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**EGYPT UPDATE BACKGROUND PAPER:
THE FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY IN EGYPT'S LIBERATION
SQUARE**



CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS
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CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS
“The Fight for Democracy in Egypt’s Liberation Square”

Introduction

The events of the last two weeks have been nothing short of extraordinary: a spontaneous popular and peaceful revolution springing out of civil society without a charismatic leadership to lead it, and apparently without centralized direction. If it were not for the violent provocations by the pro-regime hired thugs, it would have been one of the most significant, peaceful manifestations of a people’s desire for change that has ever occurred in modern history. The first few days in Tahrir Square and the million person gathering were reminiscent of the Indian non-violent independence movement led by Gandhi, the American Civil Rights movement led by Martin Luther King, and the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, led by Nelson Mandela.

The fact that Egyptian civil society, cutting across generational, religious, gender and economic lines without a charismatic leader, has been able to organize itself at the grassroots that well and act that steadfastly in the face of a strong regime evidences people power. To many in Egypt and in the Arab world, seeing so many women (with and without hijab) stand side-by-side with younger and older men, intellectuals and blue-collar workers, rich and poor, all standing up for the same values and principles, reflects the social and political transformation that is occurring in that part of the world. The pro-government provocations of Tahrir Square, as well as the attacks on the foreign media, appear to have been organized by the ruling party (NDP). However, the violence that occurred elsewhere evidences the deep frustration of the disaffected people throughout the country. In Cairo, police stations were attacked, looted, and some were even partially burned. In Alexandria, Suez, Port Said, and Bani Suwaif (in the south) there were scenes of violent confrontations with the police, and destruction of property, including some fires and looting.

Credit must be given to the Presidential Guard, which was dispatched to Tahrir Square and prevented bloodshed. For all practical purposes, they stood up in a way that protected the anti-government demonstrators. Other units from the infantry and armor were also sent in. This, in no small part, is due to American and other European leaders putting pressure on Mubarak and the military leaders. This augurs well for the transition which has begun. It is also to the credit of the leadership of Generals Tantawi, Suleiman, Shafik and Enan.

1. Historic Characteristics

Egyptians are temperamentally nonviolent and patient, as evidenced by a 5,000-year history going back to the pharaohs. They are also tolerant, even though as Muslims they are religious, but not necessarily ideological. Egypt is essentially secular, though Muslim, and Egyptians enjoy freedom of religion. 80 to 90% are Muslim, and the other

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10 to 20% are Christians. The latter have historically enjoyed freedom of religion, though they have not always been treated with full equality.

Egyptians consider themselves Arab, Muslim (for those who are), and Egyptians all at once. Each person ranks his or her identity differently, but most will say Egyptian first. In fact, this is a people with deep nationalistic feelings. Temperamentally, they are fun-loving, easygoing people who are not ideologically driven.

On occasion, Egyptians explode. The first Egyptian revolt was in 742 C.E. when the Copts (who were the followers of St. Marc and who established the first Christian church in Egypt in 40 C.E.) rebelled against the Byzantine Empire and called the Arab Muslims to help them in a revolt that led to the ouster of the Byzantines from Egypt. The next major revolt occurred in 1798, when Egyptians rebelled against Napoleon's occupation. This was followed by Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882. In 1919, there was a popular uprising in which Muslims and Christians joined forces to start the independence movement, resulting in Egypt's nominal independence in 1922 and its first post-independence Constitution in 1923. It was the beginning of a new era founded on democratic institutions with a parliament consisting of a Lower and Upper House, and a government reflecting the parliamentary political forces. Abuses by the monarchy and a corrupt ruling elite led to the 1952 revolution (a military coup), of which the Mubarak regime is the successor. Since 1952, Egypt has been ruled by a military dictatorship whose first leader was Nasser, followed by Sadat, and now Mubarak – all three came out of the military. Throughout these years, there has been a growing level of corruption and exploitation by the ruling elites. In the last 20 years, the corruption has reached extraordinary levels. Ninety percent of Egypt's wealth became concentrated in the hands of 200 families, who were enabled and protected by the government.

