

The Egyptian mirror

Thursday 10 February 2011, by [GREENWALD Glenn](#) (Date first published: 7 February 2011).

One of the most revealing journalistic genres is the effort by establishment media outlets to explain to their American audiences why Those Other Countries — usually in the Middle East — are so bad and awful and plagued by severe political and societal corruption [1], as it unironically details how Egypt is a cesspool of oligarchical favoritism and self-dealing. The article focuses on Ahmed Ezz, a close friend of Hosni Mubarak's son who has exploited his political connections to corner much of the nation's steel market, triggering growing resentment by the public. Along the way, we learn several disturbing things about Egypt, including this:

*“For many years, Mr. Ezz has represented the intersection of money, politics and power . . . Public resentment at the wealth acquired by the politically powerful helped propel the uprising already reshaping the contours of power along the Nile. . . . Hosni Mubarak's Egypt has long functioned as **a state where wealth bought political power and political power bought great wealth.**”*

Can you believe that “in Hosni Mubarak's Egypt,” private wealth translates into great political power and vice-versa? What is it like, wonders the curious and concerned *Times* reader, to live in a country like that? No wonder there's an uprising.

How many American politicians with a national platform over the last thirty years have failed to convert their political standing into great personal wealth? [2] Perhaps only those who began their political careers with great wealth. Ex-Presidents [3] and their wives [4] and top aides [5] are routinely lavished [6] with many millions [7] of dollars from media companies and other corporations for books [8], speeches [9] and other services [10] (Obama didn't even wait to become President to capitalize on his political celebrity [11]), while a large portion of ex-members of Congress [12] and administration officials with any real power [13] feed at the trough of corporate largesse in exchange for peddling their influence. It would literally be impossible to list all the top officials from both parties who have quickly converted their political influence into vast personal wealth over the past two decades; it'd be much quicker to list the few who haven't.

And that's to say nothing of the virtually limitless political power automatically wielded by those with great private wealth, who own America's government institutions [14] and literally write [15] most of its laws [16]. As the NYT taught us today, “Hosni Mubarak's Egypt has long functioned as a state where wealth bought political power and political power bought great wealth.” We also learn this about Egypt:

*“While hard facts are difficult to come by, Egyptians watching the rise of a moneyed class widely **believe that self-dealing, crony capitalism and corruption are endemic**, represented in the public eye by a group of rich businessmen aligned with Gamal Mubarak, the president's son, as well as key government ministers and governing party members. . . . On paper, the changes [in the 1990s] transformed an almost entirely state-controlled economic system to a predominantly free-market one. In practice, though, **a form of crony capitalism** emerged, according to Egyptian and foreign experts.”*

So apparently, what happens in Egypt is that they pretend to have a free-market economic system, but in reality, the very rich are able to influence the government for special favors that enhance their private-sector wealth and power. How could the people there have put up with that for so long?

But it gets worse:

“Exacerbating tensions, Egypt’s oligarchs flaunted their wealth. They built grandiose homes in the desert outside Cairo and along the country’s coasts. They drove brand-new Mercedes-Benzes down derelict Cairo streets with police escorts.”

A tiny segment of the population not only becomes wealthier [17] as a result of its political influence, but increasingly flaunts that wealth [18] while the vast majority of the nation suffers [19]. No country could possibly sustain political stability for long under those conditions. Worse still, the entrenched inequality extends (in Egypt) to the legal sphere as well:

*“Over the next few years, as Mr. Ezz took on important responsibilities in the governing party, allegations mounted that he was using his position to enrich himself and defend his near-monopoly on the steel business. Professor Selim said complaints brought against Mr. Ezz with the Egyptian Competition Authority were dismissed . . . Even without formal sanctions, the public took a dim view of Mr. Ezz’s business dealings, which were faulted — rightly or wrongly — as raising construction costs in Egypt. . . . Political analysts said that the focus of investigations now, including Mr. Ezz, is **at best selective, intended not to punish corruption, but to address public grievances without actually changing the system.**”*

Even the most flagrant corruption and illegality result in no accountability for the Egyptian elite. Still, public anger at least results in some prosecutions against rich and well-connected people such as Ezz, but when that happens, it’s designed only to placate public rage in order to preserve the system of entitlements and prerogatives, not to change it. With a status-quo-perpetuating system of justice like that (over there in Egypt), the only wonder is that it took this long for them to rise up. Thankfully, Times readers don’t live in a country where such endemic problems reign.

