

Egypt at the tipping point?

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If the regime of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak falls, the tipping point will have been mid-afternoon of January 28. For several hours after the conclusion of Friday noon prayers, the police and Central Security Forces successfully kept demonstrators away from the center of Cairo. About 2:00 pm, 20,000 protestors broke through the blockades and took over the Qasr al-Nil Bridge connecting Giza and Zamalek to Tahrir Square, the hub of the downtown district. Two hours later the headquarters of the ruling National Democratic Party, which President Mubarak leads, was on fire.

Earlier in the afternoon, crowds stormed regional NDP headquarters in the Suez Canal city of Isma'iliyya and the Delta provincial capital of Mansura. The provincial NDP headquarters in Fayyum was torched a few hours later. Hundreds of thousands of protesters throughout the country defied the 6:00 PM curfew proclaimed by the regime and remained in the streets throughout the night. In Alexandria, Egypt's second city, demonstrators drove the police and Central Security Force out of town. By the time President Mubarak addressed the nation that evening and announced he had requested the resignation of the entire cabinet, the army had begun to assume security responsibility for Egypt's major cities.

The targets of angry crowds are rarely accidental. In this case, assaulting the offices of the ruling party, and other official buildings in Alexandria, Suez, and Tanta underscored one of the main chants of the demonstrators: "The people want an end to the regime." Not "reform" and the resignation of the cabinet, which is a technocratic and administrative body with limited powers, but a regime change and a transition to democracy which would only begin with the resignation of President Mubarak.

Economic demands were prominent in the demonstrations of the January 25 "Day of Anger," which launched the protest movement. Within days demonstrators set their sights squarely on the entire autocratic regime, whose oppression at last became unbearable. The demand for regime change has only intensified since January 28.

One of the most extraordinary aspects of the Egyptian intifada is that there is no identifiable leadership. Many of the extra-parliamentary oppositional figures who have been active in the last decade have participated and spoken to the media. But they have not played an organizing or leading role. The vast majority of the participants in the demonstrations does not belong to any political or religious party or movement and has not previously participated in public political activity.

As usual, Egypt's opposition parties were ineffectual. The so-called "left" Tagammu' Party refused to endorse the demonstrations out of appreciation for the police (January 25 is Police Day in Egypt). The pro-business Wafd Party never announced a clear position. Ghad (Tomorrow) Party leader Ayman Nour, who won seven percent of the vote in the 2005 presidential elections, did support the demonstrations. The physically frail Nour was beaten by police and ended up in the hospital on January 25. His party, however, is split and not particularly popular.

The Muslim Brotherhood, widely acknowledged as the largest and best organized opposition force in

the country, abstained from the January 25 demonstrations, but belatedly endorsed the January 28 demonstrations. Perhaps as a result of this waffling there has been almost no Islamic content to the demonstrations. The tone has mostly been nationalist and secular.

Nobel Peace laureate and former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Muhammad El-Baradei, also did not endorse the January 25 demonstrations. He joined the movement only after seeing that the demonstrations were larger and more successful than expected. Since then he has announced, "If people, in particular young people...want me to lead the transition, I will not let them down."

Despite his belated support and his previously irregular and ineffective organizing, El-Baradei has emerged as the symbolic leader of the movement and is particularly popular among the youth. He is widely respected as a "clean" figure who would give Egypt a good face in the international community. The Muslim Brotherhood has endorsed El-Baradei as a transitional president - a very clever move, since he would organize elections and allow them to participate, along with all the other political tendencies.

A month ago, when the Tunisian popular uprising was well under way, not even the most astute political analysts predicted that Egypt was on the verge of the most massive popular intifada it has experienced since the era of the British occupation (1882-1954). Many correctly pointed to the important differences between the two countries. Egypt's population of 81 million is eight times larger than Tunisia's, and its military-internal security apparatus numbers well over a million people. Unlike the hard fist of former Tunisian President Zein al-'Abidin Ben 'Ali, President Mubarak has cleverly deployed a combination of limited freedoms, cooptation, splitting the opposition, and velvet and iron-fisted repression which provided some opportunities, especially for intellectuals, to express political grievances and let off steam. Moreover, the Egyptian people have a reputation for political apathy and enduring suffering patiently. It appears their patience has come to an end.

The instant analysis of most of the mass media has focused on two factors as explanations for the Egyptian upheaval. The first is the demonstration effect of the Tunisian uprising. The second is the new mobilizing capacities of Web 2.0 social media - blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, etc. Some have also mentioned the relatively free flow of information across the Arab world as a result of satellite TV networks, especially Al Jazeera and Al Arabiyya.