2. The Police

The Sadat and Mubarak regimes have used all of their powers, particularly police powers, to preserve and enhance their complete grasp of the country and to support a corrupt oligarchy. The police became, *de facto*, the private security apparatus of the oligarchy, as well as the visible oppressor of the people.

In the past 20 years, the abuses by the police in terms of arbitrary arrests and detentions as well as torture, have been rampant and increasingly unabashed, as reported by internal and international human rights organizations. The U.S. and other governments were very much aware of this situation and did little to encourage its reform. It is estimated that the political prisoner population in Egypt has been a constant 15,000 persons during the last 20 years. The police use a rotation system to terrorize any opposition. The torture includes political prisoners as well as ordinary citizens due to the deterioration of police professional standards and the absence of legal accountability. Its abuses and excesses are such that there is absolutely no trust in the police which most Egyptians consider their enemy as opposed to their protectors. Public safety has been consistently failing during the past two decades with an increase in crime rate and other forms of abuses of power by individuals as well as thugs and small organized crimes groups, which the police has left largely unchecked.

In the Nasser regime during the years 1954-67, the estimated political prisoner population fluctuated between 15,000 and 25,000. During these years, it was the General

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Intelligence Agency that engaged in the worst abuses and not the police, but not so since the Sadat regime in the early 1980s modeled the Agency after the CIA. It then became primarily involved in foreign security threats and certain aspects of domestic security.

It is estimated that the police killed between 140 and 200 persons in the past two weeks, and an unknown number of prisoners seeking to escape.

3. Demographics

Egypt's population of 84 million has an estimated 40 million living at or below the poverty level. The daily individual earnings of those in this group range between \$2 and \$5. (The cost of a cocktail at one of the many tourist hotels in the country is twice the daily earnings of those in the upper bracket of the 40 million people in question.) Sixty percent of the population is under 30, and of that 50% is under 21 (the unemployment estimates within that group are necessarily higher because it includes a high percentage of children). An estimated half of those between 24 and 30 are university graduates, but in the 18 to 30 group, the estimate of illiteracy ranges between 20 to 30 percent.

For the last 20 years, it is estimated that the city of Cairo has gone from 12 to 17 million inhabitants, most of whom live in shanty towns, including an estimated one million people who live in The City of the Dead (the main cemetery in Cairo). The other major cities are Alexandria (pop. 4 million), Giza (an extension of Cairo, at pop. 2 million), Tanta (pop. 1 million) and Assiut (pop. 750,000). While these cities are urban, Assiut and Tanta reflect a rural population which is estimated to represent some one third of the total population.

4. Economics

During the last two years, inflation has increased consistently making the price of food almost beyond the reach of an estimated half of the population. The corrupt oligarchy of the regime has not only increased its acquisition of wealth, it has also taken a substantial portion of it out of the country. The economic crisis will soon reach a new height when it will be discovered that the oligarchy has played an extraordinarily intelligent game, with the connivance of government officials, in taking their assets out of Egypt, while at the same time retaining ownership of various industries and businesses. They have done so by means of borrowing from banks controlled or directed by government appointees, thus substituting public funds and the assets of ordinary depositors, for their assets. With their departure, these banks will be left holding the bag for industries, businesses and projects which are in a failing or marginal condition. The Mubarak regime covered up for this scheme by making the Central Bank the guarantors of private banks' investment loans. This is estimated to be in the billions of dollars. When these facts become publically known the economy of the country could easily collapse with untold economic, social and political consequences. To what extent the U.S. and other major European governments supporting the regime knowledgeable of this is unknown. The assumption is that these governments, particularly the U.S., were too focused on issues like terrorism and too influenced by Israel's priorities that they did not pay too much attention to this situation.

