

Beware of the rise of Islamic radicals Upheaval in Egypt
Yoichi Shimada

Egypt is undergoing a political upheaval after decades in which the major Middle East power has pursued peaceful coexistence with Israel and has kept an arm's length from the likes of the theocracy of Iran since the era of former President Anwar Sadat (who was assassinated in 1981 by an Islamic radical group). Egypt remains at a critical juncture of whether a collapse of the government of President Hosni Mubarak will result in a transition to a sound democracy without triggering the rise of Islamic fascism that could lead to an alliance with Iran and North Korea. A major focus of attention in this situation is the strange alliance between Mohamed ElBaradei, the former director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) who has jumped into the forefront of the anti-Mubarak movement, and the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamic fundamentalist movement.

ElBaradei drawing fire from U.S. conservatives

John Bolton, who showed a combative stance over Iran's nuclear weapons development when he served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has harsh words for ElBaradei in his memoir (*Surrender Is Not an Option: Defending America at the United Nations*). ElBaradei "made excuses for Iran the entire time I was in the Bush administration," Bolton alleged, adding that the former IAEA chief was "more interested in trying to cut a deal than in faithfully reporting what IAEA inspectors were telling him."

Charles Krauthammer, a prominent conservative commentator in the United States, is even more outspoken in his criticism of Elbaradei, predicting that a transitional government led by him would be a "disaster." For the Muslim Brotherhood, whose broad base of supporters and well-disciplined organization enabled it to win about 20 percent of parliamentary seats in the 2005 general election even though its candidates ran as independents due to its illegal status, Krauthammer said, ElBaradei is nothing but a "useful idiot" and "cosmopolitan frontman." He predicted that the Muslim Brotherhood will ditch ElBaradei in due course (The Washington Post, February 4).

Some voice hopes for democratization

Krauthammer stressed that orderly reform led by the Egyptian military would be the only path to be taken. However, even in the U.S. conservative circles, some commentators have dismissed an assessment like this as overly pessimistic and have voiced hopes for voluntary development of a democratic movement. Among the critics of excessive pessimism is William Kristol, who has called for attention to be paid to the transitions from “allied dictatorships to allied democracies” that occurred in Chile, South Korea, the Philippines and Indonesia (The Weekly Standard, February 14, 2011). But even Kristol reminded us of the fact that Mohammed Atta, one of the terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks in the United States in 2001, was an Egyptian, as is Ayman al Zawahir, al Qaeda’s number two.

If Islamic radical forces that are biding their time within and outside Egypt reared their heads by exploiting the weakening of the country’s political regime, it could send shock waves far and wide. Acknowledging that Iran’s pursuit of regional hegemony is the greatest problem, Bolton contended that the situation of Lebanon, where Hezbollah, a terrorist organization supported by Iran, is gaining the levers of power, should be viewed as a more grave matter than the current turmoil in Egypt (Los Angeles Times, February 3).

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