

Marriage of convenience

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On 4 June, US President Barack Obama will deliver his long-announced address to the Arab and Muslim worlds, by which he hopes to lay the groundwork for healing the breach with the West. For such a historic milestone, many would have preferred a country that has taken significant steps towards democratic practices and could prove a positive example to others, such as Turkey or Indonesia. But the Western priority is not primarily a democratic, but a stable Middle East. As both the US and Europe seek to reset their policies in the region, such efforts are unlikely to bear fruit without Egypt. Obama's choice of Cairo is based on the mediating role the US expects from the Mubarak regime. Top priorities on the common agenda include an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, facing the Iranian nuclear threat, neutralising Syria's role to prepare for its integration in the peace process with Israel, and ensuring Iraq's stability.

For Mubarak, this is a diplomatic triumph. Obama's address to the Muslim world from Egypt will give greater international political weight to the country's authoritarian regime. Egyptian diplomacy interprets the choice as a re-warming of the relations after years of tension during the Bush administration. In May, the Egyptian president paid his first visit to the White House in five years and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently called Hosni Mubarak and his wife "friends of my family". Between 2003 and 2005, pressures on the Mubarak regime implicitly helped to trigger unprecedented popular opposition protests. However, the deteriorating security situation in Iraq, Hamas's electoral victory in Palestine, and the growing nuclear threat from Iran quickly changed EU and US moods, leading them back to their traditionally preferred approach of propping up Arab tyrants, whom they consider most capable of keeping the security balance in the region.

In Europe, French President Sarkozy is at the forefront of the resurgence of political realism. Sarkozy and Mubarak jointly chair the Union for the Mediterranean, a project that ignores democracy and human rights. It seems that bringing home contracts for French companies worth billions is far more popular with the electorate. Moreover, the EU took advantage of the southern Mediterranean governments' tyrannical grip for the great convenience of having them guard Europe's gates against illegal immigration and terrorism.

Egypt's authoritarian regime also receives support in the form of annual economic and military aid from the US (over \$50 billion since 1979) and the EU (€558 million for 2007-2010, not counting EU member states' bilateral assistance). However, this financial assistance does not benefit the Egyptian people as much as it serves the interests of the ruling elite. Contrary to Western claims, this aid does not provide an incentive for the regime to embark on tangible reforms. These billions are the price for the broker role Egypt plays in the region to ensure

Western security and political interests.

The security and stability the West is seeking so desperately cannot be achieved by supporting authoritarian regimes – these are not the bulwark against, but the primary cause for the rise in religious extremism and terrorism, due to their marginalising of their communities and repressing means of peaceful change and political participation. Popular discontent has been growing in the region, with several countries seeing uprisings over the governments' inefficiency in delivering basic services such as affordable food, employment and housing. In the political sphere, moderate Islamist groups such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood or the Tunisian Ennahda that have rejected violence and sought to integrate into the political process see their efforts crushed by oppressive regimes that prefer re-radicalisation over political competition.

Legal Islamist parties such as the Moroccan Justice and Development Party or the Jordanian Islamic Action Front that have been democratically contesting elections find it increasingly difficult to justify this choice before their party base as participation in undemocratic elections bears no hope of winning and meaningfully shaping the fate of the country. If elections do not pay off, moderate Islamists may change their minds. A recent study conducted by the Rand Corporation found that "political openings can co-opt and moderate opposition forces" and "cosmetic reforms and backtracking erode regime legitimacy and contribute to political violence".

For 28 years Mubarak has monopolised power, placed civil and political society under siege and converted the Emergency Law to a permanent condition. The 'War on Terror' has given the Egyptian regime a new legitimacy to justify its immoral security clampdowns. Aside from civil society activists, Muslim Brotherhood members are preferred targets – repression of Islamists is a good that sells well on the international market. Moderate members themselves contend that the post-2005 crackdown on the group by the regime is empowering radicals within the Brotherhood.

Continuing implicitly to support the political status quo would be explosive, but the importance of relations with Arab governments cannot be denied. Stability and democracy in the Middle East are not diplomatic alternatives, but two stops on the path towards sustainable security. The challenge for Obama and his European counterparts lies in reconciling and balancing their necessary short term political and security interests with a pro-democracy agenda. Arab civic activists nurture great expectations from the new US president: solidarity with their aspirations for change, and an international climate that provides the moral and political support that they need to become agents of change. The US and the EU now have the opportunity jointly to support moderate political forces in the Arab world. Several of the incumbent rulers in the southern Mediterranean are aging or ill, and they will leave a vacuum of power behind as succession is far from being resolved. Whom would the West like to take over?

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