Whether these corrupt oligarchs (including Mubarak's two sons, Ala'a and Gamal, who are currently in London) and the NDP and government officials who helped them will be prosecuted, and their assets seized by the transition team, is yet to be seen. In the meantime, the outflow of the oligarchs is ongoing. The General Prosecutor is said to have frozen the assets of the outgoing Minister of the Interior, General Habib el-Adly, who was known for his oppressive policies and who has accumulated a fortune estimated at billions of Egyptian pounds. The Treasurer of the NDP, Ahmad Ezz, a symbol of corruption who monopolized the steel market and whose gains are also estimated in the billions has been prevented from leaving the country. Others are being added to the list.

5. The Military

The army is held in high esteem by the people because in the last 30 years it has never acted against the people. Questions, however, arise as to why the army allowed the pro-government thugs and secret police attack the peaceful anti-government demonstrators in Tahrir Square. The present military triumvirate consists of Vice President Major-General Omar Suleiman, former head of general intelligence and prior to that, head of military intelligence; Lieutenant-General Ahmad Shafik, former Chief of Staff of the Air Force and now Prime Minister; and Field-Marshal Hussein Tantawi, Minister of Defense. Two other senior officers play an important role: Lieutenant-General Sami Hafez Enan is the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, and the likely successor to Field-Marshal Tantawi; and Lieutenant-General Mohammed Moafi, who succeeded Suleiman as head of General Intelligence (formerly head of military intelligence) and the one who ordered the arrest of several persons last week. They seem to have the support of the United States. Tantawi, who is the senior of them, is certain to have negotiated with Mubarak a drawing of the lines between himself and the others who are his juniors. Tantawi decides in connection with the military, Shafik handles government matters, and Suleiman deals with foreign affairs and security and is presumed to be the successor to Mubarak.

Military tradition is likely to prevail in preserving the seniority system among these officers until the next presidential elections are held. That date is unknown. This is also a factor in the generals preserving what they consider the honor of Mubarak as their military senior. This is why the resignation of Mubarak as well as his departure from Egypt is not something any of them supports. Moreover, Mubarak is known for his obstinacy, and he is not likely to resign or leave the country before his term of office expires, unless his medical condition requires it. (He has recently had surgery in Germany and received treatment for what is believed to be cancer of the bladder.) However, pressures may be such that a face-saving formula may be found, namely, that he takes a medical leave of absence.

6. Succession

The Constitution (Art. 84) provides that a vacancy in the Presidency is filled by the Speaker of the Parliament for 60 days, until a new presidential election takes place. Dr. Ahmed Fathi Sorour, who has held the position of Speaker for nearly 30 years, is viewed by the public as one of the main symbols of the regime's abuses, as is the

President of the Senate, Safwat el-Sherif, who is also Secretary-General of the NDP. Most commentators appear to believe that, like in the U.S., the vice president would automatically succeed the president for the balance of the presidential term. For the reasons stated above, this is not the case.

Because of the careful balance among the generals mentioned above, Suleiman cannot appear to have the ambition of succeeding Mubarak. However, he could be anointed by Mubarak as his successor.

7. The Political Scene

The present Constitution does not have limited presidential terms, and limits the right of those seeking to run for public office. The conditions to run for President and for Parliament are so difficult to fulfill that at present only the ruling political party, and three small opposition parties with limited following, could field candidates. Possible civilian candidates, like Mohamed ElBaradei and Amr Moussa (Secretary-General of the Arab League and a former foreign minister) would not qualify to run unless the Constitution is amended. ElBaradei's following is among intellectuals and upper middle class Egyptians, as well as a portion of the Tahrir youth. He is not really well-known to Egyptian masses since he has spent most of his life outside Egypt and has not served in the military. He is viewed by the U.S. media as a likely democratically-elected President. Amr Moussa, who is popular with the Egyptian people, but not liked by the U.S. or Israel, is a likely candidate.