* * * * *

None of this is to say that such matters are not newsworthy when they take place in other countries; they are. And obviously the domestic political repression in Egypt does not compare to what one finds in the U.S. But there are two points about these types of articles worth making.

The first is that they have the effect of manufacturing the appearance that such problems exist only Over There, but not here. One would never, ever find in The New York Times such a sweeping denunciation of the plutocratic corruption and merger of private wealth and political power that shapes most of America’s political culture. Just like “torture”— which that paper has no trouble declaring is used by Egypt’s government [20] but will never say is used by ours [21] — such systematic corruption can exist only elsewhere, but never in America. That’s how this genre of Look Over There reporting is not just incomplete but outright misleading: it actively creates the impression that such conditions are found only in those Primitive Foreign Places, but not here.

The second point is how adeptly the media morality narrative has been managed from the start of the Egypt crisis. Any foreign story that interests the American media for more than a day requires clear villains and heroes. What made the Egypt story so rare is that the designated foreign villains are usually first separated from the U.S. before being turned into demons; it’s fine to vilify those whom we have steadfastly supported provided the support is a matter of the past and can thus be safely ignored. Thus were Saddam Hussein, the former Mujahideen (now known as The Terrorists) and any number of Latin American and Asian tyrants seamlessly turned into Horrible, Evil Monsters despite our once-great alliances with them; the fact that it happened in the past (albeit the very recent past) permitted those facts to be excluded.

But so intertwined are the U.S. and Mubarak — still — that such narrative separation was impossible. Not even American propaganda could whitewash the fact that the U.S. has imposed Hosni Mubarak's regime on The Egyptian People for decades. His government is not merely our ally but one of our closest client regimes. We prop him up, pay for his tools of repression, and have kept him safe for 30 years from exactly this type of popular uprising — all in exchange for his (a) abducting, detaining and torturing whom we want, (b) acting favorably toward Israel, and (c) bringing stability to the Suez Canal.

And yet it's remarkable how self-righteously our political and media class can proclaim sympathy with the heroic populace, and such scorn for their dictator, without really reconciling our national responsibility for Mubarak's reign of terror. Thanks to this Look Over There genre of reporting, we're so accustomed to seeing ourselves as The Good Guys — even when the facts are right in front of our noses that disprove that — that no effort is really required to reconcile this cognitive dissonance. Even when it's this flagrant, we can just leave it unexamined because our Core Goodness is the immovable, permanent fixture of our discourse; that's the overarching premise that can never be challenged.

Some leading American officials have been criticized for recent statements that have been too starkly pro-Mubarak. Joe Biden was first when he decreed [22] that Mubarak was “not a dictator” because “has been an ally of ours in a number of things” (as always in the American Foreign Policy world, whether someone is a democrat or a dictator is determined by how much they serve or defy America's will, not by how they acquired or use power; kudos to Biden for unintentionally being so candid about that). Then Hillary Clinton — who said in March, 2009 [23] that “**I really consider President and Mrs. Mubarak to be friends of my family**” [24]: her very politically enriched family [25], that is — appeared to defend Mubarak's ongoing rule [26]. Then, it was claimed [27] that a State Department envoy, Frank Wisner, went off-script when he said Mubarak “must stay in office in order to steer those changes through.” And Dick Cheney just praised Mubarak as a good friend and ally [28].

But I empathize more with these pro-Mubarak political officials than with their American critics. All Biden, Clinton, Wisner and Cheney are doing is reflexively giving voice to decades-old bipartisan U.S. foreign policy. They're defending Mubarak because he has been — and still is — our close friend and client ruler. He has loyally done our bidding, and in exchange, we've kept him in power and kept him close. That's why it's a bit difficult to endure the sudden outburst of righteous contempt for Egypt's dictator. We've eagerly sent our money and aid for decades to ensure that he wields power over Egyptians; all that's changed is that his true face has been exposed in a way that prevents us from turning away and denying what we support.

