

Showdown in Egypt

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The Egyptian Revolution is intensifying, and the stakes are getting raised ever higher. Rather than the demonstration in Cairo's Tahrir Square dissipating as the Mubarak regime had hoped (and I had feared), over the last few days the number of protesters has mushroomed. In addition, some of the demonstrators, tired of being cooped up in the square by the army, have spread the protests to other parts of the city. Among them, several hundred militants have sat down in front of the building in which Mubarak's puppet parliament holds its sessions, while, as I write, several thousand demonstrators are marching on the state-owned TV station and a similarly-sized crowd is marching on the presidential palace. Many people have been inspired by the emotional interview on an independent TV station of Wael Ghonim. Ghonim is the Google executive who was instrumental in organizing, via his Facebook connections, the initial demonstration that effectively launched the revolution. He was arrested in the early days of the protest and held for 12 days, blindfolded and incommunicado (but apparently not tortured), by the state security apparatus and then released. He declined to be considered a hero, declaring that those who gave their lives and those who were injured are the real heroes of the Egyptian struggle for freedom.

Revolt Spreads through New Mobilizations, Strike Actions

Over the last few days, the anti-Mubarak struggle has been joined by ever-larger sectors of the population. In Cairo, sanitation workers have organized their own demonstration, while employees of the Ministry of Health also took to the streets. Members of the journalists' syndicate passed a resolution of no-confidence against their leader, a former speech writer for Mubarak. In addition, reporters for the government newspaper, *Al Ahram*, walked off their jobs and joined the anti-Mubarak protesters in Tahrir Square, and the editor of the paper's English language edition resigned his position. In a sign that elements of the elite may be distancing itself from the military regime, even lawyers and judges, in their judicial robes, have joined the protests. Meanwhile, as an indication of the rising anger of the Egyptian people, in El Kharga, south of Cairo, protesters have set fire to government buildings, including police stations. In Port Said, at the north end of the Suez Canal, 600,000 people also torched government buildings and occupied city's central square. Similar demonstrations, many directed against the hated police, occurred in other cities.

Of perhaps greatest significance for the fate of the revolution and Egypt itself, a wave of strikes has swept across the country. In Cairo itself, electrical workers, bus drivers and mechanics have gone on strike. Also in Port Said, 6,000 workers employed by five service organizations employed by the government to operate the canal, sat in at the offices of the Suez Canal Authority. Several strikes of textile workers, one involving 1,500 workers, the other (in Mahalla) involving 2,000, have broken out elsewhere. Two thousand workers of the Sigma Pharmaceutical company also walked off their jobs, as have workers in many other industries and facilities around the country. It is highly likely that, as I write this, the strike wave is continuing to spread.

The Regime Tries to Dig In

For its part, the despotic regime is digging in, while continuing to make feeble maneuvers in an attempt to deceive the Egyptian people. Earlier, Vice President Omar Suleiman announced that he was forming a committee of judges and scholars to discuss proposals for amending the consti-

tution, a classic tactic used to pretend to be doing something while actually doing nothing. More recently, Mubarak, speaking on state-owned TV declared that he was delegating his powers to Suleiman (who, as the head of the country's intelligence services, is widely seen as a torturer and a murderer) while simultaneously insisting that he was not stepping down. (He also told the US government to butt out and stop interfering in Egyptian affairs.) It is not clear whether Mubarak or Suleiman is actually in charge at this point, but since Suleiman has long been Mubarak's loyal stooge, this makes little difference. Not surprisingly, Mubarak's speech did nothing but anger the protesters. They seemed to have expected that he would actually announce his resignation, and when he did not, they booed and chanted "Get Out." Meanwhile, Suleiman, continuing the regime's tired refrain that the people are being manipulated by foreign-based satellite TV stations and other foreign instigators, could do little but scold the protesters and tell them to go home.

The increasingly irate and determined demonstrators have announced an even bigger demonstration for tomorrow (Friday) morning. They may well try to storm the government TV station, the parliament building, and the presidential palace itself. As a result, the day may turn bloody. At this point, everything depends on how the army will react. Will it open fire on the people? If the officers do order the troops to fire, will the rank-and-file soldiers obey the orders? If the soldiers do shoot, a massacre will occur which may ignite a conflagration that will engulf the country. If the soldiers do not fire, the Egyptian revolution will have entered a qualitatively new, and much more radical, stage. There have been rumors that sections of the officer corps are disaffected with Mubarak, upset over the possibility that his obstinacy may well wash them all away. Reportedly, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, without Suleiman and Mubarak, who usually chairs the meetings, met earlier today and declared that it would stay in continuous session. It also announced that, in effect, it would be responsible for the fate of the country. There is therefore a possibility that a section of the military may carry out a preemptive coup, get rid of Mubarak and announce an interim government that would open up discussions with the opposition and oversee the reform of the regime.

Shameful Role of the United States

Meanwhile, the US government, long the sponsor of the dictatorship, continues to chase, rather pathetically, after events. It is now insisting that Mubarak step down, but also insisting that whatever transition to democracy does take place, occur as slowly and as peacefully as possible. (Just in case the US does try to put some muscle behind its demand that Mubarak step aside, the government of Saudi Arabia, a de facto theocracy as reactionary, corrupt, and as brutal as the Iranian and historically a strong American ally, has assured the Egyptian regime that if the US does cut off its aid [\$1.3 billion per year], they will step in.) The administration also appears to have thought Mubarak would announce his resignation and may have been blind-sided when he did not. Whatever happens now, the US will suffer a catastrophic loss of prestige throughout the region, and perhaps throughout the world. The United States is reaping the fruits of the long-standing contradiction of its foreign policy: the claim that it stands for freedom and democracy which it believes all the world's people should enjoy, while it installs, defends, and finances ruthless and corrupt regimes throughout the world.

How to Win

It is clear more than ever that to win the Egyptian people must broaden and deepen their revolution and begin to attack the economic and social foundations of the regime. To this end, they should:

Spread the strike wave throughout the country.

Seize the factories and other places of work, including the means of communication and transportation, the banks, the municipal services, the Suez Canal itself, and begin to run them themselves.

Organize neighborhood committees to run and police their communities.

Organize a National Peoples Congress, made up of individuals and representatives of organizations and communities throughout the country, to meet in Cairo as soon as possible. This congress should make plans to launch a nation-wide General Strike to bring the Egyptian economy to a halt and paralyze the state. It should also draw up a list of proposals about how to reorganize the Egyptian government and Egyptian society, while taking steps to begin to organize a network of popular democratic councils throughout the country.

Prepare to defend themselves from assault by the police and/or the army. Begin to train and gather weapons, even if these are merely the tin shields and paving stones we saw in the earlier stages of the struggle.

Above all, step up efforts to win over the rank-and-file soldiers so that if the officers do give the order to shoot, the troops will refuse.

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