

## EGYPT UPDATE NUMBER 9



### CHRONICLES OF THE CONTINUED EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION OF 25 JANUARY 2011

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### Egypt Update No. 9 August 4, 2011

1. Egypt continues to experience turmoil as a result of heightened popular anxiety about its future. The SCAF has only partially filled the power vacuum after Mubarak's resignation. It has not shown leadership in bringing about intellectual or political initiatives that enlist and channel the energies and concerns of the Egyptian people. As expressed in prior updates, the SCAF has failed to articulate a vision for Egypt's future, which remains opaque.
2. The internal situation continues to degenerate due to the failure or inability of the SCAF and the government to address economic, social, and political issues of pressing concern. The deteriorating economic situation is not being addressed other than by makeshift solutions such as using a World Bank loan to cover the deficit of the 2011-12 budget. The revenue losses in calendar year 2011, which are predicted to carry into the winter of 2011-12, have not been addressed. The tourism sector alone is estimated to record losses of US\$2-3 billion by March 2012. There are no indications of what the government is doing to stem the continued reduction of foreign currency reserves, which have gone down since March from \$36 billion to approximately \$26 billion.



Figure 1 (Photo credit: Los Angeles Times).

3. The inflationary spiral continues to rise as the value of the Egyptian pound decreases against major foreign currencies and the cost of living increases. Considering that an estimated 20 million Egyptians live at or below the level of poverty, the increase in the cost of living threatens the marginal status of that segment of the population,

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risking to push more Egyptians below the level of poverty. In addition to this human hardship, the consequences of this situation on public safety are likely to be significant.

4. If a percentage of those 20 million people living at or below the level of poverty take to the streets, as has become customary for many groups to do since the January 25 events, Egypt will be facing food riots. That will result in the destruction of private and public property, looting, and other harmful human consequences. Whether the army will intervene to restore order is uncertain, but the likelihood is that it will at some point. In that event, the number of casualties is likely to be high, if for no other reason than the high number of potential demonstrators. It is impossible to contain several hundred thousand demonstrators without using significant firepower. That alone, without considering the risk of escalation of violence, may produce hundreds of casualties. The impact that this will have on Egyptian society will surely be significant. Moreover, the instability that it will produce will also result in a loss of international confidence in the country's stability. In turn, this will have a further negative impact on the country's economy, and a downward cycle may ensue.

5. In the meantime, public safety continues to deteriorate with many more incidents of violence reported daily, while the police have not been reconstituted. In one case alone, a merchant's dispute in the Musky area resulted in two dead and 29 injured. This was on July 31. A few days earlier in the Bulaq area, another similar dispute resulted in one dead and 40 injured. The number of thefts and robberies are increasing, and a climate of insecurity and fear is prevailing, though more so in Cairo than elsewhere in the country.

6. The SCAF has essentially taken a light-handed approach to governance ever since the resignation of Hosni Mubarak as President. It elected to have power devolve to it as opposed to letting the Mubarak-designated Vice President, Major General (Ret.) Omar Suleiman, become the acting President. (This was in large part because of the personal animosity that Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi has for Suleiman.) Tantawi is a Mubarak appointee, and his personality is attuned to working in the shadows and limited to the military sphere. He is ill at ease in the political arena, and is not communicative with large groups of civilians. Ever since his appointment in 1991 as Minister of Defense and Head of the Armed Forces, after he returned from Kuwait where he led the contingent of Egyptian forces working with the U.S. coalition during the Persian Gulf War, his tenure has been lackluster.<sup>1</sup> The SCAF's policy under his leadership has been to gain time, calm things down, and wait for the legislative elections, originally planned for September but now postponed, to be followed by the Presidential elections in November, also likely to be postponed. Why that group of 19 distinguished army officers would think that a country in turmoil which has just experienced a revolution, albeit peaceful, would remain stable without meaningful forward movement for a period of six to eight months, is difficult to understand. This transition period was an opportunity to open up the public discourse on the shape of the new Egypt, and to put forward different strategic options about the country's economic, social, and political future. Why none of that has

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<sup>1</sup> See Wendell Steavenson, *Who Owns the Revolution, the Army or the People?*, THE NEW YORKER, August 1, 2011.

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been done is to say the least puzzling, because it created a vacuum that certain political forces exploited.

7. Two major initiatives should have been undertaken that would have had no political downfall. The first was the establishment of a historic truth commission to look into the history of the Mubarak regime, particularly the mechanisms that were used to institutionalize corruption and the abuse of power. If nothing else, it would have been a way to understand the past in order to avoid the same mistakes in the future. This would have certainly been of great interest to the people, and it would have absorbed much of the negative energies that presently exist and which are now geared towards the Mubarak and other prosecutions. The second initiative should have been a constitutional commission to publicly disseminate different options for the future system of government that the Egyptian people could select (for example, a presidential or parliamentary system). This too would have enlisted public support, generated public involvement, and sustained a forward-looking outlook. Perhaps it is not too late for the SCAF to move along these lines before the end of the year, particularly because the legislative and presidential elections are likely to be postponed due to the factors mentioned in this update. Both of these important initiatives, which fall in the category of looking forward or learning the lessons of the past, can still produce positive consequences for Egyptian society.



