

Short-Changed

Egyptian Struggle for Democracy Founders on Obama's Stinginess

Michael Schmidt

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US President Barack Obama's military regime (for as commander-in-chief of the world's largest military machine, his is not merely a mild "administration"), has proven once again that when it comes to American imperialism's dealing with the darker majority of humanity, having a black man in the Oval Office simply doesn't matter.

As we argued in the last edition of *Zabalaza*, the widespread myth that Obama's skin-colour automatically made him a better man was a deeply racist argument that would be proven to be threadbare as soon as Obama ordered the invasion of his first "country of colour" – and this happened in under a month of his inauguration when he authorised sending 17,000 extra troops to Afghanistan.

But American imperialism is not just about the stick of armed intervention or enforced regime-change: we must not forget the carrot of aid, aid that can be temptingly held out, and then withdrawn if the recipient nation is not suitably compliant.

Egypt, the most populous nation in the Arab world, and, along with Nigeria and South Africa, one of the most economically and militarily powerful states in Africa, has been the largest recipient of US aid after Israel since it signed a peace accord with Israel in 1979 – sometimes topping US\$2 billion/year, US\$1.3 billion of that in military aid and between US\$100 million to US\$250 million in economic aid. Ironically, under President George W Bush, the Americans gave US\$45 million to "good governance" and "democratisation" programmes, with a substantial chunk of that bypassing the state and going directly to civil society organisations. But over the past year, Washington has slashed this civil society aid to Egypt by more than half, down to US\$20 million.

Not only that, but the strings attached to US aid have been drawn tighter, with the bourgeois-democratic Freedom House warning that the new rules gave the Egyptian government a de facto veto over which civil society organisation received aid. All civil society organisations have to be registered in Egypt, so the state now has both an administrative and financial stranglehold on civil society. The organisations left high and dry include the Egyptian Centre for Human Rights, the Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-violence Studies, online youth-run Radio Horytna (Radio Our Freedom), and groups that work for the rights of women and the disabled. As the Associated Press reported on April 18, "Obama has moved away from his predecessor George W. Bush's aggressive push to democratise the regimes of the Middle East."

And yet Obama has not reduced the steady flow of military aid to the autocratic regime of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's president-for-life. In addition, on May 22, *The National* newspaper reported on secret negotiations between Obama and Mubarak for an "endowment" of US\$50 million which is being viewed by many in Cairo as "Mubarak's trust fund" – this within days of Mubarak's regime having extended the state of emergency under which the Egyptian people have languished for another two years. The state of emergency was implemented in 1981, so for the past 28 years, gatherings of the Egyptian popular classes have not been tolerated by the authorities. It has been years since we have had contact with the tiny Egyptian anarchist movement, centred on dissident academics and writers, and their network is presumed to have been repressed. Under the state of emergency laws, Egyptian civilians face arrest and trial before *military* tribunals for "political" offences, detention without trial and torture is rife, and participating in even peaceful demonstrations is banned. Although in practice, in recent years, the authorities have tolerated numerous strikes by workers, the right to strike itself is restricted and the right to organise independent unions severely curtailed.

The length of Egypt's state of emergency has already exceeded the 19-year emergency rule of the white reactionary regime of South Korea between 1972 and 1991 when all anarchist, communist and socialist activities were explicitly outlawed. By comparison, South Africa's internationally condemned nationwide state of emergency lasted only three years, from mid- 1986 to early 1990, and provoked a popular insurrection that contributed to the dismantling of the racial (but not geographic and class) aspects of apartheid and saw the reemergence of the anarchist movement.

Amnesty International has no presence in Egypt, and only noted briefly in its 2010 Report that Mubarak's Egypt had been proven to be a torture centre for suspects kidnapped by US agents in "extraordinary renditions" under its so-called "war on terror" (one of them an innocent South African Muslim). Egypt remains welcoming of Sudanese President Omar al-Al Bashir, who is wanted for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes by the International Criminal Court. And yet there are increasing signs of restlessness and struggle for real democratic change among the hard-pressed Egyptian popular classes, as the 81-year-old Mubarak battles illness in his 29th year of rule without an obvious successor.

We support the oppressed classes of Egypt who have been short-changed by Obama, in their demand for genuine, sweeping social reform – reform that no matter how bourgeois, will unintentionally open up the space for radical, directly democratic experimentation.

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