



Richard Falk

Richard Falk is the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Palestinian human rights.

When an 'NGO' is not an NGO: Twists and turns under Egyptian skies

What motives are behind the US government's strong reaction to the arrest of NGO workers in Egypt?

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Santa Barbara, CA - A confusing controversy between the United States and Egypt is unfolding. It has already raised tensions in the relationship between the two countries to a level that has not existed for decades. It results from moves by the military government in Cairo to go forward with the criminal prosecution of 43 foreigners, including 19 US citizens, for unlawfully carrying on the work of unlicensed public interest organisations that improperly, according to Egyptian law, depend on foreign funding.

Much has been made in US press coverage that one of those charged happens to be Sam LaHood, son of the present US Secretary of Transportation, adopting a tone that seems to imply that at least one connected by blood to an important government official deserves immunity from prosecution.

Washington has responded with high minded and high profile expressions of consternation, including a warning from Hillary Clinton that the annual aid package for Egypt of \$1.5bn (of which \$1.3bn goes to the military) is in jeopardy unless the case against these NGO workers is dropped and their organisations are allowed to carry on with their work of promoting democracy in Egypt. And indeed the US Congress may yet refuse to authorise the release of these funds unless the State Department is willing to certify that Egypt is progressing towards greater democratisation.

President Obama has indicated his intention to continue with the aid at past levels, given the importance of Egypt in relation to US interests in the Middle East, but, as in so many other instances, he may give way if the pressure mounts. The outcome is not yet clear, as an ultra-nationalistic Congress may yet thwart Obama's seemingly more sensible response to what should have been treated as a tempest in a teacup, but for reasons to be discussed, has instead become a *cause celebre*.

The US citizens charged are from the payroll of three organisations: The International Republican Institute (IRI), Democratic National Institute (DNI) and Freedom House. The first two organisations get all of their funding from the US government, and were originally founded in 1983 after Ronald Reagan's speech to the British parliament, in which he urged that help be given to build the democratic infrastructure of newly independent countries in the non-Western world, put forward as a Cold War counter-measure to the continuing appeal of Marxist ideologies.

Ideological and governmental character

From the moment of their founding IRI and DNI were abundantly funded by annual multi-million grants from Congress, either directly or by way of such governmental entities as the US Assistance for International Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy. IRI and DNI claim to be non-partisan, yet both are explicitly affiliated with each of the two political parties dominant in the United States, with boards, staff and consultants drawn overwhelmingly from former government workers and officials who are associated with these two parties.

The ideological and governmental character of the two organisations is epitomised by the nature of their leadership. Madeleine Albright, secretary of state during the Clinton presidency, is chair of the DNI board, while former Republican presidential candidate and prominent current senator, John McCain, holds the same position at the IRI. Freedom House, the third main organisation that is the target of the Egyptian crackdown also depends for more than 80 per cent of its funding from the National Endowment for Democracy and is similarly rooted in US party politics. It was founded in 1941 as a bipartisan initiative during the Cold War by two stalwarts of their respective political parties, Wendell Wilkie and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Against this background, the protests from Washington and the media assessments of the controversy seem willfully misleading. Since when does Washington become so agitated on behalf of NGOs under attack in a foreign country? Even mainstream eyebrows should have been raised sky high when General Martin Dempsey, currently the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, was reported to have interceded with his military counterparts while visiting Cairo on behalf of these Americans - who have been subjected to a travel ban and faced with the threat of prosecution. When was the last time you can recall a US military commander interceding on behalf of a genuine NGO? To paraphrase Bob Dylan, the answer my friends, is never. So even the most naive among us should be asking: "What is really going on here?"

The spokespersons for the organisations treat the allegations as a simple case of interference with the activities of apolitical and benevolent NGOs innocently engaged in helping Egyptians receive needed training and guidance with respect to democratic practices, especially those relating to elections and the rule of law. Substantively such claims seem more or less true at present, at least in Egypt. Sometimes these entities are even referred to by the media as "civil society institutions", which reflects, at best, a woeful state of unknowing, or worse, deliberate deception. Whatever one thinks of the activities of these actors, it is simply false to conceive of them as "nongovernmental", or as emanations of civil society. It would be more responsive to their nature if such entities were described as "informal governmental organisations". (IGOs)

It is hardly surprising that a more honest label is avoided, as its use would call attention to the problematic character of the undertakings: namely, disguised intrusions by a foreign government in the internal politics of a foreign country with fragile domestic institutions of government, by way of behaviour that poses at the very least a potential threat to its political independence. With such an altered interpretation, the controversy assumes a different character. It becomes quite understandable for the Egyptian government seeking to move beyond its authoritarian past to feel the need to tame these Trojan horses outfitted by Washington.

'Memory lapses of a senile bureaucracy'

It would seem sensible and prudent for Egypt to insist that such organisations, and especially those associated with the US government, be registered and properly licensed in Egypt as a minimum precondition for receiving permission to carry on their activities in the country, especially in matters as sensitive as elections, political parties and the shaping of the legal system. Surely the United States, despite its long uninterrupted stable record of constitutional governance, would not even consider allowing such

"assistance" from abroad. If it had been proposed by, say, Sweden, an offer of help with democracy would have been immediately rebuffed, and rudely dismissed as an insult to the sovereignty of the United States - despite Sweden being a geopolitical midget and US being the gorilla on the global stage.

