

# Revolution and Democracy in Egypt

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The term revolution has been used by many people to describe the ongoing demonstrations in Egypt. Additionally, part of the narrative about these events is that the revolution will lead to democracy as most revolutions do. This narrative, however, should be viewed, at this time, as aspirational. It is obviously possible that we will see a revolution in Egypt from which democracy will grow, but it is very far from certain that this is what will happen there.

History has shown both that revolutions are rare and not the inevitable outcome of large, even massive street demonstrations, and that when most authoritarian regimes are overthrown, they are not replaced by democracies. Moreover, while some democracies, notably those in countries of Eastern Europe like Poland or the Czech Republic as well as the Baltic states arise out of events that could be described as revolutions, most democracies take a very long time to evolve. The American democratic revolution, for example, lasted roughly two centuries beginning with the American Revolution in 1776 which brought independence, followed a few years later by the creation and approval of the U.S. Constitution, and ending when apartheid in the American south was brought to an end with the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts in 1964 and 1965. Some other democracies, Germany and Japan, for example, grew out of military defeat, occupation and enormous commitment of resources from other democratic countries.

Revolutions do not inexorably or even usually lead to democracy. The Russian, Chinese, and Iranian Revolutions, the biggest revolutions of the 20th century, did not lead to democracies but replaced old authoritarian regimes with new authoritarian regimes. Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union gave way to democracy in some places, but to non-democratic regimes in others. These realities should not be misused to create an argument for continued support for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, or to raise fears about an Islamist takeover in Egypt, but to recognize the difficulty of the tasks facing the Egyptian democrats, and their allies once Mubarak leaves power and to craft a policy that reflects this.

Because of this revolution narrative, the question of the future of Egypt has been reduced by much of the media to three possible scenarios. First, Mubarak or a successor remains in power, restabilizes the country and gets the regime back on track; second the Muslim Brotherhood takes over leading to an Islamist regime that is hostile to the U.S. and to Israel; and third liberal democracy grows out of the streets of Cairo and Egypt becomes a beacon of democracy in the Middle East. [Roger Cohen's suggestion that Egypt is either Iran in 1979 or Eastern Europe in 1989](#) is illustrative of this approach and seems to ignore the possibility of any other more complex outcome.

The Muslim Brotherhood scenario has been embraced by the far right, perhaps most notably, or at least most bizarrely, in the [clownish fear-mongering rantings of Glenn Beck](#) who believes that Egypt is going to become part of a trans-Arab caliphate if we abandon Mubarak. While Beck's allegations of a Communist-Jihadist plot sound increasingly unhinged, the possibility that fundamentalist Islam will be one of the ideologies vying for, and sharing, power in post-Mubarak Egypt is very real. Advocates of democracy should recognize that a democratic Egypt must have all voices, including those of the Muslim Brotherhood, represented, but also that there is a possibility of an illiberal semi-authoritarian regime emerging if the fundamentalists are strong and institutions are weak.

The most likely outcome in Egypt, if history is any guide, will be that none of these three scenarios will come to pass. Instead, something else, probably some hybrid of two or more of these outcomes will arise out of the ashes of the Mubarak regime. We may see a semi-democratic Egypt where the Muslim Brotherhood has a far stronger presence, and where elections are better, but still not fully free and fair. A more democratic Egypt might emerge, but with the military continuing to play a major role in political life and with widespread corruption. These outcomes, or any of the other innumerable possibilities, will require a nuanced policy from the U.S and will have a significant impact on the politics of the region. Because of the U.S. support of the Mubarak regime, the U.S. may be substantially relegated to the sidelines when post-Mubarak Egypt begins to take shape, but it must be prepared for a post-Mubarak transition in Egypt that will probably be complex and unfinished for at least a few years.