

# Cheerleading for Egypt

*Why our praise is not premature*

Today's elections in Egypt are the first major competitive presidential election in the Arab world: the military has vowed to abandon its rule on July 1 and fifty million Egyptians stand empowered to vote, their thumbs poised to be dipped in the ink that will determine their future. The dignity that comes with self-government – the dignity of active citizenship, rather than passive subjecthood – is being realised across the nation. It is a time for the defenders of democracy to cheer.

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Not so fast, say some pundits across the West. There is, according to this cautionary note, a crucial difference between liberal democracy – a democracy in which the decisions of the majority are limited (either judicially or in voters' hearts) by respect for individual rights – and illiberal democracy – a democracy in which the majority tyrannically runs rough-shod over minority freedoms. Only the former, according to this view, merits celebration. Beware of premature praise. Be it the authoritarian impulses of Omar Suleiman (he was Mubarak's former spy chief, after all), the religious conservatism of the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsy, or the give-'em-what-they-want populism of Hamdeen Sabbahy, our praise is properly pending a substantive evaluation of Egypt's electoral results.

This view, however, is profoundly mistaken, and for three related reasons.

Firstly, it is strategically bankrupt. Conditioning our moral support of the Egyptian people on whether they happen to endorse the same solutions that we ourselves advocate reinforces the perception that the West does not take Arab citizens seriously as self-determining agents who can be trusted with their own fate. Such a perception risks further marginalising the West's moral credibility in the Middle East. Egyptians are properly suspicious of the West after its enduring support for Mubarak and, indeed, continuing support for despots across the Muslim world. Stipulating our endorsement of Egyptians' political autonomy on the ends for which they exercise that autonomy reeks of colonial condescension.

Secondly, this view is intellectually bankrupt: it presupposes a cleanly worked out view of what counts as "liberal" and "illiberal" that is unavailable. This is more difficult than may be apparent. If the distinction rests on some account of individual rights, we confront the question of what, precisely, these individual rights are. Not only have our views on such matters changed throughout history – inviting us to exhibit modesty in the face of our own fallibility – but the content of individual rights is continually subject to reasonable disagreement even among contemporaries. For example, does free speech properly include the right to engage in hate speech or language offensive to others' religious sensibilities? American jurisprudence announces "yes!", but most of the other Western democracies disagree. Likewise, it is typically assumed by American liberals that citizens have a right to produce and view pornography, despite certain feminists' protestations on the tendency of such material to undermine respect toward women. An Islamist president of Egypt is likely to side with the Europeans and the feminists, respectively, on these two issues; would the corresponding legislation qualify as instances of "illiberal" democracy?

Thirdly, the view that we should withhold our praise until Egypt proves it has substantive liberal chops is morally bankrupt. Here's why. Suppose, miraculously, that we were justified in believing that we had identified a fully worked-out and accurate account of individual rights that democracies should respect. Suppose also that Egypt selects a president who led the charge in implementing illiberal policies. The question arises: wouldn't a 'benevolent' – or liberally palatable – autocracy be safer, more predictable, and therefore morally preferable? It would not. Just because a democratically enacted law is unjust does not mean that we would have been justified to enact a morally superior law undemocratically.

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For any law to be legitimate, it must be authorised by those subject to it. It may be that my group of friends and I would implement a wiser system of taxation if in charge; but that fact does not give us the right to seize Westminster by force, and it certainly does not generate a duty among the people to obey us if we did. To believe in democracy is to believe that the people should be the source of all legislation; Respecting them as agents – as free beings capable of determining their own lives – requires that attitude.

The people, of course, may err in the exercise of their political freedom; democracy is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of a law's moral legitimacy, and that is the grain of truth in pundits' exhortation to pause before we praise. But the crucial lesson is this: liberal laws are no good if not enacted by the right procedure. We need to get the procedure right first. Egypt is trying in the face of long odds to do precisely this; the temptations toward fraud in a fledgling democracy, never mind established ones, are high. Counting votes, and doing it accurately, is a moral accomplishment not to be diminished.

Egyptian democracy needs procedural cheerleaders. Let's show up.