

Los Angeles Times

OPINION

OP-ED

Egypt's second chance at democracy

As long as the military's goal is democracy, U.S. aid should continue.

By Chuck Freilich

July 17, 2013

"As Egypt goes," says an old adage, "so goes the Mideast." But the historic changes underway in Egypt have repercussions far beyond even that.

For four decades, Egypt, as the political and military leader of the Arab world, has been the linchpin of U.S. Middle East policy, the anchor for a moderate and pro-American Arab camp, the first Arab country to make peace with Israel, an indispensable first stop for all regional American diplomacy. It is not an easy alliance: When Egypt supports American policy, the United States is far better able to promote its regional objectives; when it does not, as has happened not infrequently, the U.S. encounters difficulty.

Today, having thrown off the radical theocratic Muslim Brotherhood as well as longtime autocratic leader Hosni Mubarak, Egypt has a second chance to get democracy right.

Democracy is infinitely more than just elections and institutional arrangements. In a country where religious fundamentalism remains widespread, where absolute poverty and illiteracy afflict most of the population, the prospects of stable democracy taking root are dubious. The harsh reality is that no one has an answer to Egypt's crushing poverty, and a prolonged period of instability is likely.

A debate has broken out in the U.S. about whether the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi's government should be decreed a military coup — in which case American law requires cessation of all aid — or a popular uprising. In truth, it was a popularly inspired and supported coup, and the transitional military-backed regime holds out the best hope for a stable, moderate, secular and at least partially democratic Egypt.

Just as elections have given rise to heinous authoritarian regimes (Hitler, Hamas in Gaza, the Islamic Republic), a military regime, if committed to a transition to civilian rule as the Egyptian military appears to be, could be the source of positive change.

Nothing would be more counterproductive now than a cessation of U.S. aid, most of which goes to the military. It would weaken the primary force for stability and moderation in Egypt and deprive the United States of what minimal influence it has.

So long as the transitional government pursues its goal of civilian control, the United States should provide it with full backing and the greatest financial assistance possible. It should not exert pressure for premature democratization. Drafting a new constitution, enabling parties to prepare for elections, reestablishing the rule of law, stemming Egypt's economic meltdown — all will take time, and a too-exact deadline would be counterproductive. Egypt must get it right this time — there may be no third chance.

As a young officer in the Israel Defense Forces, I went AWOL in November 1977 to watch as Egyptian President Anwar Sadat became the first Arab leader to visit Israel, the first to even open contact with Israel.

Two dramatic years later, I participated in a military commission established to implement the Israel-Egypt peace agreement. At first, contacts were frigid between officers used to viewing one another through gun sights. Then came the jokes and the acts of kindness.

The prospect of a radical, failed state in Egypt, which could act to abrogate the peace with Israel and even rejoin the war camp, is a nightmare.

For the sake of U.S. interests in the Mideast and its ability to affect regional developments, from the changes set in motion by the Arab Spring to the prospects for containing Iran's nuclear program and the prospects for an Arab-Israeli peace, the U.S. must do everything it can to help Egypt through this trying time.

It is not clear that Egypt has the prerequisites for democracy. But let us recall with humility that it took centuries for democracy to develop in the West, and Egypt's starting point is much more difficult. What is essential is that Egypt be a moderate, stable and peaceful state.

Israel too has to do its part. Unable to directly influence events in Egypt, it will be called on to demonstrate restraint in the face of continued attacks from the Sinai Peninsula, as well as from the Gaza Strip. Progress with the Palestinians, essential in its own right, would further contribute to the atmosphere with Egypt, as it would to international efforts to isolate Iran.

Chuck Freilich, a former deputy national security advisor in Israel, is a senior fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School and the author of "Zion's Dilemmas: How Israel Makes National Security Policy."

Copyright © 2013, [Los Angeles Times](#)