

What next for Egypt?

If there was ever a better time to read 'Egypt: The Moment of Change', a book edited by Rabab El Mahdi and Philip Marfleet which was launched in front of a packed audience at SOAS in 2009, then it is now. Made up of chapters by eight Egyptian and British academics, it catalogues the explosive situation which has existed in North Africa's most populous country for many years. 'Egypt: The Moment of Change' highlights problems including social injustice and governmental corruption. It also focuses on the way capitalist interests backed up by the security state have subjugated workers' interests at the grassroots. Islamism and the standing of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's President, in the world are also, of course, considered. The conclusion of the book is a pertinent 'What Next?' Dr. El Mahdi, who co-directed the work, warned that the most dangerous time would be the 'moment of change' when Mubarak's regime starts to crumble under the weight of inherent contradictions accumulated over three decades in power. We are now witnessing that moment.

A day after deposed Tunisian President Ben Ali fled his own country, I made the following assessment regarding the geopolitical fallout of the Tunisian uprising: '[a] domino effect in Egypt seems plausible in a presidential election year and in a country where the ingredients for an uprising are all there waiting only for them to reach their critical mass and a trigger event. The bogus way in which the parliamentary elections were run two months ago, when the overwhelming majority of seats were won by the ruling party, totally excluding the Muslim Brotherhood (who had won 88 seats in the 2005 elections) and other parties have contributed to the build-up of frustration among Egyptians'.



An Egyptian protester chant anti-government slogans, as another holds a sign in Arabic reading "Voice of the People, no to Mubarak"

Back in Egypt, it took four days of mass street protests to force Mubarak's regime to make its first concession. In a speech, the President promised reforms, jobs, and social justice, including the designation of Omar Suleiman, head of the Intelligence Service, as vice president (a position Mubarak had in fact got rid of when he came to power in 1981). General Ahmed Shafik was appointed Prime Minister. Yesterday, it emerged that the retired General Mahmoud Wagedi had been nominated Interior Minister. Giving these three men top positions as well as announcing the resignation of Ahmed Ezz, steel industry tycoon, from the membership of the National Democratic Party's Political Bureau did nothing to appease the protesters, however. It could have worked two years ago when Suleiman and Shafik's distinguished military careers still commanded respect among Egyptians. But the timing and context

of their new appointments eroded any credibility they might have had. Egyptians responded with the slogan 'The people want to topple the regime!', a chant originally heard in Tunisia just before Ben Ali's regime fell. In Egypt, key figures including El Baradei and the Nobel Prize laureate Ahmed Zewail considered the appointments as a 'militarisation' of the state.

A night curfew was declared last Friday in the three main cities of Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez. The turning point in the protests came when the curfew was declared: it shattered what little remained of the regime's authority. Internationally it weakened the regime's credibility. A regime which cannot impose a curfew in its capital city conveys an image of weakness and, indeed, disintegration. Then the Egyptian Army was deployed nationally because the police forces had lost control of the situation.

Even after what happened in Tunisia, the Egyptian disturbances caught most foreign observers, including governments, by surprise. Washington revised its position four times - shifting from an initial assurance by Hilary Clinton, Secretary of State, that the Mubarak regime was stable on Tuesday, to a more nuanced - almost neutral - position by the weekend. By this time, the U.S. was calling for an 'orderly transition' of power to form a broad-based government. While all this was happening, vice-President Joe Biden made a major gaffe on live TV by saying he failed to think of Mubarak as a dictator because of the regime's important role in the geopolitics

of the region. Biden is now being likened in the Arab world to the French foreign affairs minister Michele Alliot-Marie, who made a pro-Ben Ali speech in Parliament just before the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia. Norway was in fact the only country to formulate a clear position supporting the Egyptian protesters, whilst other western countries lined up behind the US's formally ambivalent position.

From Brussels, Catherine Ashton has called on Egypt 'to release immediately all peaceful demonstrators who are in detention', and open dialogue with the opposition. Understandably, Arab capitals maintained a deafening silence about what was going on in Egypt while Arabs from Rabat to Riyadh continue to be glued to Al Jazeera, watching the worsening situation. After removing internet and mobile phone networks in Egypt, Mubarak's regime decided on the sixth day of the protests to shut down Al Jazeera's bureaus in the country. The government has now withdrawn its journalists' press cards, and indeed removed the news channel from the crucial Nilesat satellite.

