

# Egypt's Pluralist Politics

Though U.S. observers tend to view Egypt's politics through a secular-vs.-Islamist lens, a clearer way of seeing what's happening in that important Arab country is to examine other issues, like the economy, that are motivating Egyptians, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A downbeat [report in the \*Washington Post\*](#) about events in Egypt starts by observing: "Egypt's disparate opposition groups remain so divided that analysts and activists say they risk losing the last major decision-making body in the country to Islamists when the country votes in upcoming parliamentary elections."

This message, and the consternation that seems to go with it, says at least as much about our own way of looking at domestic divisions and political competition in a country such as Egypt as it does about how the people in those countries look at those things.

The Islamist-vs.-secular dimension has become for us an all-purpose lens through which we seem to view just about everything going on not only in Egypt but also in several other Middle Eastern countries, especially ones buffeted most by the turbulence of the Arab Spring.

Yes, the Islamist/secular dimension is salient for many Egyptians, but it is only one dimension of many. The *Post* article describes various other ones, which account for that intra-opposition division that is the subject of the article.

There are differences over economic policy, for example, with leftists being opposed to a loan from the International Monetary Fund (presumably because of the conditions that would be attached to the loan) and free-market liberals having different views. Americans differ over economic policy all the time; why can't Egyptians?

One could just as easily use the same lens, but generally we don't, in viewing political competition next door in Israel, where they just had an election. There is a religious/secular divide in Israel, too, with the political religionists there having some remarkable similarities to their Islamist counterparts in Egypt and other nearby Muslim-majority countries.

This is not the only political divide, however, that matters in Israel. Some of us viewing Israeli politics from afar might want to use a different lens, colored in terms of things that concern us such as policy toward the

Palestinians or toward Iran. But those issues appear to have played even less of a role in the just-concluded Israeli election campaign. Relying solely on either of these lenses would preclude a good understanding of Israeli politics.

In Egypt, there are legitimate concerns about some of what President Mohamed Morsi has done and thus concerns about opposition to him being divided, but this is not just an Islamist-vs.-secular thing. One should be concerned about some of his moves that appear to be in an authoritarian direction, but there is nothing specifically Islamist about those moves. (They resemble some of the tactics used by his predecessor, the very secular Hosni Mubarak.)

There also is Morsi's past objectionable language about Israel, but again there is nothing Islamist about it. (One can hear similar invective about Israel from most parts of the Egyptian political spectrum.)

It is true that in some circumstances, given how some electoral laws work, divisions of the sort the *Post* article describes can have major consequences for who rules a country and for that country's stability and welfare.

One of the leading examples in modern times was a presidential election in Chile in 1970. Probably the most salient political division in Chile at the time was between Marxists and non-Marxists. The non-Marxist camp was divided, and the election was a three-way race among the Marxist Salvador Allende, a Christian Democrat, and a conservative.

Probably either of the latter two candidates would have defeated Allende in a head-to-head race, but in the three-way contest Allende barely got first place with less than 37 percent of the vote. The election was sent to the Chilean legislature, but it simply followed its tradition of awarding the presidency to the first-place finisher. So Allende became president, and the rest, including Augusto Pinochet's coup and rule by a military junta, is history.

Similar circumstances are not prevailing today in Egypt, but the main point is that we cannot understand well what is going on there, and anticipate what can go well or poorly there, by reducing everything to a struggle between Islamists and secularists.

Nor should we necessarily be unhappy about the sorts of divisions described in the article. Political scientists have a word for those sorts of cross-cutting divisions in which people may be natural allies on some issues but opponents on others. It's called pluralism. And it is generally considered to be a good thing, as it helps to form the basis for a stable democracy that does not get torn apart by a citizenry that all lines up on one side or the other of a single great divide.

Egypt has yet to demonstrate, of course, whether it has enough of the other ingredients for a stable democracy. But we should be neither surprised nor upset that everyone in Egypt who is not an Islamist is not working in unison against those who are.