**Figure 2** In March 2011, protesters in Cairo stormed the headquarters of State Security, notorious for its systematic use of torture. (Photo credit: Mohamed abd El-Ghany, Reuters).

8. Those who initiated the January 25 “revolution” repeatedly demanded substantive reforms, but they only obtained formal ones. This situation emboldened the Muslim Brotherhood to become part of the new political scene. Now, however, a heretofore unknown political power has emerged publicly – the *Salafi*, about whom I warned in my Update No. 7 of May 31. On July 29 they took over Tahrir Square with an estimated

400,000 demonstrators.<sup>2</sup> They do not support reform, but rather a radical change of system – an Islamic *Salafi* Republic. With this agenda and their strong show of support in Tahrir Square on July 29, it is clear to any observer that the Muslim Brotherhood was never the real danger to secularism in Egypt.<sup>3</sup> The *Salafi* demonstration revealed the potentially large numbers of persons who are attracted to their movement. Their willingness to take to the streets as they have is only the beginning of what this group can and is likely to do in the pursuit of power. Among them are those who will resort to violence without much hesitation. In June, Egyptian newspapers reported that a group of *Salafi* had cut off the ear of a man for an unspecified crime, claiming that this was a “*Shari‘a*” punishment.

However, there is nothing in the *Shari‘a* to that effect, nor does such a penalty exist. The *Salafi*, however, have their own interpretations of the *Shari‘a*, and it is mostly what their doctrinal leaders make it to be. These *Salafi* have been nurtured for years by their Wahhabi teachers and funders in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. They are not interested in reform, but in a *Salafi* Islamic republic, whose extremism and intolerance would not only throw Egypt back into the darkest periods of Islam’s Middle Ages, but would also create the largest instability in the region ever to exist, with the potential for war with Israel. The *Salafi* now see their chance with the SCAF failing to exercise its leadership, and with the presently perceived power vacuum, they are staking their future claims.



Figure 3 A Salafi protest in Cairo in early 2011. (Photo credit: Al Arabiya).

9. There is much to be said about the repeated attempts by the SCAF to change the cabinet’s membership with a back and forth about nominees, which evidenced indecisiveness. Moreover, the popular distractions of the ongoing prosecution of Mubarak regime personalities, and above all, the trial of Mubarak himself which started on August 3 during the month of Ramadan, is the newest popular diversion from the real problems facing Egypt. Mubarak’s prosecution will be a show trial that will capture the attention of the Egyptian people, and divert it from substantive problems that need attention. The Mubarak trial began with the dramatic appearance of the former President laid out in a hospital bed as he faced charges, but behind a cage (a barbaric carryover of the Middle Ages which exists only in Egypt and a few other countries in the world). Mubarak, as expected, declared himself not guilty of the charges put before him.

<sup>2</sup> See Anthony Shadid, *Islamists in Egypt Mass in Square to Demand Religious State*, N.Y. TIMES, July 29, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> For more background on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, see my Egypt Update No. 7, May 31, 2011.

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Resumption of the trial was scheduled for August 15, and Mubarak will be confined to a military hospital until then.



Figure 4 Mubarak appears in court. (Photo credit: Reuters).

The Mubarak trial demonstrates what a peaceful revolution can accomplish. Bringing to justice the undisputed ruler of Egypt for 30 years and his two sons, as well as the former Minister of Interior and six other senior police officers, is an extraordinary event in the history of justice. Unlike revolutionary justice in post-

Bastille day in 1789 when the guillotine severed heads faster than people could be called to trial, or the post-Leninist revolution, where millions of people were killed in an arbitrary and indiscriminate manner, this is the most civilized expression of contemporary justice – a trial with due process. Admittedly, while many in Egypt and elsewhere look at the sick 83-yr old Mubarak in a hospital bed and behind a cage with some sadness, the majority of the Egyptian people see it as a vindication that justice is for all, and that no one is above the law. This writer, however, on several television Egyptian television programs and in a major article in the newspaper *Al Shorouq*, has urged that the treatment of Mubarak should reflect dignity and compassion, not because he deserves it, but because it is a way for the Egyptian people to evidence their compassion and their sense of dignity. Justice is not about revenge or humiliation, nor is it exclusively about retribution. It is a symbolic of certain values, and a historical marker. The impact of this and other regime trials on the future of Egypt, as well as on the course of events on other Arab regimes, is yet to be seen, but it will surely be a significant turning point.<sup>4</sup>

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10. A forthcoming update will contain all of the internal developments that have taken place in Egypt since June and which are probably only relevant to illustrate the limited and narrow focus of Egyptian society, due to the lack of leadership described above.

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<sup>4</sup> See Anthony Shadid, *In Egypt, Mubarak Trial is Stark Image of Humbled Power*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 3, 2011.