In Egypt, Don’t Blame the Elections

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In the recently concluded Egyptian elections Islamists combined for roughly 60% of the vote. Although this is the beginning of a reasonably complex process to form the lower house of the Egyptian parliament, this outcome suggests that Islamist parties will be well represented in that legislative body. Accordingly, it is likely that the post-Arab Spring Egypt may adapt a foreign policy to the west and to Israel that differs sharply from that of Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt. Moreover, it is all but inevitable that the legislature will adapt laws and policies that are illiberal and will not sit comfortably with western democrats.

These developments will also provide ample rhetorical ammunition to those who believe efforts at democratization, and specifically elections, often cause more harm than good. This argument will probably grow stronger if, as is likely, Egypt’s future is a difficult one. This is an appealing, even intuitive argument, but it should be scrutinized a bit, particularly with regards to Egypt. The problem with this argument is that it attributes a broad array of problems and ills, all of which are multi-causal with deep historical and political roots, to the elections themselves. It is more accurate to see the elections as an expression of these problems and ills, and probably a healthy one as well.

Elections in late 2011 did not conjure Islamist or even anti-western feelings in Egypt. Nor did they suddenly make these sentiments part of the political discourse in Egypt. Similarly, it was not elections that ended the, at least from the perspective of Washington, stable and positive role Mubarak played. The corrupt, authoritarian and ineffective regime which Mubarak led and American support for that regime, were far more significant causes of these sentiments.

This Islamist majority, and strong anti-American views, did not emerge simply because an election was held; it had existed throughout most of the later Mubarak period in Egypt. Avoiding elections and keeping an authoritarian regime in power only contributed to the appeal of this message. While bringing Islamists into power may initially cause some concern in the west, it also forces the Islamists to think not just of ideology, but of governance. Governments, particularly in countries where there are at least some democratic institutions, stay in power not only through taking popular ideological positions, but by delivering services, solving problems and governing well. These things take a lot of time and can take resources away from things like saber rattling or making ideologically heated statements. The west may be better served by an Islamist majority that is focused on the complex problems of governance rather than the relatively easy task of building support for anti-western positions.

Giving these forces a chance to be part, particularly the majority part, of the government obviously makes it more likely that the government will pursue policies that are unattractive to the west, but it also takes away one of the major considerations, their exclusion from government and political involvement, that fueled their anger and support. Similarly, simply keeping who
held these views, representing a majority of the Egyptian people was not a recipe for continued stability in Egypt and was a strategy that could not be sustained.

These elections do not, of course, guarantee that democracy will continue to evolve in Egypt. The development of a democratic polity after an authoritarian one has collapsed is never easy and often does not come to pass at all, regardless of the timing of the first election. For those who would like to see Egypt more towards becoming a pluralist and inclusive political system, the elections are not a signal to give up these hopes or to be discouraged. Rather, they demonstrate the need for continued support for Egypt’s democratic development. Walking away from Egypt because the parties that won the election, while representative of many of the people, are not pro-west, will only hasten the end of democratic prospects in Egypt. Now is the time to remain committed to the development of free media, civil society organizations and to future free, fair and competitive elections, not discouraged by the outcome of one election.