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## Doubting Obama's Words on Diplomacy

In his two Inaugural Addresses, President Obama has called for diplomacy to replace military bluster, but his failure to rein in U.S. imperial impulses during his first term has made the world dubious of his rhetoric as he enters his second, write Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett at [GoingToTehran.com](#).

By Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett

When Barack Obama first ran for the presidency, his most important foreign policy campaign promise was to end not just the Iraq War, but also the "mindset" that had gotten the United States into that strategic travesty.

His First Inaugural emphasized the idea that America would exercise real leadership by resurrecting diplomacy and "engagement" as essential elements of American strategy. Leaders and publics in Tehran, Moscow, Beijing and many other places around the world were eager for him to deliver.

In his Second Inaugural, President Obama recalled this vision, reminding Americans that they are "heirs to those who won the peace and not just the war; who turned sworn enemies into the surest of friends. We will show the courage to try and resolve our differences with other nations peacefully, not because we are naive about the dangers we face, but because engagement can more durably lift suspicion and fear."

But now his words fall flat in much of the world. For his administration never understood that, to be effective, "engagement" had to mean more than simply reiterating longstanding U.S. demands while not just continuing to reject other parties' interests and concerns, but acting even more assertively against them.

In the Middle East, Obama promised to engage Iran, make resolving the

Palestinian issue a top priority, and redefine America's posture toward the Muslim world.

Obama's approach to engaging Tehran entailed reiterating the same demands on the nuclear issue as his predecessor while intensifying the coercive aspects of American policy (e.g., sanctions, covert operations, and cyber-attack) when Iran did not surrender.

If, in his second term, Obama launches another war to disarm yet another Middle Eastern country of weapons of mass destruction it does not have, this will be a disaster for America's position in the Middle East. But this is where Obama's current strategy inexorably leads.

Obama's decisions to allow Israel and the pro-Israel lobby to hype the Iran "threat" and to appease the Netanyahu government with the most robust U.S. military assistance to Israel ever not only derailed nuclear diplomacy with Tehran; they also made it impossible for Obama to exert any leverage over Netanyahu regarding Israeli settlements or to support Palestinian statehood at the United Nations.

As a result, Obama is not just presiding over a stalled peace process; he is overseeing the demise of the two-state solution.

These policies destroyed whatever hope Middle Easterners might have invested in Obama. After Obama's First Inaugural, it seemed like he could have gone anywhere in the Muslim world. He chose Cairo as the venue for a major address ostensibly aimed at starting a new relationship with the Muslim world, based on dialogue rather than dictation.

Today, with Middle Eastern publics asserting more of a role in shaping their own political futures than ever before, it would be hard to find a Middle Eastern capital that would freely host Obama for such an address.

Obama's vaunted "reset" of relations with Russia turned out, from Moscow's perspective, to be not just insincere, but duplicitous.

Examples of American perfidy include NATO's ongoing plans to deploy anti-missile radars in Europe, Obama's appointment of someone with no diplomatic experience and essentially neoconservative views on Russia as his ambassador in Moscow, his distortion of a UN Security Council resolution authorizing humanitarian intervention in Libya into a regime-change campaign, his support for the overthrow of Syria's government, and his endorsement of human rights legislation specifically targeting Russia.

Since returning as Russia's President last year, Vladimir Putin has declined all

invitations to come to the White House.

In Beijing, Chinese leaders are increasingly persuaded that what Obama administration officials first described as a U.S. “strategic pivot” from the Middle East to Asia and now call a “rebalancing” is really meant to contain China and “keep it down,” even as its economic development moves ahead.

China’s political and policy elites are growing concerned that the fundamental strategic bargain underlying Sino-American rapprochement in the 1970s, that Washington accepted a peacefully rising People’s Republic and that neither country would seek military hegemony in Asia, is being eviscerated, by the United States.

The world is increasingly giving up on the proposition that the United States can act in any manner other than that of an imperial power, even as more and more important players in global affairs are coming to see it as an imperial power in decline.

Obama’s Second Inaugural displayed no appreciation for this reality. And that does not augur well for any meaningful recovery of America’s international standing during Obama’s second term.

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