

The day Mubarak stepped down

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SocialistWorker.org reports on the fall of the Mubarak regime, with on-the-spot reports from Cairo.

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From day of challenge to day of victory

February 11, 2011

HOSNI MUBARAK is gone. Hours after a televised speech in which he defied the mass uprising against him and declared he would remain as Egypt's dictator, Mubarak stepped down. His newly appointed Vice President Omar Suleiman appeared on state television on Friday to announce that authority had been transferred to a council of military leaders.

The streets of Cairo and every city in Egypt, filled with protesters furious about Mubarak's speech last night, erupted in jubilation. News channels with their cameras trained on Tahrir Square gave up trying to make themselves heard over the joyous demonstration. Reporters described deafening chants of "Egypt is free!" and "You're an Egyptian, lift your head."

Many questions remain about the shape of the new regime under the military—and what role, if any, Suleiman, who infuriated Egyptians over the past several weeks with his defense of Mubarak's continued reign, will play.

The military has been at the center of the Mubarak dictatorship for 30 years and also bears responsibility for the regime's crimes. In fact, military police have been involved in arresting key activists. Now the struggle will have to continue to make sure that the military establishment—which is also deeply involved in the country's business affairs—doesn't consolidate power in the hands of the armed forces.

But it's already clear that the people of Egypt have changed the course of history in the Middle East—and the world beyond. They have overcome the violence of police and thugs, the regime's attempts to co-opt parts of the opposition, and the double-dealing of Western leaders who put "stability" ahead of Egyptians' demands for democracy.

The emergency laws that enabled Mubarak's police state to rule for 30 years are still on the books. But the millions of people who engaged in this revolutionary struggle—with the sacrifice of at least

300 lives, with thousands more injured and arrested—weren't intimidated. They will continue to press for genuine democracy. And workers—whose strikes pushed the regime to the breaking point—will continue to press for wages that can put food on the table, as well as the right to organize independent unions.

Egypt's revolution has taken a giant leap ahead, opening the way for a struggle that can reshape all of Egyptian society. And the monarchs, dictators and U.S. stooges who hold power across the Middle East are terrified that they—following Mubarak and the ousted Tunisian autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali—could be next.

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AS FRIDAY began, it was clear that the demonstrations would be bigger than ever today—and so was the level of anger.

Already furious at Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's refusal to announce his resignation on Thursday night, the mass of people were now upset at Communique #2 of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces [\[1\]](#), which backed Vice President Omar Suleiman's line that constitutional changes would come—but only after the protests end.

The statement said that the armed forces "confirm the need to resume orderly work in the government installations and a return to normal life, preserve the interests and property of our great people."

If the regime thought this would quiet people's anger, they were wrong. By midday Friday, thousands had already surrounded the state television building and smaller numbers were outside the presidential palace. And Tahrir Square was packed as tightly as it had ever been in the course of the revolution

As SocialistWorker.org contributor Mostafa Omar reported from the long line to enter Tahrir Square at midday:

"The army's statement says nothing concrete. They are trying to back up the vice president's promise that will lift the emergency laws—but they said they would do so only at the end of the current crisis.

This is leading to the first serious rift between the demonstrators and the army. People are entering into heated debate with officers, accusing them of taking the side of the regime, and not the revolution. Already, three officers have quit the army and joined the protests—one of them has given a lengthy interview to Al Jazeera.

And while thousands are camping outside the state TV building, about 2,000 workers in state TV and radio are on strike—the people who produce the regime's version of the news.

Already, there are an estimated 10,000 people camped outside the presidential palace in Heliopolis. People are coming to Tahrir with the expectation of marching there. But it's a long march—miles and miles."

What effect the mass discontent on the streets had on the maneuvers behind the scenes will probably become known in the days to come, but the morning and afternoon mobilizations were a clear rejection of the attempt to maintain Mubarak in power, while emphasizing that his powers had been transferred to Suleiman.

Furious, the crowds continued to swell as the evening hours approached, and demonstrators reportedly overcame the military's attempt to defend the state television building.

When Suleiman finally appeared on television to make his brief statement that Mubarak had stepped down, the streets erupted again, but this time with joyous celebrations.

Protesters' fury erupts against Mubarak

Eyewitnesses in Tahrir Square tell Lee Sustar and Eric Ruder that the movement is determined to face down the threat of repression in order to force out Hosni Mubarak.

February 11, 2011

Protesters react to Mubarak's speech insisting he'll continue to cling to power
DISBELIEF, then fury—followed by a resolve to take the revolution forward.

That was the reaction in Cairo's Tahrir Square February 10 when Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak gave his speech refusing to step down.

"People on Tahrir Square were mostly enraged after the speech," journalist Anand Gopal reported from Cairo. "I saw three people even faint. Mubarak has basically lost most of his power, but the symbolic value of him remaining president is enormous, of course. About 1,000 protesters have marched to the president's palace and are camping out there for the night, to be met by many more tomorrow. Tomorrow looks to be a day of major confrontation."