The National Democratic Party (from whose leadership Mubarak resigned on Saturday, February 5 to signal change) is likely to field V.P. Suleiman for the next presidential elections. He has the support of the U.S., Israel, and the major European powers, and he will have the support of the Arab leaders who supported Mubarak. How much popular support he receives is unpredictable, but he is, as of the present, the sure candidate. He is presently working with the secular opposition on transition and reform.

The 2010 legislative elections were notoriously fraudulent. The regime supported by the police was so arrogant in the exercise of power that they did nothing to hide the massive and wholesale fraud. Less than 25% of the population participated in the elections, with the government-party-fielded candidates winning 90% of the seats in Parliament. Many challenges are pending before the courts.

There is a great misconception in the U.S. and other western countries about the Muslim Brotherhood. Some in these governments' circles fear that Egypt could become another Iran, but that speculation has no basis in fact as it is politically-motivated. There is a tendency to confuse the fact that Egyptians are pious and religious with their support for the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood has an estimated 20% following in the population at large. Moreover, the Brotherhood has been decimated by decades of repression, imprisonment, torture and other forms of abuses. More importantly, its leadership is divided into three groups along generational lines. The oldest of these three groups consists of those in their late 60s and 70s, who are usually more ideological and less willing to become an active political party. Those in their 50s and early 60s, the second generational group, are also strongly ideological, but more willing to engage in public

life. The third group, which is in their 40s and early 50s are less ideological and more willing to share power with the secularists. This has been demonstrated in an amendment to the Constitution that was adopted two years ago when the 88 members of parliament who represent the Brotherhood, agreed that the Egyptian political system should be based on the concept of Egyptianhood, which by implication is secular. The latter group may assume leadership during this phase if the Brotherhood decides to engage in this transitional phase. The older guard, however, wants to sit out this phase. A split between the old guard and the new is a possibility. If that occurs, secularism would be irreversible.

It should be noted that Article 189 of the Constitution requires that any proposed change come from the President or one-third of the members of the Parliament. Once the proposal is submitted, it needs one-third of the Parliament to be considered. After 60 days, it can be submitted to a vote which requires two-thirds for passage. At present, over 90% of the Parliament is from the NDP. However, any changes at this time would have to be initiated by President Mubarak unless the regime collapses, which is doubtful so long as the armed forces support him.

8. Regional Implications

Much has been discussed in the U.S. media and presumably within the Administration of the implication of changes in Egypt on relations with Israel and stability in the region. If anything else, this shows how much those making such an assessment are out of touch with the situation in Egypt. Peace with Israel is not at issue, nor is it something that is of particular interest to the Egyptians at this point in time. No one among opposition forces or the masses in the street is even talking about Israel, and the 1979 peace treaty is not even a matter of discussion, let alone challenged. Claims to the contrary are politically-motivated falsehoods. There is, however, a great deal of anti-Israel sentiment among Egyptians because of the abuses committed by Israel against the Palestinians – particularly after the events in Gaza December 2008/January 2009 (Operation Cast Lead), but also in light of the historic policies of Israel of gradual territorial expansion, occupation of Palestinian territory, and pressure brought upon the Palestinians to turn them into what the former Apartheid regime of South Africa called “Bantustan.” Many in Israel and some in the West interpret this as being anti-Semitic, and part of it may be true. What is driving these sentiments, however, are the abuses committed by Israel against the Palestinians, and the apparent resistance of Israel to making peace with the Palestinians, establish a Palestinian state on the pre-‘67 boundaries (with minor modifications), and deal with that people on the basis of human equality and fairness. Failure to understand all of the above by the U.S., Israel, and the western world will lead to miscalculations that could have significant implications on the future relations of Arab and Muslim states with the West. Peace and stability in the region and in the world depends on a better understanding by the U.S., Israel, and the western world of these and other different national characteristics among Arab states.

