

End U.S. Support for Egyptian Repression

By Stephen Zunes

The quick conviction on Monday in a political court of Dr. Saad El-Din Ibrahim and 27 associates is a serious blow against Egypt's burgeoning pro-democracy movement. It also raises serious questions about continued U.S. military and economic aid to the increasingly authoritarian regime of Hosni Mubarak.

Dr. Ibrahim and his colleagues served with the Ibn Khaldun Center for Developmental Studies, a think tank dedicated to the promotion of civil society in Egypt and throughout the Arab world. Last year, the Egyptian government shut down this internationally renowned center, known for its study of applied social sciences in Egypt and the Arab world. Its monthly publication, *Civil Society*, has been an important source of information and analysis for scholars across the globe.

The Center had also engaged in monitoring elections and workshops in civic education. Such activities resulted in the stunning seven-year sentence for Dr. Ibrahim.

The closure of the center and the jailing of its staff is clearly intended to deter other academics from pursuing research and related activities. The result can only harm the free exchange of ideas crucial to advancing political pluralism in Egypt and other Arab countries.

The convictions are the latest in a series of repressive government measures against Egyptian scholars, democrats, feminists, and human rights activists.

Egypt is the second largest recipient of U.S. economic and military assistance. As long as the Mubarak regime knows that U.S. aid will flow regardless of its violations of internationally recognized human rights, there is little incentive to change its patterns of abuse.

The nearly two billion dollars in military and economic aid designed to prop up the Mubarak

regime has also been rationalized as needed to "support the Camp David Accords." This largesse of U.S. taxpayer dollars was originally designed as a one-time implementation of the 1978 peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. Since most peace agreements have led to demilitarization, not increased arms shipments, the largely military nature of the aid package was controversial even then.

However, both Democratic and Republican administrations, as well as both parties in Congress, have continued pouring this military and economic assistance into the corrupt and autocratic Egyptian government annually for each of the twenty-three subsequent years. Concerns by pro-democracy groups in Egypt and human rights groups in the United States that such aid was only making further repression possible has been rejected by Washington, with the Orwellian response that such aid "supports peace in the Middle East."

There is a kind of pseudo-sensitivity among policymakers in Washington which argues that human rights concerns are not important in Arab societies. Yet the international human rights violations routinely violated by the Egyptian regime and other Middle Eastern governments are based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, deemed universal because they do reflect an international consensus.

The fact is that Arabs and Muslims do not like being detained, denied due process, tortured, and murdered for their political beliefs by repressive governments any more than do Western Christians. To imply otherwise is simply racist.

Indeed, when Egypt signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1982, the government became legally bound to uphold its principles.



The growing popular anti-American sentiment in Egypt, the largest and most important country in the Arab world, stems not so much from U.S. support of Israel as it does U.S. support for Mubarak's dictatorial rule. As with support for the Shah of Iran, the U.S. may find itself faced with a successor regime embittered by the long-standing U.S. support of the ousted dictator.

The Bush administration should suspend all military and government-to-government economic assistance to the Mubarak regime until it ends its human rights abuses and allows for free and competitive elections. The United States cannot hope to promote democracy around the world as long as it supports repressive rule in Egypt or anywhere else.

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