

Egypt: “The Revolution Came and The Revolution Went”; Can the Egyptian People Push for Deeper Change ?

The Egyptian military has no culture of democracy

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It is now the long morning after, as protesters returned to Tahrir Square to clean it up and savor their victory. There were even some initial scuffles with the military that may be over anxious to assert control and show that it is in charge.

In all the joy of the moment—the type of joy we see so rarely these days in the news—in all the electrifying coverage, and congratulations in the capitals of the West that stood by Mubarak for decades, there is still vast uncertainty.

The Egyptian military, now nominally in charge, has no culture of democracy much less any history of fostering real change. Funded with support from abroad, it is subject to influences from all its many new found friends of “democracy,” especially its patrons in Washington.

It has already sounded the trumpet of reassurance that it will live up to its promises to assure new elections while keeping the country’s foreign commitments intact including the peace treaty with a nervous Israel, and likely is loyal to the war on terror as well.

It has now dissolved the parliament and suspended the constitution, meeting two key demands of pro-democracy protesters. At the same time, it has also, so far, committed itself to keep the structure of the Mubarak regime in place.

How will this sit with a euphoric Egyptian public?

So far, we have seen a takeover, but not yet the makings of a transformation. When millions of people were in the streets, they had power. When they are not, power reverts to institutions and a bureaucracy considered the most stifling in the world,

Egypt has been a police state with more than a million informers. That will not change easily.

Already a CIA assistance team has been dispatched, all in the name of guaranteeing democracy, of course. The Mossad’s role has been more low key but you can assume its there.

Almost every revolution is menaced by the threat of a counter-revolution and this one is no exception.

On the American right, the big fear stoked by Fox Fuhrer Glenn Beck is from the Islamic boogieman. “This isn’t about Egypt, this is the story of everyone who has ever plotted, or wanted, to fundamentally change or destroy the Western way of life,” he and his cronies warn.

On the left, the worry is that the movement for change is not organized enough to insure change, or even clear about what it wants now. Its leaderless momentum won Mubarak’s ouster, but can it win its desire for a real democracy and economic justice?

As Germany’s Der Spiegel reminds us, Egypt has been plundered by a kleptocracy, and corruption is deeply engrained, with the military is deeply part of it.

“It was Egypt’s economic decline, however, that fuelled the greatest anger. In the 1970s, the country could still be measured against economies like that of South Korea. But when the Asian countries began their ascent, Egypt couldn’t keep up

“Reforms undertaken that were intended to consolidate the national budget largely benefitted the middle and upper classes. The suffering of the poor merely continued to grow — and with it, the rage. Rumors have been the only information available about the scope of the dictator’s wealth. Still, they have been sufficient to fuel the hatred.”

Part of the problem has been the way the military dominates Egypt’s economy, as Andrew S Ross explained on Bloomberg News

“It’s a business conglomerate, like General Electric,” said Robert Springborg, professor of national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, referring to the Egyptian military. “It’s represented in virtually every sector of the economy.”

So is what’s good for Egypt’s GE good for the country, now that the military is, at least temporarily, in formal control?

In a September 2008 classified cable recently released by WikiLeaks, U.S. Ambassador to Egypt Margaret Scobey wrote, “We see the military’s role in the economy as a force that generally stifles free market reform by increasing direct government involvement in the markets.”

Fixing the economy won’t be easy as another African government (Yes, Egypt is also in Africa) empowered by a people’s revolution found out. The inspiring victory of Nelson Mandela confronted many of the issues that Egypt now faces. Apartheid had wrecked the economy leaving it with the deepest inequality in the world.

Mandela’s movement backed a Reconstruction and Development plan (RDP) to make major changes. It was widely supported by the people who fought for change, but then the World Bank and the IMF stepped in. South Africa was warned it would lose western support and financing if it moved in a direction these powerful institutions opposed. The pressure was intense and Mandela buckled. He abandoned the policy.

All these years later, South Africa remains mired in an economic crisis with nearly 40% unemployment. Its fickle “friends” in the West who expressed so much concern then moved on after their interests were protected.

Egypt needs help and solidarity from its real friends, as well as the vigilance of its own people, to insure that its Revolution is not betrayed or twisted beyond recognition to serve the interests of a few.

At the same time, what will the United States do to realign policies that assured Mubarak's survival for three decades, policies that got so little attention in a media mesmerized by drama and action.

Will the spirit of democracy that President Obama so eloquently supported lead to a new approach?

Political Scientist Michael Brenner explains the challenge,

'The fall of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt calls for a rethink of American strategy in the Middle East. Egypt has been the keystone of a set of interlocking policies on Palestine, on the suppression of Islamist movements, and on resisting the spread of Iranian influence. The American organized and lead concert includes the Arab triad of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

A tacit member is Israel. This improbable coalition is cemented by convergent national interests as each government defines them. Paramount is regime survival. The three Arab autocracies live in dread of popular uprisings that could drive them from power. Discontent varies in intensity - being highest in Egypt as now has been made manifest."

Manifest it was but will it remain so? When the cameras were focused on the streets, we could see what was going on. As decision-making moves into the suites and barracks, and as the cameras move on, it will be harder for the whole world to watch what happens now.

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