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Guest Columnist

Egypt's bloody climate summit

The summit offers Egypt the opportunity to falsely promote itself as a liberal “green actor” committed to progressive change.



In August 2019, then-President Donald Trump and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi participate in a bilateral meeting at the G-7 summit in Biarritz, France. Trump reportedly referred to Sisi as “my favorite dictator.” [ANDREW HARNIK | AP]

From Nov. 6 to 18, Egypt will host the 27th annual United Nations Climate Change Conference in the city of Sharm El-Sheikh. The conference is intended to assess the world's progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and determine actions needed to limit the rise in the world's temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius

(2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) by 2030. Thousands of world leaders, official delegates, U.N. officials, climate activists and journalists will soon take over this beach resort city.

Yet, in holding this environmental summit in Egypt, the U.N. confronts a human rights catastrophe. According to a leading African scholar, the current government represents “the most repressive regime in the history of the modern Egyptian state.” Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi seized power in 2013 and, according to human rights organizations, runs one of the most brutal and cruel regimes in the world. Human Rights Watch writes: “Tens of thousands of government critics, including journalists, peaceful activists and human rights defenders remain imprisoned.”

Egyptian authorities “harass and detain relatives of dissidents abroad and use vague ‘morality’ charges to prosecute LGBT people, female social media influencers and survivors of sexual violence.” There are an estimated 60,000 political prisoners behind bars in Egypt. Sisi has given the green light for forces to routinely use torture. Officers beat and use electrical shocks and stress positions on political detainees. The interior ministry is reported to have developed an “assembly line” of abusive torture techniques.

The world community thus faces a fundamental dilemma. On the one hand, the summit offers the opportunity for our climate crisis to make international news and for governments and activists to recommit and pledge to increase their efforts to limit carbon emissions. Yet, on the other hand, the summit offers Egypt the opportunity to falsely promote itself as a liberal “green actor” committed to progressive change. As environmental activist Naomi Klein writes: “This summit is going well beyond greenwashing a polluting state; it’s greenwashing a police state.” The summit gives the repressive Egyptian regime the chance to “preen green before the world.”

How should the U.S. respond to this paradox? In order to promote action on climate change, should the Biden administration speak softly about the horrendous abuse of thousands of Egyptian citizens? Or, should we potentially risk global environmental cooperation by taking strong action against the brutal Egyptian regime? How does America thread this needle?

This fundamental dilemma between conflicting priorities arises in multiple areas of U.S. foreign policy. The paradox is articulated with clarity in the Biden administration new national security strategy released in October. The Strategy

document serves as a guide for America's national military and defense planning and is central to budgeting and diplomacy.

Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser, described the document as driven by "two fundamental strategic challenges." "The first is the competition between the major powers to shape the future of the international order." This entails "outcompeting China," "restraining Russia" and promoting democracy over dictators and autocrats (like the regime in Egypt). The second is to deal with transnational challenges such as "climate change, food insecurity, to communicable diseases, to terrorism, to the energy transition, to inflation." These challenges require that the U.S. work with nations, friends and enemies alike, to meet these global threats.

The enigma at the heart of the Biden strategy is what to do when these two strategic challenges conflict. This contradiction is on full display at the Egyptian climate summit. This conference brings Biden's democracy and human rights focus on a collision course with his climate change agenda. Richard Pearshouse, the director of environment and human rights at Human Rights Watch states: "There's this underlying tension between two supposedly different realms: human rights on one side and robust climate action on the other side. Now we're seeing this tension really play out."

The U.S. can pursue both priorities.

In terms of climate change, the U.S. should stop investing valuable diplomatic energy on the non-binding agreements that have dominated previous environmental conferences. As Greta Thunberg memorably stated much of what is pledged in these unenforceable documents amounts to little more than "Blah, blah, blah." The U.S. should instead put all its energy into pushing the high-income nations to follow through on their \$100 billion climate finance commitment to help the world's lower-income countries deal with the effects of a warming planet. For over 10 years, the developed world has dragged its feet and not delivered on this commitment.

In terms of human rights, the U.S. can call the world's attention to the horrendous situation in Egypt by sponsoring a resolution at the conference that calls for the government to release Alaa Abd el-Fattah (#FreeAlaa), one of Egypt's highest profile political prisoners and a symbol of the 2011 pro-democracy revolution. Alaa has been on a hunger strike since April in protest of his imprisonment.

Donald Trump reportedly referred to Sisi as “my favorite dictator.” The worst outcome possible for this summit would be to give Sisi priceless propaganda opportunities to emerge as a “green leader.” This would only embolden his repression. The carnage taking place in Egypt’s prisons must be a priority.



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