

## Egypt: Liberalism and Intervention

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Egyptian Flag, Jan 30 2011, Tahrir Square  
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The rapidly evolving events in Egypt, following the equally important events in Tunisia, should give liberals of all stripes hope. The voice of the people, so long suppressed in the Arab world, is being heard in the streets. Protesters originally limited their violence to attacks on government buildings and reports have emerged of citizen groups protecting businesses and homes from looters. But, now that pro-regime supporters have turned to violence to try clear Tahrir Square, violence may well increase.

And as the violence increases, there will be more demands on the U.S. and Europe to pressure the Mubarak regime. One could even see demands being made for more active forms of intervention, perhaps corresponding with the [Responsibility to Protect](#) doctrine. While such actions are highly unlikely, the idea of using outside force to shepherd democracy has become more common over the last 20 years.

Even as violence increases, the world must remain cautious about trying to help create democracy and/or protect human rights in such situations. The U.S. has played this correctly for now; quiet and sometimes assertive diplomacy directly to the regime, emphasizing the importance of respect for the people.

The situation in Egypt should help us to remember some important lessons about intervention. In 1859, the political philosopher John Stuart Mill published a short magazine article called "[A Few Words on Non-Intervention](#)." Mill, the author of famous works of liberalism such as [On Liberty](#) and [The Subjection of Women](#), argued that non-intervention must be a core principle of international affairs. The only permissible reason for intervention was if a large power invaded a country, another was justified in coming to the aid of its people.

Mill was very clear that even though he felt that liberty and constitutional government should be the norm for all, no one had the right to impose a particular political order on others. Mill's liberalism was both domestic and international.

So what does this have to do with Egypt? In 2003, the Bush administration argued, among other things, that intervention in Iraq was justified to promote freedom and democracy in that country and throughout the region. Neoconservatives argued that military force strongly supported this agenda. I must admit I felt some sympathy with this argument. As a student of the Middle East and a believer in liberalism, I warily embraced the idea that ridding the world of Saddam Hussein would improve the lives of Iraqis and just might lead to a ripple effect.

Clearly, this position was fundamentally flawed. As the process of Iraqi constitution-making became more fraught and complicated, and as various political forces turned to violence, it became clear that imposing a political system by force leads to chaos and disenfranchisement of those people it was supposed to support.

Liberals like me can now see the wisdom of Mill's position. There has been no great power or UN-led military effort to "free" Egypt. Instead, it is the voice of individuals, indeed young people using social networking sites, that has created this move toward greater freedom and democracy. It was only when the people had enough—*Kifaya* in Arabic, the rallying cry of various opposition movements over the past few years—that revolution truly broke out.

The events in Egypt teach us other lessons about intervention. The United States has, since the Carter administration, supported the Egyptian regime with vast amounts of money, primarily for the military. This "intervention" was designed to keep Egypt at peace with Israel and, at the time, away from the influence of the Soviet Union. But this intervention is partly what the Egyptian people are rejecting. Demands to oust Mubarak are coupled with signs angrily rejecting the United States.

Importantly, though, these same signs demand what liberals should support—a voice in politics and the protection of human rights. The two issues of most concern to Egyptians on the streets are the flawed electoral structures of their system and the creation of a network of "special courts" designed to try "terrorists" who are usually nothing more than political activists who question the regime. So, the rejection of Mubarak, of the United States, and interference in their politics are really assertions of the kind of liberalism that we should all support.

Finally, the Egyptian revolution can be a lesson for Mill as well. In the article he published, Mill infamously did not apply his liberal principle of non-intervention to communities that were not seen to be fully developed nation-states. That is, he did not believe that Indians, Egyptians, Africans, or others who were part of various empires of his day had the same rights to non-intervention as French, Austrians or Prussians. Events in Egypt demonstrate that those who we think are "the Other" wish for the kinds of freedoms and rights that we all want.

If only Mill could see the liberalism erupting in Egypt right now, he might well reconsider the exception to his rule. And the next time we claim that some peoples, traditions, religions, or civilizations cannot achieve democracy, rights, or freedom unless we help them, we might want to look to the power of peaceful protest in the oldest civilization in the world.

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