

Egypt's Chaos Defines Bleeding in despotic Arab world

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"Freedom lies behind a door closed shut," the great Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawqi wrote in the last century. "It can only be knocked down with a bleeding fist." More than that is bleeding in the Arab world at the moment.

The uprisings we are witnessing in Egypt have been a rude awakening for all those who imagined that the despots of the Arab world could be kept in place provided they continued to serve the needs of the West and their harsh methods weren't aired on CNN and BBC World. But while Western establishments lull themselves to sleep with fairy tales, ordinary citizens, who are defeated and demoralized, mull their revenge.

The French government seriously considered sending its paratroopers to save former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is pleading with officials in Washington to delay Hosni Mubarak's departure from Egypt so that Israel has time to prepare for the likely outcome. Former U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair is even describing the Egyptian dictator as a "force for good."

The almost 200 pro-democracy citizens who have been killed don't bother him too much. That's small beer compared with the tens of thousands dead in Iraq. And a desperate Palestine Liberation Organization is backing Mubarak and repressing solidarity demonstrations in Ramallah on the West Bank.

Hated Figures

In Yemen, another strongman in power for 30 years is beginning to totter. President Ali Abdullah Saleh is a hated figure, again backed by the West, as I discovered when I visited the country last year.

If Tunisia was a tremor, the Egyptian uprising has become an earthquake that is spreading throughout the region. The generals in Cairo are still refusing to disperse the crowds with tanks and bullets. A full-scale Tiananmen Square option, which Mubarak and his friends would have appreciated, becomes difficult in these conditions.

So what will they do? As the crisis moves a step further, Vice President Omar Suleiman, not trusted by many people as the former director of intelligence, is hoping to divide the opposition, clear the streets and negotiate a deal, offering Amr Moussa, the toothless head of the Arab League, the interim presidency. They want someone who will retain the remnants of the old institutions and, in particular, the apparatuses of the secret state that have been so useful in helping the West's policy of renditions in the war on terror, which has so far only succeeded in engendering more terror.

Total Overhaul

The millions of people in the streets of Egypt are demanding a total overhaul. They want, as in Tunisia, a new constitution that guarantees political and social rights. They want an independent foreign policy that is decided in Cairo, not Tel Aviv or Washington. They want to lift the blockade of Gaza so that its people can live as normally as possible.

This week, the Egyptian regime, shaken by the mass mobilizations, threatened counter-revolution. Pro-Mubarak forces, a combination of the security cops out of uniform and gangsters released from prison, attacked protesters, creating mayhem in Tahrir Square. The military, which pledged to defend public safety, failed to do so.

In Alexandria, there were clashes between Mubarak's desperate supporters and the anti-government protesters. The coming weekend is decisive. The planned march by several hundred thousand people on the presidential palace might drive Mubarak to get a helicopter to the airport. One assumes the Saudis are preparing a palace for him as is their wont.

Plan B

A post-Mubarak Egypt is difficult to predict with exactitude. What we can say is that it won't be a repeat of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The iron will of the Ayatollah doesn't exist in Cairo. Instead there is a decent, amiable technocrat, Mohamed El Baradei, more known abroad than at home, as a possible Plan B for the White House.

Lurking behind El Baradei is the Muslim Brotherhood. It, too, is divided, with a dominant wing composed of young, modernist Muslims who want to mimic Turkey. If the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's favorite Islamists in Istanbul can do business with Washington, why not their Egyptian equivalents? They have been engaged in private discussions with informal emissaries from the U.S. for more than a decade.

Nonetheless, a regime propelled into office via an uprising from below can't be as cavalier in disregarding public opinion, and nor is this a time for the U.S. to start preaching the virtues of liberal capitalism: The recent fate of Iceland, Ireland and Greece should be enough on that score.

Internally, what is required is to rebuild the abandoned social safety net, providing elementary health, education and housing for the poor.

Externally, Egypt's relationship with the U.S. and Israel will have to be modified, regardless of who succeeds Mubarak. A peace treaty that benefits Israel alone was never accepted by the Egyptian people.

Only then will Egypt be able to stop the bleeding.

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P.S.

* Source: Bloomberg:

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-02-04/egypt-chaos-defines-bleeding-in-despot-arab-world-commentary-by-tariq-ali.html>