



How Should the U.S. Deal with the Human Rights Abuses of Partners and Allies? The Case of Egypt

*Jennifer Windsor, Executive Director, Freedom House
Center for American Progress: The Future of Human Rights
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President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt has ruled under a military state of emergency for almost three decades. During that time, he has received billions of dollars of U.S. assistance, and has been lauded as a key ally, and even a democrat.

Today, as we speak, the Egyptian people are indicating their dissatisfaction with their government. In response to a call by a group on Facebook, there has been a nationwide general strike to protest the cost of living. As part of that strike, thousands demonstrated, an illegal action in Egypt. Security forces were out en masse. While demonstrations in Cairo were largely peaceful, in other parts of the country clashes turned violent, and reportedly a number were killed, including a 9 year old. Demonstrations continue and reportedly over a hundred people were arrested. A new strike is to be called in May.

Today, Egypt is holding local elections but the turn out is abysmally low, and the Muslim Brotherhood decided to boycott the election, after hundreds of its members, including 40 leaders, have been arrested, and only 10 percent of candidates to run in the elections. In past elections, similar crackdowns have occurred against secular liberal opposition groups or parties that had begun to present genuine challenges to the Mubarak and NDP's monopoly of power, they were subject to intimidation and arrest. The most visible case is Ayman Nour. When Nour was arrested in January 2005, Secretary Rice—in an unprecedented action—canceled a trip to Egypt in protest, eventually resulting in Nour's release. He is now back in prison, and last month, his final appeal to be released because of his serious health condition was turned down.

Secretary Rice has chosen not to publicly show her displeasure. Instead, she recently waived Congressional conditions on improvements on rule of law and human rights, which were imposed on a paltry sum of a \$100 million out of a \$1.3 billion worth of military assistance. The government of Egypt didn't hesitate to make it clear that they saw this as a PR victory.

Thanks to Egyptian journalists—especially bloggers—who have refused to observe the "red lines" that previously restricted their work, freedom of expression has expanded in Egypt. But serious threats to press freedom remain. Two weeks ago, Ibrahim Eissa, the independent journalist and editor of Al-Dustor newspaper, was charged with "spreading false news about the president's health to harm the national economy."

In Egypt, freedom of association and assembly are heavily restricted—and force is used if necessary, as we can see in the government crackdown against demonstrators. But more subtle forms of intimidation and repression are also in place. Egyptian laws governing nongovernmental organizations have become worse over the years, not better. Again, the high profile case is the one against Dr. Saadeddine Ibrahim, who remains in self exile, with dozens of legal cases against him and others because he discussed aid conditionality with President Bush during the Prague Conference last year. But many other individuals and groups, whose names are not so famous, have like Dr. Ibrahim suffered for crossing the line.

At the American University in Cairo in June 2005, Secretary Rice spoke on democratic reform in the region. "The day is coming when the promise of a free and democratic world, once thought impossible, will also seem inevitable. The people of Egypt should be at the forefront of this great journey... So together, let us choose liberty and democracy."

The Bush Administration's actions during the 2003-2005 period—including the withholding of \$30 million, the delay of Rice's trip, and direct assistance to a number of human rights groups—did lead to a package of modest reforms on the part of the Egyptian government, and civil society, journalists, and political leaders responded by pushing the envelope.

Unfortunately, since that time, critical public statements have virtually stopped, although Secretary Rice and other Administration officials assure us that they are raising issues in private. And Secretary Rice—to her credit—continues to meet with Egyptian civic activists. But the Bush Administration’s clear retreat from its forward leaning policy in the last two years has given the Mubarak regime an opening to renew its repressive policies throughout the country and has left Egypt’s would-be reformers exposed and disillusioned on their journey to liberty and democracy.

But let us be clear, the Bush Administration’s policy was a step forward from the past. The Clinton Administration was virtually silent about human rights abuses in Egypt. Indeed, the Administration rendered an individual to Egypt who was successfully tortured. Successive U.S. Administrations have continued to operate with a bilateral agreement which effectively allowed the Egyptian government to determine which nongovernmental organizations received assistance and eliminated any U.S. leverage to pressure the Egyptians to respect fundamental human rights. Security, stability and other interests have always prevailed.

But have U.S. policies actually advanced U.S. interests? Let us answer honestly. What has the Bush Administration gotten for its recent silence on human rights in Egypt and for billions of dollars. A successful peace process in the Middle East? Have past U.S. policies really led to stability and security in Egypt? I think not. If there is no peaceful, effective way to voice opposition—or to choose a successor—then the people will find an outlet. Repression empowers extremists, it does not eliminate them. It is extremists, not elections, that endanger our security.

The adherence to democratic principles and respect for human rights cannot and should not always be the sole foreign policy goal for the U.S. in its bilateral relations with Egypt or any authoritarian ally. But issues of human rights have to be on the table more consistently, and high-level advocates should be present to make the case to decision makers in the White House. All parts of the U.S. government—not just State, or USAID, but DOD, USTR and the CIA—should be asked to evaluate their actions and policies towards Egypt in terms of their potential to negatively or positively impact human rights. Assistance, trade and security relationships should be leveraged to encourage the opening

of political space and respect for human rights. The U.S. should be a consistent voice for the right of all individuals to enjoy fundamental freedoms and not say that governments are “on a democratic path” when they clearly are not.

We should back Egyptian civil society and human rights defenders—especially now as they test the waters and take risks. That support needs to be shown through diplomatic interactions, including public as well as private conversations. Sufficient resources for those on the frontline should be made available in a way that does not endanger those who need it. We need to be willing to speak out when civic and human rights advocates and activists are repressed—immediately and forcefully. And we need to provide legal and other emergency assistance to victims and their families, providing them safe transport and asylum if necessary.

If the next Administration can make that vision a reality, then indeed we will have transformed U.S. foreign policy and sent a signal that the U.S. is genuinely committed to freedom and human rights for all.