

Day 14 of the Egyptian Revolution

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Contents

Bait-and-Switch	3
The Opposition Leaders	4
The Rank and File Opposition	4
US Cynicism and Hypocrisy	5

As the Egyptian Revolution has entered its fourteenth day, the political situation in Egypt appears to have reached a stalemate. The anti-Mubarak demonstrators, with great courage and tenacity, defended themselves and Tahrir Square from assaults by pro-Mubarak thugs, many of them employees of the state intelligence apparatus. They have also vowed to stay in the square until Mubarak leaves, while some demonstrators have formed a human chain to prevent army tanks from entering the square and dismantling the barricades they've built.

On the other hand, by appearing to be friendly to the people, the army has succeeded in bottling up most of the protesters in the square, so that now the movement is little more than a passive and peaceful demonstration. (It is not clear whether the defense squads, spontaneously formed in the early days of the protest, continue to patrol their communities.) While there have been some indications that the army may have positioned itself for an attempt to physically remove the demonstrators from the square, this is not likely to happen while the regime and its US backers have some hope of ending the protest without resorting to large-scale violence.

Bait-and-Switch

For its part, the regime has dug in its heels. Earlier today, Egyptian vice president Omar Suleiman, himself a retired military officer and former head of the dreaded security service, formed a "Committee of the Wise" to try to negotiate an end to the demonstration. Backed by the Obama administration, which appears to have retreated from its previous demand for Mubarak's early departure, Suleiman originally floated the offer of some sort of "graceful" exit for Mubarak at some undefined point in the future in exchange for a promise of free elections, the legalization of the opposition parties, and other very limited democratic reforms.

The regime also announced the resignation of Mubarak's son, Gamal, and other figures from the ruling party's executive committee, thus ruling out any attempt to establish a Mubarak dynasty. Since Mubarak had already declared that he would not run in the elections scheduled for September, and since, if the protesters do call off their demonstration, there would be no way to force the government to live up to its end of the bargain, it is not clear that this offer was anything more than a ruse. In any case, as I write this, Suleiman, at a meeting with 50 representatives of the anti-Mubarak forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood, withdrew the previous hint of an near-term departure of Mubarak.

The aim motivating all these bait-and-switch tactics, an aim shared by both the Egyptian and the United States governments, is to concede as little as possible to the anti-Mubarak protesters in exchange for the protesters returning to their homes. The governments are particularly concerned to minimize any changes to the current economic and social structure of Egypt that might be made. This means leaving the army, which owns and runs its own economic enterprises and constitutes a kind of economy within the economy, the unchallenged ruler of the country and the cynical and corrupt ruling elite organized around the Mubarak family intact. It also means not touching the hated security apparatus, without whose elimination any democratic reforms the regime agrees to will be emasculated.

The Opposition Leaders

For awhile it appeared that Suleiman had found a negotiating partner in a committee of moderates pulled together by Mohamed ElBaradei, the one-time Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, who returned to Egypt after the protest began in an attempt to put himself at the head of the movement. But unfortunately for Suleiman, Mubarak, and the United States, ElBaradei has not budged on the protesters' main demand — that Mubarak leave immediately. It is also not clear whether ElBaradei has a sufficient base of support among the protesters to enable him to guarantee the movement's part of any deal, even if he were to accept one. This reveals one of the key problems facing the US government and the Egyptian regime — that the movement, because of its spontaneous and anarchistic character, has little formal organization and virtually no leaders with whom they can negotiate and who might be able to convince the people to call off their struggle.

The Rank and File Opposition

In the meantime, the protesters have announced that they will remain in the square until Mubarak is ousted; they are also planning several more “Million Man” demonstrations in the coming weeks. This is crucial, but it will not be enough, since it is not at all clear how long the demonstrators will be able to hold out in the square or how many times people will be willing to come out to demonstrations, especially as life in Cairo shows various signs of returning to normal.

While the movement has at times been very militant, it has remained politically moderate. The protesters seem to believe that, if they can get rid of Mubarak and establish a US-style democracy, their lives will improve — they will be able to find jobs and housing, for example, and live in dignity. As a result, the movement has not succeeded in radicalizing its demands or in drawing other elements, such as the urban slum dwellers and the rural poor, into the struggle. It is essential that it do so; it must broaden its base and start to struggle for serious changes in the economic and social structure of the country.

This is a nation in which millions of people live on less than \$2 a day, while the Mubarak family has a net worth of over \$40 billion, and other sections of the elite are comparably wealthy. (Is it a mere coincidence that the Mubarak family's net worth is exactly equal to the amount of “aid” the United States has given Egypt in the 31 years of the Mubarak dictatorship?) This is a nation where a large percentage of university graduates, including engineers, cannot find jobs and are forced to live with their parents. If this is true of those with university degrees, what can the lives of the truly poor be like?

Even if the protesters do obtain Mubarak's early departure, which seems increasingly unlikely, and an opening up of the political system, very little will change in the daily lives of the vast majority of Egyptians if the movement fails to take up the struggle for a profound transformation of Egyptian society. Moreover, without such a change, the regime will be in a strong position to reestablish a dictatorship if and when it decides it is necessary to do so. Above all, it is essential that the demonstrators keep up their efforts to win the rank-and-file soldiers to their cause and thus eliminate this option.

US Cynicism and Hypocrisy

Among other things, the recent events in Egypt reveal the profound cynicism and hypocrisy of US foreign policy. The United States claims to stand for freedom and democracy; US president Obama recently declared that “the destiny of Egypt lies in the hands of its people.” But why is it that this type of rhetoric always gets trotted out when people go into the streets and start fighting for their rights and need? Did the US government support the Egyptian people during the 30 years of the Mubarak dictatorship as his police apparatus arrested, tortured, and killed untold thousands of people, and crushed any sign of dissent? Did it believe then that the “destiny of Egypt lies in the hands of its people”?

To raise the question is to answer it. The United States is far more concerned to defend its economic, political, and strategic interests than it is about the lives and needs of millions of people. It matters not how brutal, cynical, and corrupt its stooges are, as long as they are loyal to the United States. Only those regimes that are avowed enemies of the US empire, such as the theocratic regime in Iran and the Communist government of North Korea, are denounced for their violations of human rights, their repression of dissent, and subjected to economic sanctions. The same outrages carried out by the US’ clients are ignored or fobbed off with pro forma expressions of disapproval.

But when the United States’ clients are no longer useful, either because their peoples have risen against them (as in the case of Mubarak) or because they dare to assert their independence (as in the case of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Manuel Noriega in Panama), they are nudged aside or violently overthrown. It would be nice to believe that, even if nothing else winds up being gained by the current struggle in Egypt, at least some people, in Egypt, in the United States and elsewhere in the world, have lost some of their illusions in the United States.

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