SocialistWorker.org contributor Mostafa Omar, also in Tahrir Square, added: "There is concern that the army might try to impose a military junta—an open military dictatorship. There are discussions in Tahrir Square on whether the army is ready to use force. At the same time, there are a lot of chants and a lot of discussions in which people are saying that they are willing to sacrifice to win. Many people don't believe the army is willing to use force. Others believe there are preparations being made for a massacre." But the demonstrations and marches are going to be enormous. The activists have renamed the event tomorrow as the Day of Challenge—the day of challenging the regime. "Socialist and blogger Hossam el-Hamalawy made a similar point in an interview with Al-Jazeera English." At this point, no one knows what will happen, "he said." "I can assure you that tomorrow, Egypt will witness its biggest demonstration in history." He added: "Now we have the wave of mass strikes in every single sector. Mubarak's speech has provoked everybody, and no one now is in control."

Earlier attempts to repress the democratic revolution have left at least 300 dead and hundreds more beaten and arrested. Even as the regime was promising concessions, plainclothes cops and military police were continuing to arrest activists—often beating and torturing them.

So when the—incorrect—reports of Mubarak's imminent departure began, tens of thousands of people came to Tahrir Square to swell the already enormous crowd assembled there. Rumors flew as media outlets began reporting that the Egyptian military announced it would pledge its "support for the legitimate demands of the protesters."

In the afternoon, Army Gen. Hassan al-Roueini, the military's commander for Cairo and the surrounding suburbs, announced to the crowd at Tahrir Square that "all your demands" would be met.

This further fueled the impression that Mubarak's speech would be the formal announcement of his resignation.

Leon Panetta, director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, added to the expectation during an afternoon appearance before the House Intelligence Committee. "[T]here is a strong likelihood that Mubarak will step down this evening, which will be significant in terms of where the hopefully orderly transition in Egypt will take place," said Panetta.

All this contributed to a festive atmosphere in Tahrir Square. "In the four hours before Mubarak's speech, the square was packed with people celebrating," Mostafa Omar said. "It felt like a wedding. And 95 percent of the people there felt that he was going to deliver a resignation speech. When it became clear that he wasn't going to, chants of 'please leave' erupted. There was a little confusion. A number of people fainted."

Mubarak announced his intention to stay on and transfer presidential powers to Vice President Omar Suleiman. This "transfer of power," however, does not include the authority to recommend constitutional amendments, dissolve parliament or dismiss the cabinet.

Given Suleiman's statements a day earlier that "order must be restored" and that there might be a "coup," this left a bad taste in the mouths of many protesters.

Almost immediately after the speech, clumps of protesters began marching out of Tahrir Square, making their way to the state television headquarters a few blocks away to express their disgust at the speech. Others reportedly headed to the presidential palace, although it lies a significant distance from Tahrir Square.

Those who remained at the square started building more fortified structures amid the city of tents that had sprung up in Tahrir Square in the last two weeks. Within the hour, several protesters had already constructed a wooden structure with a roof, indicating that they had no intention of leaving before Mubarak was out of office.

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WITH MASSIVE protests set to follow Friday prayers on February, the looming question was the response by the armed forces.

Was the statement by Gen. al-Roueini that all the protesters' demands would be met a deliberate ploy? Is there a split brewing in the military? And what are the intentions of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces—a body that met on February 10 for the first time since 1973?

Ahram Online reported that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces took the unprecedented step of meeting without Mubarak at its head:

"The just released Communique #1 of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, announcing that the Council will remain in an open-ended session, in order to safeguard the people's achievements and demands," is being interpreted widely as indicating that the Egyptian army has effectively seized political power in the country."

The U.S. intelligence consulting business Stratfor described how Mubarak's intransigence has

created a dilemma for Egypt's generals:

"The military faces three choices. The first is to stand back, allow the crowds to swell and likely march to the presidential palace and perhaps enter the grounds. The second choice is to move troops and armor into position to block more demonstrators from entering Tahrir Square and keep those in the square in place. The third is to stage a coup and overthrow Mubarak."

The possibility of a split in the armed forces—and how to respond to it—has been a constant topic of debate in Tahrir Square. "It's clear that there are splits at the top," Omar said. "But Mubarak is saying to them that if he goes down—as a symbol of the regime—it will weaken the regime forever." After the speech, in Tahrir Square, the chant went back up—"the regime must go." There is the beginning of an understanding that the regime is closing ranks. There are definitely splits, but the Army High Council is still behind Mubarak. The army might change its position on protecting peaceful protests."

All this sets the stage on the Day of Challenge for a classic revolutionary confrontation between the mass of people and the state. And the following day is a workday—it's almost certain that strikes will resume on an even wider scale.

After defying beatings, bullets and torture to demand democracy in the last two weeks, the movement is bigger and more determined than ever. The outcome of this showdown will shape Egyptian—and world—politics for a long time to come.

Footnotes

[1] <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/5396/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-army-to-guarantee-reforms-communiqué-number-.aspx>