

Egypt at the Turning Point

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As I write this (in the evening of Wednesday, February 2, in Los Angeles, California, early in the morning of Thursday, February 3, in Egypt), government-paid and organized thugs, including plainclothes cops, riding on horses and camels, have attacked the peaceful anti-Mubarak protesters in Cairo, pummeling them with clubs and bludgeons. These thugs or their allies have also heaved Molotov cocktails into the crowds. Three anti-Mubarak protesters have been killed and more than 600 injured, including some western journalists. As this assault has occurred, the army, which had up till now posed as the friends of the people, has stood by and allowed this to happen, thus abetting the thugs. This is clearly an attempt by Mubarak and his stooges both to intimidate the anti-Mubarak demonstrators and to foment violence in order to discredit the movement. Ultimately, they want to drive the protesters off the street. Despite feeble prodding from our two-faced president, Barack Obama, and Mubarak's own promise not to run for reelection in September's elections, the aging dictator seems determined to hold onto power, even if this means injuring and killing hundreds if not thousands of people and plunging the country into chaos.

A Turning Point

Although it is extremely unfortunate that people have been killed and hurt, these events may well be a positive turning point for the Egyptian Revolution. Up until today, the protesters appeared to be almost complacent about what would be needed to overthrow Mubarak and bring about an improvement in their lives. They also had illusions in the army, believing the soldiers to be on their side. But the army took advantage of this to establish itself as the defenders of "law and order" and as the arbiters of the fate of the country. They even managed to control access to yesterday's massive demonstration. Now, at least, the anti-Mubarak demonstrators realize where the army really stands. As anarchists have long argued, the army is one of the chief pillars of the state, which, in turn, is the main instrument through which a tiny elite (that lolls in luxury while the majority of people struggle in poverty) defends its rule.

Today's brutal attack may also impel the movement to begin to understand what will be necessary to win their struggle. It is not enough to demonstrate peacefully and to hope that the United States and other "democratic" nations will force Mubarak to resign. As I mentioned in my previous comments, even to get rid of Mubarak, let alone to win serious economic, social, and political reforms, the anti-Mubarak movement must become much more militant and much more radical. Since it is clear that the army and the police will not protect the protesters (quite the contrary), they must start organizing militias, arming themselves and training. (Earlier in the week, demonstrators attacked police stations and seized weapons. This must continue.) They must reach out to broader sectors of the population. Although it seems that many of the anti-Mubarak protesters are unemployed, it has since become clear that many are among the university-educated unemployed. The movement must make, or deepen, contact with, and try to involve, the slum dwellers, the villagers, the urban and rural poor. If it does not do so, it runs the risk of allowing Mubarak to mobilize elements among these classes to attack the anti-Mubarak forces.

Deepen and Broaden the Struggle

It must also broaden its focus from narrowly political demands — such as getting rid of Mubarak, reforming the constitution and instituting democratic rights, to begin to mobilize people around economic and social issues, for jobs, for housing, for education. Moreover, it must not limit itself to struggling within the bounds of private property. It must begin to find ways to undercut the social basis of the regime: to occupy the factories, to seize the means of communications (so the government cannot shut down the internet and wireless telephone communications), and the means of transportation. It must also take the offensive against the police, and the domestic surveillance apparatus, attacking police stations, running the police off the streets, exposing informers, destroying computers.

Hold onto the Streets

Above all, it must hold onto the streets. The more radical elements (there is a small left in Egypt which has begun to build ties with the more younger and secular elements of the Muslim Brotherhood) of the movement must organize themselves into cells and networks and begin to educate themselves politically. At the moment, the movement has very little organized leadership. Sooner or later, some political current will emerge to put itself at the head of the movement. Hopefully, enough young people, radicalized and educated by the struggle, will organize themselves into an anti-authoritarian left that can play an influential role in the events. Last, the movement must call on, and make direct contact with, its sisters and brothers throughout North Africa and the Middle East to join them in the struggle, not just for western-style democracy, but a revolutionary social transformation of the entire region, the reconquest of Palestine for the Palestinians, and expulsion of imperialism.

The United States

In the meantime, the United States is left without a policy. Obama held off as long as he could before coming out and nudging Mubarak to begin some sort of (undefined) “transition.” Having now declared itself (in a way), the US government must now try to figure out which way to jump, which horse to bet on, but the more it vacillates, the less ability it will have to influence events. While I see today’s events as possibly a positive turning point in the Egyptian movement, the United States, its news agencies, and “experts” are petrified that they presage the end of the chance for a “peaceful and orderly” transition, that is, one that makes as few changes in Egyptian society as possible, and the beginning of “chaos.”

What’s Ahead

It is not at all clear what will happen tomorrow. Will the movement allow itself to be run off the streets? Or, will today’s attacks impel it become more determined and more radical? The movement plans another large demonstration for Friday. Will it be prepared to defend itself from thug attacks, or even an attack by the army? Does it have the organization and determination to

take the offensive against the regime and to move on to an attack on the rotten Egyptian social structure? The world will be watching.

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