Unlike Tunisia, where US strategic interests were almost non-existent, Egypt plays a pivotal role in Washington's Middle East policy. For Israel a change in regime in Egypt might threaten its gas supplies across the north of Sinai, where Tel Aviv is buying Egyptian gas at preferential prices. Over the past three years, this issue has caused divisions even among supporters of Mubarak's regime. Moreover, Israel's strategic alliance with Turkey has been profoundly damaged in the aftermath of the Gaza flotilla debacle. Israel cannot afford to lose another strategic partner in the region, least of all Mubarak's regime. There is a deep concern in Tel Aviv, as is made clear in statements from Israeli politicians and ranking military officers. As far as the business community is concerned, there is justifiable panic in Wall Street, the City of London, and the Gulf stock exchanges. Increasing instability around the Suez Canal is just one of the problems which have led to a sharp hike in oil prices, as well as other commodities which are transported through the Canal.

The protests in Egypt certainly present American foreign policy advisers with a major headache. These demonstrations have involved all sections of society, including informal grassroots movements like the 6 April Youth movement, Kefaya Enough!, supporters of Mohamed El Baradei, and other protest groups formed over the last five years or so through Facebook and other social networking sites. Also present is the Muslim Brotherhood. The latter group, in particular, has left Washington confused as to how best to respond to a situation dominated by events on the street, rather than in the corridors of power in Cairo or Washington. So far around 150 people have been killed in the Egyptian disturbances, and 4,000 injured in the space of just over a week. There is a consensus among key opposition figures now that Mubarak should abdicate, dissolve parliament, and form a broad-base salvation government to draft a new constitution to form the basis of the next presidential elections.

Beyond such considerations, the US is concerned about the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood. It has kept a relatively low profile throughout the protests and they have agreed to line up, together with other political groups, behind El Baradei to engage in

transition talks with the Mubarak regime. The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood has kept low profile throughout the protests disarms both the regime and Washington from their stability vs. Islamists cliché. As thousands of protestors continue to pour into Tahrir Square in Cairo and other cities two significant developments have taken place. First, the army issued a communiqué in which it recognised 'the legitimacy of the demands of the protesters' and guaranteed peaceful protest would not be met with violence. Secondly, the army's communiqué was followed by a speech by Omar Suleiman, vice-President, in which he called for dialogue with the opposition and instructed judges to reconsider fraud charges regarding the recent parliamentary elections, with the aim of holding fresh elections in the constituencies concerned. The army's communiqué has been interpreted as a tacit support for the demonstrators and has encouraged more people to come out defying the curfew even further. As for the vice-President's speech it is clear that the regime has made another concession. 'Too little too late' is the refrain from Tahrir Square. But one should not fail to notice the fact that it was Suleiman who made the speech and not Mubarak, as was the case in the first speech since the turmoil started last Tuesday. Meanwhile, Frank Wisner, US former ambassador to Cairo (1986-91) has arrived in Cairo to engage transition negotiations. Abd Al Jawad, director of the Al Ahram Strategic Studies Centre, declared shortly after the two communiqués that 'Mubarak's era is over and a new legitimacy represented by Omar Suleiman is underway'.

Protestors seem determined to topple the regime and their numbers have grown despite the extended seventeen-hour curfew. The regime has been betting that the protests' momentum would be weakened gradually but it seems it has to reconsider its assessment. One thing is sure, we are already in a transition mood, in that any succession plans for Gamal Mubarak are now put to rest. Mubarak himself knew it was over when he appointed a vice-President; we will not witness a spectacular ouster like the Ben Ali scenario. In the several months from now until September, when his term ends, vice-President Suleiman is likely to seek to consolidate his role as the acting head of the state, ensuring an honourable exit for Mubarak in September, when his term ends, unless demonstrations force the army to pressure Mubarak to resign from his duties more precipitously on medical and age grounds. But for now all are holding their breath while foreign governments and companies started evacuating their citizens and personnel. 'What next for Egypt?' may be decided today in Tahrir Square just as was the case in 1919 Revolution from the very same square, hence the significance of the symbolism. Mubarak is surely gone, who is next remains to be seen.

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