And these Washington shrieks of wounded innocence, as if Cairo had no grounds whatsoever for concern, are either the memory lapses of a senile bureaucracy or totally disingenuous. In the past it has been well documented that IRI and DNI were active in promoting the destabilisation of foreign governments that were deemed to be hostile to the US foreign policy agenda. The Reagan presidency made no secret of its commitment to lend all means of support to political movements dedicated to the overthrow of left-leaning governments in Latin America and Asia.

The most notorious instances involving the use of IRI to destabilise a foreign government is well known among students of US interventionist diplomacy. For instance, IRI funds were extensively distributed to anti-regime forces to get rid of the Aristide government in Haiti, part of a dynamic that led to a coup in 2004. This brought reactionary political forces to power which were welcomed and seemed far more congenial to Washington's ideas of "good governance" at the time. IRI was openly self-congratulatory about its role in engineering a successful effort to strengthen "centre and centre/right" political parties in Poland several years ago, which amounts to a virtual confession of interference with the dynamics of Polish self-determination.

Spokespersons for these organisations piously claim in their responses to these recent Egyptian moves against them to respect the sovereignty of the countries within which they operate, and especially so in Egypt. Even if these claims are generally true, ample grounds remain for suspicion and regulation, if not exclusion, on the part of a territorial government. An insistence upon proper regulation seems entirely reasonable, if due account is taken of the numerous instances of covert and overt intervention by the United States in the political life of non-Western countries.

Against such a background, several conclusions follow: first, the individuals being charged by Egypt are not working for genuine NGOs or civil society institutions, but are acting on behalf of informal government organisations or IGOs; secondly, the specific organisations being targeted, especially the DNI and IRI, are overtly ideological in their makeup, funding base and orientation; and thirdly, there exist compelling grounds for a non-Western government to regulate or exclude such political actors when due account is taken of the long US record of interventionary diplomacy. Thus the Washington posture of outrage seems entirely inappropriate once the actions of the Egyptian government are contextually interpreted.

A strange puzzle

Yet the full story is not so simple or one-sided. It needs to be remembered that the Egyptian governing process in the year since the uprising that led to the collapse of the Mubarak regime has been controlled by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which is widely believed by the Egyptian public to be responsible for a wave of repressive violence, associated with military leaders' suspected fears that some democratic demands are threatening their position and interests in the country. A variety of severe abuses of civilian society have been convincingly attributed to the military. The military is also responsible for a series of harsh moves against dissenters who blog or otherwise act in a manner deemed critical of military rule.

In effect, the Egyptian government, although admittedly long concerned about these spurious NGOs operating within its territory even during the period of Mubarak rule, is itself seemingly disingenuous, using the licensing and funding technicalities as a pretext for a wholesale crackdown on dissent and human rights, so as to discipline and intimidate a resurgent civil society and a radical opposition movement that remains committed to realising the democratic promise of the Arab Spring.

There is another seemingly strange part of the puzzle. Would we not expect the United States to side with the Egyptian military - with which it worked in close harmony during the Mubarak period? Why would Washington not welcome this apparent slide toward Mubarakism without Mubarak? Was this not preferred outcome for the US in Egypt all along, being the only outcome that would allow Washington to be confident that the new Egypt would not rock the Israeli boat or otherwise disturb US interests in the region?

There is no disclosure of US motives at this time for its current seemingly pro-democracy approach, but there are grounds for thinking Washington may be reacting to the success of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Nour (Salafi) Party in the Egyptian parliamentary elections - and even more so to the apparent collaboration between these parties and the SCAF in planning Egypt's immediate political future. In such a setting, it seems plausible that sharpening state/society tensions in Egypt by siding with the democratic opposition would keep alive the possibility of a secular governing process less threatening to US-Israeli interests, as well as inducing Egypt itself to adopt a cautious approach to democratic reform. Maybe there are different explanations more hidden from view, but what seems clear is that both governments in this kaffuffle have dirty hands, and are fencing in the dark, that is, mounting arguments and counter-arguments that obscure rather than reveal their true motivations.

In the end, Egypt, along with other countries, is likely to be far better off if it prohibits US IGOs from operating freely within its national territorial space, especially if their supposed mandate is to promote democracy as defined and funded by Washington. This is not to say that Egyptians would not be far better off if the SCAF allowed civilian rule to emerge in the country and acted in a manner respectful of human rights and democratic values.

In other words, what is at stake in this seemingly trivial controversy lies hidden by the smokescreens relied upon by both sides in the dispute: weighty matters of governance and democracy that could determine whether the remarkable glories of the Arab Spring mutate in the direction of a dreary Egyptian Autumn, or even Winter.

Richard Falk is Albert G. Milbank Professor Emeritus of International Law at Princeton University and Visiting Distinguished Professor in Global and International Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has authored and edited numerous publications spanning a period of five decades, most recently editing the volume International Law and the Third World: Reshaping Justice (Routledge, 2008).

He is currently serving his third year of a six year term as a United Nations Special Rapporteur on Palestinian human rights.

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