

# Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is early days, and the true measure of what the Egyptian people have accomplished has yet to fully sink in. Some achievements are as clear as they are stunning. Over a period of less than three weeks, they challenged conventional chestnuts about Arab lethargy; transformed national politics; opened up the political space to new actors; massively reinforced protests throughout the region; and called into question fundamental pillars of the Middle East order. They did this without foreign help and, indeed, with much of the world timidly watching and waffling according to shifting daily predictions of their allies' fortunes. The challenge now is to translate street activism into inclusive, democratic institutional politics so that a popular protest that culminated in a military coup does not end there.

The backdrop to the uprising has a familiar ring. Egypt suffered from decades of authoritarian rule, a lifeless political environment virtually monopolised by the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP); widespread corruption, cronyism and glaring inequities; and a pattern of abuse at the hands of unaccountable security forces. For years, agitation against the regime spread and, without any credible mechanism to express or channel public discontent, increasingly took the shape of protest movements and labour unrest.

What, ultimately, made the difference? While the fraudulent November 2010 legislative elections persuaded many of the need for extra-institutional action, the January 2011 toppling of Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali persuaded them it could succeed. Accumulated resentment against a sclerotic, ageing regime that, far from serving a national purpose, ended up serving only itself reached a tipping point. The increasingly likely prospect of another Mubarak presidency after the September 2011 election (either the incumbent himself or his son, Gamal) removed any faith that this process of decay would soon stop.

The story of what actually transpired between 25 January and 11 February remains to be told. This account is incomplete. Field work was done principally in Cairo, which became the epicentre of the uprising but was not a microcosm of the nation. Regime deliberations and actions took place behind closed doors and remain shrouded in secrecy. The drama is not near its final act. A military council is in control. The new government bears a striking resemblance to the old. Strikes continue. Protesters show persistent ability to mobilise hundreds of thousands.

There already are important lessons, nonetheless, as Egypt moves from the heady days of upheaval to the job of designing a different polity. Post-Mubarak Egypt largely will be shaped by features that characterised the uprising:

This was a popular revolt. But its denouement was a military coup, and the duality that marked Hosni Mubarak's undoing persists to this day. The tug of war between a hierarchical, stability-obsessed institution keen to protect its interests and the spontaneous and largely unorganised popular movement will play out on a number of fronts - among them: who will govern during the

interim period and with what competencies; who controls the constitution-writing exercise and how comprehensive will it be; who decides on the rules for the next elections and when they will be held; and how much will the political environment change and open up before then?

The military played a central, decisive and ambivalent role. It was worried about instability and not eager to see political developments dictated by protesting crowds. It also was determined to protect its popular credibility and no less substantial business and institutional interests. At some point it concluded the only way to reconcile these competing considerations was to step in. That ambiguity is at play today: the soldiers who rule by decree, without parliamentary oversight or genuine opposition input, are the same who worked closely with the former president; they appear to have no interest in remaining directly in charge, preferring to exit the stage as soon as they can and revert to the background where they can enjoy their privileges without incurring popular resentment when disappointment inevitably sets in; and yet they want to control the pace and scope of change.

The opposition's principal assets could become liabilities as the transition unfolds. It lacked an identifiable leader or representatives and mostly coalesced around the straightforward demand to get rid of Mubarak. During the protests, this meant it could bridge social, religious, ideological and generational divides, bringing together a wide array along the economic spectrum, as well as young activists and the more traditional opposition, notably the Muslim Brotherhood. Its principal inspiration was moral and ethical, not programmatic, a protest against a regime synonymous with rapaciousness and shame. The regime's traditional tools could not dent the protesters' momentum: it could not peel off some opposition parties and exploit divisions, since they were not the motors of the movement; concessions short of Mubarak's removal failed to meet the minimum threshold; and repression only further validated the protesters' perception of the regime and consolidated international sympathy for them.

As the process moves from the street to the corridors of power, these strengths could become burdensome. Opposition rivalries are likely to re-emerge, as are conflicts of interest between various social groups; the absence of either empowered representatives or an agreed, positive agenda will harm effectiveness; the main form of leverage - street protests - is a diminishing asset. A key question is whether the movement will find ways to institutionalise its presence and pressure.

