

# Obama's Baffling Response to Egypt

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The Obama administration is behind the curve and sounds strangely out of it with regards to the developing situation in Egypt. Although this is not altogether surprising, it is still disappointing. The U.S. policy towards Egypt, as well as other countries in that region — essentially providing financial and other support to non-democratic leaders in exchange for some stability and cooperation on some security related interests — was always a short term strategy which could never last for very long. In fairness to the administration, this policy has been a bipartisan problem which has gone on for decades, but, it has exploded now during the Obama administration's watch.

Some of the public statements from the administration are quite baffling. On January 28th, when the demonstrations were already well under way, [President Obama remarked "the United States will continue to stand up for the rights of the Egyptian people and work with their government in pursuit of a future that is more just, more free and more hopeful."](#) On January 30th, [Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that "we want to see a transition to democracy, and we want to see the kind of steps taken that will bring that about. We also want to see an orderly transition."](#) "These comments are not so much wrong, although empirically President Obama's remarks are probably inaccurate, as they are a day late and a dollar short. Actually, they are more like three decades late and several billion dollars short. Significantly these statements demonstrate the wide gap, which does not appear to be getting any narrower under the current administration, between how the U.S. government views the U.S. role in the world and how the rest of the world views that role. The President's use of the word "continue" suggests that he thinks that the U.S. has stood up for the rights of the Egyptian people in the past. While the U.S. has made the occasional statement about human rights, and even committed money to those causes, these statements and commitments have been dwarfed by the far larger U.S. commitment of resources to an Egyptian regime that has consistently abused human rights and restricted freedom.

Secretary Clinton's remarks are relatively benign but her words amount to little more than platitudes. Of course the U.S. wants to see an orderly transition as well as meaningful democracy in Egypt, but American ability to influence that outcome and American leverage in Egypt is severely compromised by several decades of U.S. policy in Egypt. Demonstrators in Egypt may be justifiably reluctant to turn to the U.S. for guidance once, as is inevitable, Mubarak leaves office. Thus Clinton's comment is little more than a statement of American preferences which also may underscore the lack of American power in Egypt and perhaps the region.

The problem with pursuing short term policies, as the U.S. has done for decades in Egypt and elsewhere, is that there is always a good argument for continuing them. Reversing course or even significantly modifying the course is difficult and involves tremendous

uncertainty, so it is always easier to postpone change until another day, another year or another administration. However, when the policy begins to backfire, as is occurring in Egypt now, the U.S. is put in a very difficult position and, at best, relegated to the status of observer and at worst, that of enemy due to our patronage of the previous regime.

Five years ago when semi-democratic regimes in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan were swept away by Color Revolutions, the question of U.S. involvement in these events was heavily debated, and in many cases overstated, by many different political actors. The U.S., particularly the neoconservatives in and around the Bush administration, sought to take some credit for these democratic breakthroughs, as they were described at the time, which were largely the result of political events in those countries. Critics of the Bush administration as well as Russia and other semi-authoritarian regimes in the region sought to portray these events as little more than U.S. backed plots. Today, nobody is seriously discussing the U.S. role in the peaceful effort to bring down non-democratic regimes in Egypt or the successful effort in nearby Tunisia.

This is a significant reflection of evolving U.S. influence in the world, as well as of the difficulty of balancing a foreign policy that advocates for democracy in some places while offering political and financial support to those opposing democracy in other places. In some countries, such as Egypt, the U.S. has done both, but the dollars have generally outweighed the occasional rhetoric. History, including the recent Color Revolutions, has shown us that getting rid of an authoritarian regime and bringing in a democratic one are two different things. This is the challenge facing Egypt and Tunisia now; and the U.S. may end up being more peripheral to that process than it would like.