

Dr. Amr Hamzawy
Senior Associate
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Washington, D.C.

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Hearing “Redefining Boundaries: Political Liberalization in the Arab World”
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Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for inviting to testify before the House Committee on International Relations. Allow me to highlight three key issues based on my testimony about challenges and prospects of political liberalization in Egypt, which I submitted to the Committee. These are: (1) government reform policies, (2) composition of opposition movements, and (3) strategies to promote democracy in Egypt.

Contemporary political developments in Egypt shed light on two major dilemmas: the uncertain path of the government in initiating needed democratic reforms and the structural weakness of opposition parties and movements.

Throughout the last three years the ruling National Democratic Party has articulated different reform initiatives tackling the crucial issues of citizen participation and political rights. Although NDP draft laws on “Exercising Political Rights” (Law No. 73 of 1956), “Reforming the System of Local Administration”, and the establishment of the National Council for Human Rights represent attempts to open up the political system, they stop short of creating a momentum for democratization in Egypt. President Mubarak’s recent decision to amend article 76 of the constitution to allow more than one candidate to run in the upcoming presidential election next fall is a significant reform step, but there is a real danger that it will be robbed of meaning if it is not followed by other substantial reforms.

The Egyptian government has so far ignored the wide consensus that exists outside its own constituency concerning the three reform imperatives needed to render Egypt’s democratic transformation a realistic project: (1) setting limits on the terms of office as well as the powers vested in the president, (2) rescinding the State of Emergency, and (3) changing the laws obstructing the establishment and functioning of parties and NGOs.

The second major dilemma of Egypt’s democratic transformation is the absence of viable opposition movements with broad constituencies. The four major opposition parties—Wafd, Unionist, Arab Nasserist, and Ghad Party—are structurally weak and lack constituencies large enough to mobilize popular support. Ten other small parties are active, but their numbers and political relevance are inconsequential.

Civil society actors encounter both state restrictions and popular distrust. The legal framework for NGOs in Egypt is governed by the Law No. 84 of 2002, which requires

civic associations to register with the Ministry of Social Affairs and in this way opens up the gate of political manipulation.

Non-violent Islamist movements, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood, are well rooted in the Egyptian social and cultural fabric and possess therefore a great potential for forging broad alliances for political transformation. Their mainstream has been moving towards more pragmatism based on prioritizing gradual reforms as the only viable strategy to promote democracy. Embracing the notion of democratic polity within non-violent Islamist movements, however, does not mean that they are giving up their religious legacy and becoming wholeheartedly the new liberals of Egypt. Rather, they will always sustain their traditional agenda built around calls to implement the Islamic Law. But, the crucial issue at stake here is that calling for democratic reform is becoming a central component of the Islamist agenda as well, if not its determining principle. The realization of the new Islamist vision requires a degree of openness on the part of the Egyptian government towards their integration in the political sphere. Unfortunately, no steps have been taken in that direction.

Throughout the last three years, different secular parties have been reaching out to mainstream Islamists and engaging them in campaigns calling for reforms. The Egyptian Movement for Change, Kifaya (Enough), stands for this emerging secular-religious national alliance for democracy. These are significant steps of great potential, since democratic opposition platforms are by far more effective with Islamist participation than without it.

Mr. Chairman,

Egypt's path to democracy is uncertain. The government reform policies in the last three years have gone in the right direction, but they stop short of introducing a package of substantial changes into the restrictive patterns of political participation prevailing in the country. Apparently, the only way to end the current stalemate is to mobilize large constituencies for political reform within the society. Opposition parties and civil society actors, however, face restrictions and suffer from structural deficiencies.

The United States can help promote reform by encouraging the government to move ahead in opening up the political system and easing its restrictions against the opposition. To this end, the United States should use its strong economic and political ties with Egypt, without however alienating the government by threatening to cut down military and economic assistance. Managing the reform process, primarily in its first stages, remains the prerogative of the existing regime and without its backing the whole process cannot take off.

Thank you for your attention!

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