Throughout these events public opinion frequently wavered. Many expressed distaste for the regime but also concern about instability and disorder wrought by the protests. Many reportedly deemed Mubarak's concessions sufficient and his wish for dignified departure understandable but were alarmed at violence by regime thugs. The most widespread aspiration was for a return to normality and resumption of regular economic life given instability's huge costs. At times, that translated into hope protests would end; at others, into the wish the regime would cease violent, provocative measures. This ambivalence will impact the coming period. Although many Egyptians will fear normalisation, in the sense of maintaining the principal pillars of Mubarak's regime, many more are likely to crave a different normalisation: ensuring order, security and jobs. The challenge will be to combine functioning, stable institutions with a genuine process of political and socio-economic transformation.

Western commentators split into camps: those who saw Muslim Brotherhood fingerprints all over the uprising and those who saw it as a triumph of a young, Western-educated generation that had discarded Islamist and anti-American outlooks. Both interpretations are off the mark. Modern communication played a role, particularly in the early stages, as did mainly young, energised members of the middle classes. The Brotherhood initially watched uneasily, fearful of the crackdown that would follow involvement in a failed revolt. But it soon shifted, in reaction to pressure from its younger, more cosmopolitan members in Tahrir Square and the protests' surprising strength. Once it committed to battle, it may well have decided there could be no turning back: Mubarak had to be

brought down or retaliation would be merciless. The role of Islamist activists grew as the confrontation became more violent and as one moved away from Cairo; in the Delta in particular, their deep roots and the secular opposition's relative weakness gave them a leading part.

Here too are lessons. The Brotherhood will not push quickly or forcefully; it is far more sober and prudent than that, prefers to invest in the longer-term and almost certainly does not enjoy anywhere near majority support. But its message will resonate widely and be well served by superior organisation, particularly compared to the state of secular parties. As its political involvement deepens, it also will have to contend with tensions the uprising exacerbated: between generations; between traditional hierarchical structures and modern forms of mobilisation; between a more conservative and a more reformist outlook; between Cairo, urban and rural areas.

The West neither expected these events nor, at least at the outset, hoped for them. Mubarak had been a loyal ally; the speed with which it celebrated his fall as a triumph of democracy was slightly anomalous if not unseemly. The more important point is that it apparently had little say over events, as illustrated by the rhetorical catch-up in which it engaged. Egyptians were not in the mood for outside advice during the uprising and are unlikely to care for it now. The most important contribution was stern warnings against violence. Now, Western powers can help by providing economic assistance, avoiding attempts to micromanage the transition, select favourites or react too negatively to a more assertive, independent foreign policy. Egypt's new rulers will be more receptive to public opinion, which is less submissive to Western demands; that is the price to pay for the democratic polity which the U.S. and Europe claim they wish to see.

With these dynamics in mind, several core principles might help steer the transition:

If the military is to overcome scepticism of its willingness to truly change the nature of the regime, it will need either to share power with representative civilian forces by creating a new interim, representative authority or ensure decisions are made transparently after broad consultation, perhaps with a transitional advisory council.

Some immediate measures could help reassure the civilian political forces: lifting the state of emergency; releasing prisoners detained under its provisions; and respecting basic rights, including freedom of speech, association and assembly, including the rights of independent trade unions.

Independent, credible bodies might be set up to investigate charges of corruption and other malfeasance against ex-regime officials. Investigations must be thorough, but non-politicised to avoid score-settling. There will need to be guarantees of fair judicial process. Independent and credible criminal investigations also could be held to probe abuse by all security forces, together with a comprehensive security sector review to promote professionalism.

The democratic movement would be well served by continued coordination and consensus around the most important of its positive and strategic political demands. This could be helped by forming an inclusive and diverse body tasked with prioritising these demands and pressing them on the military authorities.

One need only look at what already is happening in Yemen, Bahrain or Libya to appreciate the degree to which success can inspire. But disenchantment can be contagious too. Mubarak's ouster was a huge step. What follows will be just as fateful. Whether they asked for it or not, all eyes once again will be on the Egyptian people.

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\* Middle East/North Africa Report N°10124 Feb 2011:

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/egypt/101-popular-protest-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-I-egypt-victorious.aspx>