9. U.S. Policy

President Obama has lost some credibility since his speech in Cairo two years ago, when he expressed so much hope toward the Arab and Muslim worlds. The Egyptian

people, as well as the Arab people and those in the Muslim world, have come to the conclusion that this was a speech without substance. The disappointment with the Obama Administration has been heightened by its failure to move the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. These negative feelings are enhanced by the continued policies of the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan, and by Islamophobia in the U.S. and Europe. In addition, the revelations about the torture policy of the Bush Administration against Muslims, and the failure of the Obama Administration to bring to justice those who established the policy and those who carried out the acts of torture have had a significant impact on the psyche of all of the peoples mentioned above.

The Administration needs to help ensure that the transitional regime in Egypt carries out its promises of reforms, protects the security of those who opposed the Mubarak regime, particularly those who were active in the streets in the past twelve days, and help shape a timetable and a schedule for steps to be taken toward a democratic process and much-needed reforms. More importantly, it has to be ready for the impending economic crisis that could further destabilize this country. Regional consequences will also be significant, particularly in Jordan and Yemen. For this Administration, the impending economic crisis will be a serious complication for which it was unprepared, because it was paid little attention to this aspect in the past decades.

10. Egyptian Goals

Egypt's revolution, as well as other uprisings or popular pro-democracy movements in other Arab countries, are part of the bigger picture that can be referred to as "the Arab Revolution." It is for all practical purposes, the continuation of the post-colonial revolutionary change that the Arab people, irrespective of their countries and ideologies, believe is necessary in order to transform their societies from post-colonial dictatorial regimes (military and monarchical) into modern democracies with social justice for all. If Israel did not exist, the Arab people would be in their revolutionary stage.

The three main concerns and goals of the Egyptian people are democracy, justice (including economic justice), and the rule of law applicable equally to all citizens. The Egyptian people have been influenced by American and Western ideals and values reflected in the U.S. Constitution, but they are particularly affected by Islamic values and principles, which are reflected in this drive for change.

Egyptians and Arabs are, however, disaffected by the strong pro-Israel influence on U.S. policy. This is more a reflection of their sense of justice and fairness toward the Palestinians than it is an ideological or religious factor. While the U.S. is seen as the model and inspiration of democracy and justice, it is also seen as the mighty power that engages in double standards and which exempts itself of all the international and human rights obligations that it expects others to be bound by. There is great sympathy among Egyptians for Americans, but there is great distrust of the American government and its policies.

11. Concluding Assessment

- The Egyptian people have faced their oppressors, confronted their fears, and stood up for democracy and justice. They are unlikely to be turned away from their

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hopeful expectations. This is something that many have fought for over the past six decades of military dictatorship and exploitation of a corrupt oligarchy. Whether this latest popular revolutionary movement that cuts across all lines of Egyptian society can be accomplished is yet to be seen, but the people will not stand for a continuation of the past. Their slogan is “enough is enough”. It remains to be seen whether the new military rulers now in control will understand these needs and do whatever is necessary to transition Egypt towards democracy and justice.

- The two sides have been sizing each other up for the last twelve days and the regime is waiting it out, believing that time is on its side. Sooner or later, the encircled and “contained” demonstrators in Tahrir Square are bound to leave, so believes the new leaders of the regime. Not so for the pro-change popular demonstrators and civil society. It is now a battle of wills and staying power.
- The regime offered some changes but they were not enough, and the people distrust the NDP-controlled parliament.
- Continuation of the popular revolution will depend on whether demonstrations and rallies will continue in other cities, particularly in Alexandria. Rural areas may continue to sit it out, as the population there is more placid, and their farming subject to disruption by the provincial government and police. Assiut, the capital of southern Egypt, will be a significant swing factor. If its people take to the streets, it will be bloody because of the temperament of its population.
- Mubarak is hanging on to power, claiming that with him gone, the country will deteriorate into chaos. However, this argument undermines V.P. Suleiman. American and other western leaders are pressing him to step down. Israel is supporting him, as are some of the Arab monarchical regimes. This external support for Mubarak confirms the people in their opposition to him.
- Opposing political forces in the U.S. are raising false alarms about threats to Israel and the rise of the Brotherhood. These politicians and the media that supports these speculative extreme ideas are doing a disservice to the United States.
- With internet and cell phone service restored, technology is helping opposition groups at the national and local levels to communicate. This is an important factor in keeping the anti-government groups going.
- Foreign media and foreign public opinion are supportive of the people, which explains they have been harrassed by pro-government elements.
- The country is at a standstill, as is the economy. For the last twelve days, there have been no functioning public offices, and schools, businesses, and factories are

