid direct clashes with the security forces.

Q: What is the status of refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa who are now in Egypt?

A: In general there is unwillingness among ordinary Egyptian to sympathize with those who have fled from other countries, and many support the heavy tactics that have been used to crush dissent among these residents.

Q: Speaking concretely, what has to happen for constitutional reform to take place?

A: Many parts of the Egyptian system now operate outside the framework of the constitution, making the document rather irrelevant to the major debates occurring in the country. Until the opposition can spark popular support for constitutional reform, there is little likelihood of change in the short term.