The fact that we don't actually regret anything is compellingly demonstrated by Obama's efforts to ensure the empowerment [29] of Egypt's new “Vice President,” Omar Suleiman, who has been Mubarak's — and our — brutal domestic enforcer and oppressor for years [30]. Pragmatic arguments can of course be assembled to justify that support — exactly the same way that support for Mubarak can be pragmatically justified. And that's the point: moral proclamations notwithstanding, we're not doing anything different with Egypt now. We're doing what we've always done: subjected the people of that region to hard-core oppression in order to advance what we perceive to be our interests (though, as 9/11 proved, that perception about self-interest is dubious in the extreme). That behavior would almost be tolerable if we were at least honest about it, but pretending that we're so very inspired by the democratic aspirations of the Egyptian people — all while we have long acquiesced and still acquiesce in the extermination of those aspirations — is a bit too much to withstand. But as long as we can keep Looking Over There to those bad people and bad things, none of these contradictions will be particularly bothersome.

BY GLENN GREENWALD

UPDATE: Highlighting several of the points here, *The Independent's* Robert Fisk today discovered that the aforementioned pro-Mubarak official Frank Wisner — hired by the State Department as its Egypt envoy — happens to work at Patton, Boggs, the very well-connected law and lobbyist firm which happens to represent the Egyptian regime [31] and has in the past represented Mubarak himself. I'm sure there's some reasonable explanation for the State Department's conduct here; I can't wait to find out what it is.

P.S.

* From Salon, FEB 7, 2011 05:08 ET:

http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2011/02/07/egypt/index.html

Footnotes

[1] See here: http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2010/05/26/conspiracies and here http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2009/05/11/journalistsfor examples). This morning, The New York Times has a classic entry

[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/07/world/middleeast/07corruption.html?_r=1&hp

[2] http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/2010/04/13/2010-04-13_sarah_palin_quits_as_alaska_governorgets_rich_rakes_in_12m_since_quitting_public.html

[3] <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2001/08/06/politics/main305105.shtml>

[4] <http://www.observer.com/node/43808>

[5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/04/us/politics/04emanuel.html>

[6] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/23/us/politics/23cheney.html>

[7] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/22/AR2007022202189.html>

[8] <http://www.observer.com/2008/rumsfeld-writing-memoirs-penguins-conservative-imprint>

[9] <http://blog.seattlepi.com/seattlepolitics/archives/163237.asp>

[10] http://www.economist.com/node/1875084?story_id=1875084

[11] <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/17/us/politics/17obama.html>

[12] http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2009/02/01/daschle

[13] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/04/AR2008010403609.html>

- [14] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/04/29/dick-durbin-banks-frankly_n_193010.html
- [15] <http://emptywheel.firedoglake.com/2009/09/08/liz-fowlers-plan/>
- [16] <http://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2008/06/mccain-campaign-staffed-telecom-immunity-lobbyists>
- [17] <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-12-13/wall-street-sees-record-revenue-in-09-10-recovery-from-government-bailout.html>
- [18] <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/01/the-rise-of-the-new-global-elite/8343/>
- [19] http://www.usatoday.com/money/economy/housing/2011-01-27-foreclosures27_ST_N.htm
- [20] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/weekinreview/06held.html?pagewanted=2&sq=torture&st=cse&scp=17>
- [21] <http://mobile.salon.com/opinion/greenwald/2010/07/03/keller/index.html>
- [22] <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Backchannels/2011/0127/Joe-Biden-says-Egypt-s-Mubarak-no-dictator-he-shouldn-t-step-down>
- [23] http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2010/02/17/clinton/index.html
- [24] <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2010/06/29/clinton-earns-65-million-in-speaking-fees-as-private-citizen/>
- [25] <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2010/06/29/clinton-earns-65-million-in-speaking-fees-as-private-citizen/>
- [26] http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20110207/pl_afp/egyptunrestpoliticsus
- [27] <http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch/2011/02/obama-administration-distances-self-from-own-envoy-to-mubarak.html>
- [28] http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110206/ap_on_re_us/us_reagan_cheney
- [29] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/04/world/middleeast/04diplomacy.html>
- [30] See on ESSF: [Who is Omar Suleiman?](#)
- [31] <http://thinkprogress.org/2011/02/07/us-envoy-frank-wisner/>