These are undoubtedly part of the explanation. But Al Jazeera began broadcasting in 1996. It was a virtual cheerleader for the Tunisian uprising. But it was slow to cover the January 25 events in Egypt, which many suspected was due to pressure from the network's patron, the emir of Qatar. Since then, Al Jazeera has more than made up for lost time, at least until its reporters were arrested and their cameras confiscated on January 30. Mobile phones, which have been used for political mobilization far more than Facebook and Twitter, have been available in Egypt since 1998. Blogs and Facebook have been used for political organizing for several years. On January 28 there was no internet access in most of Egypt, and the mobile phone networks were shut down.

The precise timing of the Egyptian uprising was unpredicted and unpredictable. But putting it in historical context highlights structural causes that make the events less surprising and diminish somewhat the significance of fashionable factors like social media.

This has been an insurrection inspired largely by youth. Over half of Egypt's population is younger than the thirty years Hosni Mubarak has been in power. Middle class youth cannot easily marry and raise a family by relying solely on the wages they earn from jobs in Egypt, if they are employed at all. Unemployment is concentrated among first-time job seekers with a tertiary education. Such unemployed and underemployed youth typically work abroad for several years to save enough

money to buy and furnish an apartment, the sine qua non of middle class marriage.

The Facebook page of the April 6 Youth Movement, which has received prominent attention from the commentariat, has some 100,000 members. But the event for which the group is named - a national general strike called for April 6, 2008 - did not happen. Its presence on the internet has been considerably greater than in urban neighborhoods and rural villages where computer access is limited and illiteracy rates are high. They are, however, closely linked to Muhammad El-Baradei, and this may position them well in any transition to a new regime that may come.

The project of neo-liberal economic restructuring has been underway since 1991. Economic growth has been impressive - about five percent a year - since the recently dismissed cabinet was installed in July 2004. The upper middle class and the elites have prospered. But there has been very little trickle down. According to the World Bank, more than 40 percent of all Egyptians live at or near the poverty line. The price of food has skyrocketed. Consequently, the wages of most blue and white-collar workers are insufficient to sustain a family. The cutbacks in government social spending have shredded the social safety net put into place by the authoritarian-populist regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser. What is left is an authoritarian kleptocracy.

For about a decade the regime has tolerated social mobilizations around several political and economic issues. In the foreign policy realm there were popular committees and demonstrations in solidarity with the second Palestinian intifada in 2000-02 and against the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 (which Hosni Mubarak did not support, though he did not waver in his alliance with the United States). In 2005-06 the Egyptian Movement for Change (popularly known Kefaya or Enough) burst on the scene calling for Mubarak not to run in the 2005 presidential elections (he did); not to groom his son Gamal to succeed him (which seemed likely until January 28); to limit the powers of the executive branch of government (they were arguably expanded by the constitutional amendments of 2005); and to end the state of emergency which has been in effect since 1981 (it was extended). There was also a strong campaign to support the independence of the Egyptian judiciary in spring 2006, which was much broader than Kefaya. But Kefaya lost steam around the time of the 2006 Lebanon War.

Perhaps most importantly, since 1998 there has been a rising wave of strikes, sit-ins, demonstrations and other actions by workers, with a big spike after the acceleration of the implementation of neo-liberal policies by the "government of businessmen" installed in July 2004. Over two million workers have participated in more than 3,000 collective actions in this period. They have won some substantial economic demands. The government reneged on its promises whenever it thought it could get away with it, but this usually prompted workers to strike or protest yet again. About 40% of all the collective actions have been in the private sector, where there are very few local trade union committees. This is a completely new development.

The most important political gain by workers in this period was the establishment of two independent trade unions — the Independent General Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers in 2008 and the General Union for Health Technicians only a month ago in December 2010. The government was also forced to raise the basic monthly minimum wage to 400 Egyptian pounds (about \$70) — wholly inadequate, but nearly four times what it had been before.

The importance of the labor protest movement over the last decade was highlighted by a press release on January 30 in which the two independent unions and representatives of workers from a dozen factory towns declared their intention to form a new trade union federation, independent of the existing Egyptian Trade Union Federation, which has functioned as an arm of the Egyptian regime since it was established in 1957. This is the first attempt to establish a new institution based on a popular movement — a revolutionary act, since this is illegal according to existing Egyptian law.

All these mobilizations have been reported on by the privately owned press which began proliferating after the establishment of *al-Masry al-Youm* (The Egyptian Today) in spring 2004. Overly oppositional editors have sometimes been jailed, fined, or beaten up. But the enormous audience enjoyed by the satellite TV channels has reduced the efficacy of repressing the local press, especially since the circulation of most newspapers and magazines is limited. *Al-Masry al-Youm*, with a daily circulation of 100,000, is the largest and does not cross the boundaries of liberal opposition.

As a result of all these developments, the barrier of fear, which is essential to maintaining an autocratic regime in power, was breached well before January 2011. The missing element was for the Egyptian people to understand this. On January 28 they did. Whatever happens in the coming days and weeks, the Mubarak regime will not be able to put this genie back in the bottle.

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P.S.

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