closed. The extraordinary resourcefulness of the Egyptian people and their historical survival instincts is what keeps them going.

- It should be understood that the present situation is about succession and the preservation of the regime. V.P. Suleiman is asserting himself and is reaching out to opposing constituencies, but he does not want to appear as the one pushing Mubarak out. He also must contend with Field Marshal Tantawi, who is known not to like him personally and who considers him his junior. In any event, Mubarak is still in control, and he is likely to favor Suleiman as his successor.
- The National Democratic Party, from whose leadership Mubarak resigned on February 5, will have to be “cleaned up” before the next election. Likely candidate V.P. Suleiman is expected to be the new president. Gamal Mubarak is definitely out – he was never acceptable to the people or to the armed forces.
- V.P. Suleiman will have to bring about order, even though he has to deal with other regime leaders, engage the opposition in dialogue, and develop a plan for constitutional reform and new elections – all of this while weeding out the most notable corrupt figures and bringing in new clean and credible people to the fore. This process has begun.
- The U.S. is credited in Egypt with with positive influence, and there is an opportunity for the U.S. to be recognized for its role in bringing about democracy and justice.

12. Recommendations

- Mubarak should delegate the powers of the presidency to the Vice President and take a medical leave of absence, as opposed to remaining in power until September 2011 when his term ends. Only in that way can V.P. Suleiman start the process of constitutional and other reforms. This avoids the embarrassment of having Mubarak resign.
- In view of the strong popular distrust of the present Speaker of Parliament, parliament should be reconvened before considering the proposed constitutional amendments in order to elect a new Speaker.
- If Mubarak takes a medical leave and transfers power to V.P. Suleiman, he should submit to parliament a number of proposed constitutional amendments, which include amendments to the election of the president, change the election process, allow the formation of parties, eliminate emergency powers, and reinforce civil and human rights provisions. Assuming parliament accepts the proposed amendments, its legal committee will have to work on the new text along with representatives of civil society in order that it can be submitted to a vote 60 days thereafter.

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- The V.P. should reshuffle the cabinet to exclude a number of the 15 holdovers of the prior cabinet, including the substitution of Tantawi by Enam (Tantawi could resign at the same time that Mubarak takes a medical leave of absence).
- The V.P. should request the Prosecutor General to immediately commence the investigation of public corruption and crimes committed by government officials, members of the oligarchy, and NDP party officials; commence seizure of their assets and contacts with foreign banks and prosecutors to initiate seizure of assets abroad; and establish a list of such persons under investigation who should be prohibited from leaving the country pending the investigation.
- The U.S. and major European allies should support the investigation and prosecution of the corrupt oligarchy and cooperate in the seizure of their assets abroad.
- The V.P. should meet with the leadership of the judiciary and prosecution to provide his full support. This will necessitate the removal of the Minister of Justice, who is known to have been against the independence of the Egyptian judiciary.
- The U.S. and its major allies should be ready for the impending economic and financial crisis which will likely necessitate Egypt having to take a major loan from the World Bank and to be supported by the IMF. This groundwork has to be laid now.
- The U.S. should take a common position along with major European allies to support this plan of action.