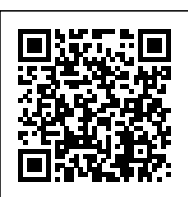


CAIRO COUP WELCOMED (SORT OF) BY THE WEST

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Thomas Walkom, The Toronto Star, 12 February 2011



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The best outcome for governments in Israel, North America and Europe would have been the one that former President Hosni Mubarak tried to put forward on Thursday.

That's when he called for a transfer of power to Vice-President Omar Suleiman and the establishment of commissions to study democratic reforms — all to be followed by scheduled elections in the fall.

Such a scenario would have allowed the "orderly" transfer of power called for by both Prime Minister Stephen Harper and U.S. President Barack Obama.

It would have kept in place, for an unspecified period, Egypt's state-of-emergency laws that allow the regime to keep its enemies under control and provide the torturers that have been so useful to the U.S. (and occasionally Canada) in their campaigns against terrorism.

It would have assured the continuation of Egypt's peace treaty with Israel and kept the crucial Suez Canal open to oil tanker traffic. And it would have maintained the fig leaf of constitutional legitimacy.

But Mubarak's concessions came too late. They weren't enough to satisfy protesters, some of whom (most notably opposition figure Mohamed ElBaradei) began calling on the army to step in.

The clumsy and grudging manner in which Mubarak made his concessions also irked the old dictator's sponsors in Washington.

Exactly what happens now is murky. A military high council has taken charge through what is, in effect, a coup. But it is unclear who will dominate this council or how long it will hold power.

Traditionally, Western governments have valued stability over democracy in Egypt. In that sense, this coup will be welcome. The military have run Egypt since 1952 (both Mubarak and Suleiman are former generals). Field Marshall Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, the head of the new military council,

is close to Mubarak and very much part of the old system.

At most, what happened Friday is that one faction of the armed forces ousted another. Egypt's military and business establishment remains firmly in charge. Mubarak may have gone. So far, Mubarakism remains

The new council has already announced that it won't lift the state of emergency until the "present circumstances end" and that it is "studying" popular demands for change. Egypt's street protesters appear to have enthusiastically accepted this even though, on paper, it is no more than Mubarak promised in his ill-fated address on Thursday.

Ultimately, the military's cautious approach to democracy may not satisfy Egyptians — particularly once the euphoria over Mubarak's exit has died down. But it is encouraging to Western governments who are keen to ensure that Egypt's upheaval threatens neither its relationship with Washington nor the Suez Canal.

Still, the future remains uncertain. The coup was welcomed by Obama, who, while acknowledging that "many questions remain unanswered," praised both army and protesters for avoiding violence. But the military's seizure of power has also been welcomed by Iran, the Hamas government in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Egypt's still-banned Muslim Brotherhood.

Harper, who — curiously — expresses the real American position more clearly than Obama, was more restrained. He expressed little jubilation about Mubarak's exit. What happened, he said, happened. "They're not going to put the toothpaste back in the tube."

