

Egypt: Seize the Moment, Keep Up the Struggle

Ron Tabor

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In my last set of comments on the Egyptian scene, I laid out several possible scenarios, as tens of thousands of anti-Mubarak protesters marched on the state-owned TV station, the parliament building, and the presidential palace, where Hosni Mubarak then resided. One of the possibilities was a pre-emptive coup carried out by the military. The aim would be to kick out Mubarak, then try to convince the protesters to call off their demonstration.

This is precisely what happened, except that the coup had already occurred by the time I wrote. The meeting of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, but without vice-president Omar Suleiman and president Mubarak, who traditionally chaired those meetings, present, was in fact the coup, although only a few people realized it at the time.

The Military in Command – For Now

With Mubarak gone, the top brass, led by Defense Minister Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, has suspended the constitution, dissolved the rump parliament elected by the last (and phony) elections, and promised to hold new elections in six months, or whenever they deem the country ready. They have also declared that they will lift the emergency decree at some indefinite point in the future and will select a commission to amend the constitution, while promising that any proposed amendments will be submitted to the country within 10 days for a national referendum to be held within two months. With these acts, the military has, without explicitly saying so, put the country under martial law, under which it can, if it wishes and feels able to do so, arrest (and torture) anyone they want, break up opposition meetings, and smash opposition demonstrations (although I expect it will not resort to these heavy-handed measures right away). As a fig leaf, the military has announced that current prime minister Ahmed Shafiq, who was appointed on January 29, will stay in office, while he has indicated that he will reshuffle his cabinet and perhaps offer some positions to members of the opposition. In short, aside from the departure of Mubarak and possibly a few crumbs in the way of posts in a powerless cabinet, the only thing the protesters have won are promises.

For its part, the military, whoever was orchestrating its maneuvers (I now believe it was Tantawi, seconded by Sami Anan, the army chief of staff), played its hand brilliantly. Ordering the troops not to fire on the people, the generals managed to station their forces so that they controlled access to Tahrir Square and much of the rest of Cairo. In doing so, they turned what had begun as a militant struggle, including storming police stations, seizing control of neighborhood streets, and an attempt to break into the Ministry of the Interior, into a peaceful protest bottled up in a confined space, all the while continuing to enjoy the confidence of the people. When the huge crowd did march out of the square, the army remained firmly in control, and when it became clear that there was no way to save Mubarak, they nudged him out. The military leadership apparently decided that this was the best option, rather than risk a bloodbath that would have set the entire country, and perhaps the entire region, ablaze. Meanwhile, although some of the protesters have vowed to stay in the square and there has been some talk of holding another demonstration in a week, most of the demonstrators have headed home, under the watchful eyes of the soldiers.

Despite the fact that little concrete has been won and that the fate of the country remains firmly in the hands of the top brass, most of the Egyptian people still have tremendous illusions in the military, believing it to be the “friend of the people.”

The Military and the United States

As we have stressed during the past three weeks, the military's goal throughout the struggle has been to cede as little to the people as possible, in order to protect its power, as the real power in the state, and its privileges, particularly its vast empire of commercial and industrial enterprises and its tax-exempt status. This continues to be the case. It is this that explains the generals' desire to keep tight control over the process of amending the constitution, the speed with which they intend, if they can, to force through their proposed amendments (thus short-circuiting any serious discussion), and their refusal to lift the state of emergency.

Through its deft maneuver, the military has also managed to pull the United States' chestnuts out of the fire. Caught waffling between the legitimate demands of the protesters and its desire to defend its long-standing "friend" in the Middle East, Hosni Mubarak, President Barack Obama and the US general risked emerging from the crisis with egg on its face. Lucky for the US, the recent events have eased its dilemma. Now, all the administration has to do is support the junta while urging it to take slow and careful but definite steps toward establishing a civilian government and a more democratic regime. As this happens, they can claim that this is what they wanted all along.

The Genie and the Lamp

Fortunately for the people of Egypt (and for the rest of us), the brass have not yet succeeded in putting the genie back into the lamp. Like soda in a bottle of soda that's been shaken and then had the cap removed, workers throughout Egypt have erupted in a wave of strikes and demonstrations to address their long-standing grievances, particularly low wages and shabby working conditions. What has most alarmed the generals is the fact that the militant actions involve not only workers at private enterprises but also those at state-owned (and presumably army-owned) businesses. These have included ambulance drivers, journalists, workers at banks and insurance companies, and transport workers. In Cairo, even the police are out, demonstrating for higher salaries, claiming, somewhat pathetically, that their superiors had ordered them to steal from the people. Hopefully, the nation-wide strike wave will signal the beginning of a new stage of the Egyptian Revolution rather than its death throes.

Class Differences

For its part, the opposition is starting to differentiate itself along political and class lines. On Sunday, seven of the young (and middle class) organizers of the protest, including Google executive, Wael Ghonim, and Amr Salama, met privately with two representatives of the ruling junta, Major Generals Mahmoud Hijazi and Abdel Fattah, coming away supposedly impressed with the generals' sincerity. Meanwhile, Ghonim has been using the internet to communicate with workers throughout the country, urging them to call off their strikes and roll up their sleeves to start working for the "new Egypt." As this suggests, many of these individuals are prepared to sell out the needs of the workers, the unemployed, and the rural poor in return for a US-style bourgeois democracy in which they can expect to play leading roles.

Seize the Moment, Keep Up the Struggle

Ghonim's advice should be ignored. Now is not the time to give up the struggle. Now, more than ever, the workers, the unemployed, the rural poor, and all those oppressed by Egypt's rotten social structure need to step up the struggle. In addition to striking and demonstrating for their immediate needs, they need to organize for another mass demonstration to be held as soon as possible. The demands of this demonstration should include:

- Lift the state of emergency and release all political prisoners immediately!
- For full rights to speak, assemble, and organize without the threat of arrest now!
- No to the military's maneuver to monopolize the process of amending of the constitution! The opposition should assert its right to rewrite the constitution. For a nation-wide Constituent Assembly elected by all the people in open and fair elections!
- Former president Hosni Mubarak must be arrested! He, former Vice President Omar Suleiman, and all those (including members of the current ruling junta) implicated in the torture and killing of Egyptians must be put on trial for their crimes!
- Seize the financial assets of the entire Mubarak family! For a full and open financial investigation of the means by which the Mubaraks and all the members of the Egyptian ruling class have enriched themselves at the people's expense!
- As they organize for another mass mobilization, the opposition should begin to organize for a nation-wide Peoples Congress to meet in Cairo. The aims of this congress should be two: one, to draw up a further list of demands and proposals to reorganize Egyptian society that address the needs of all the oppressed people of Egypt; the other, to organize for a nation-wide general strike.
- Meanwhile, anarchists and libertarian socialists should seize the political space that has been created, however temporary it might be, to form their own groups and establish working relations among them, with the idea of eventually federating on the national level.
- Meanwhile, just as the revolution in Tunisia inspired the Egyptians, the revolution in Egypt is inspiring people throughout the Middle East. Protests and struggles, many of them involving fights with the police and mass arrests, have erupted in Bahrain, Yemen, Algeria, and even Iran, while governments throughout the area have been falling over themselves in a rush to announce concessions, including outright gifts of cash, in order to head off revolutions in their own countries.

The struggle is not over! Victory has not been won! The only way the people can win their demands is by struggle, by stepping up the pressure, not by returning to their homes! The only guarantee against continued military rule is mass mobilization! Don't leave your fate in the hands of the generals!

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