EGYPT'S SMALL STEPS TOWARDS TRUE DEMOCRACY

Posted on January 30, 2011 by Keghart

NATIONAL POST

Category: Opinions

David Frum, The National Post, 29 January 2011

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So — another regime toppled? Should we be worrying about a Muslim Brotherhood takeover?

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So — another regime toppled? Should we be worrying about a Muslim Brotherhood takeover?

Maybe. But despite the arresting images on TV, regime survival remains the better bet. The army still supports the regime, and the army has determined the outcome of Egyptian power struggles since the Mamluks of the Middle Ages. So it's also worth considering: What if the regime survives? What then?

This week's protests remind us that dictatorships do not deliver stability. Dictatorships do not make reliable allies over the long term. Egypt's friends should be planning — should have planned long ago — for a transition to a more representative form of government.

Other poor countries have made such transitions: Mexico in the 1990s, for example. Egypt is poor, yes, but so were the Baltic republics at the time they made their democratic transition after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Western world should be urging the regime against its plans to bequeath Egypt from Hosni Mubarak to his son Gamal, like some kind of family estate.

Above all, what's needed is pressure and aid to accelerate Egypt's already impressive transition to a more open economy that grows faster and creates more jobs.

Egypt's GDP per capita has almost doubled since the advent of Hosni Mubarak after the 1981 assassination of Anwar Sadat — an achievement all the more impressive because Egypt's population has doubled over those same 30 years, from almost 42 million to almost 81 million.

Growth has been especially rapid over the past decade, boosted by discoveries of oil and gas, now Egypt's most important exports.

But since 2008, Egypt has been hit hard. The Egyptian pound is linked to the dollar. As the dollar has declined against other world currencies, food prices in Egypt have risen.

Egypt is not more corrupt than it was a month ago. The Mubarak regime has not become more authoritarian. But the price of bread and cooking oil has been rising, and rising faster than wages.

If the regime survives, so will all those problems. It will be tempting to the Mubarak regime to buy a little temporary popularity with populist-nationalist economic policies: more food subsidies, more hiring of college graduates by already over-staffed government bureaucracies, less privatization of state industries. That's the path followed by the oil states of the Persian Gulf, and their rulers lead quiet, wealthy lives.

But Egypt does not have enough oil and too many people for that solution to work for very long. It cannot afford to buy acquiescence. It must earn consent. And that means gradually bringing more and more of the population into politics.

The New York Times reports on how power is monopolized in Egypt: "In local council elections in 2008, there were 52,000 open seats. Government decisions to disqualify candidates meant that 43,600 seats were uncontested and awarded to the ruling party. Out of a total of 51,546 seats, the ruling party won 99.13%.

"In midterm elections for one-third of the Shura Council, the upper house of Parliament, held in 2007, the first elections to be held after the constitutional amendments removed judges from supervising the electoral process, a total of 88 seats were open. The results: 84 seats for the ruling N.D.P., 1 seat for Tagammu, a small opposition party, and 3 seats for N.D.P. members who ran as independent candidates."

And that is in addition to Egypt's notoriously rigged presidential elections. Honest council elections would constitute an important first step toward reform. So would a guarantee that Gamal Mubarak will not succeed Hosni as president. But nothing would help more than a U.S.-led global recovery, more open trade, more demand for Egyptian exports and a surge in Egypt's food-buying power.

Whether this time next week we are facing a new Egyptian regime — or a bloodier version of the existing regime — either way, Egypt will face those continuing challenges of political and economic reform.

An Alternative Opinion:

> *Dictators" do not Dictate, They Obey Orders*

Michel Chossudovsky, Globalresearch.ca, 29 January 2011

"Dictators" do not dictate, they obey orders. This is true in Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria.

Dictators are invariably political puppets. Dictators do not decide.

President Hosni Mubarak was a faithful servant of Western economic interests and so was Ben Ali.

The national government is the object of the protest movement.

The objective is to unseat the puppet rather than the puppet-master.

The slogans in Egypt are "Down with Mubarak, Down with the Regime". No anti-American posters have been reported... The overriding and destructive influence of the USA in Egypt and throughout the Middle East remains unheralded.

The foreign powers which operate behind the scenes are shielded from the protest movement.

No significant political change will occur unless the issue of foreign interference is meaningfully addressed by the protest movement.

The US embassy in Cairo is an important political entity, invariably overshadowing the national government. The Embassy is not a target of the protest movement.

In Egypt, a devastating IMF program was imposed in 1991 at the height of the Gulf War. It was negotiated in exchange for the annulment of Egypt's multibillion dollar military debt to the US as well as its participation in the war. The resulting deregulation of food prices, sweeping privatisation and massive austerity measures led to the impoverishment of the Egyptian population and the destabilization of its economy. The Mubarak government was praised as a model "IMF pupil".

The role of Ben Ali's government in Tunisia was to enforce the IMF's deadly economic medicine, which over a period of more than twenty years served to destabilize the national economy and impoverish the Tunisian population. Over the last 23 years, economic and social policy in Tunisia has been dictated by the Washington Consensus.

Both Hosni Mubarak and Ben Ali stayed in power because their governments obeyed and effectively enforced the diktats of the IMF.

From Pinochet and Videla to Baby Doc, Ben Ali and Mubarak, dictators have been installed by Washington. Historically in Latin America, dictators were instated through a series of US sponsored military coups. In todays World, they are installed through "free and fair elections" under the surveillance of the "international community".

Our message to the protest movement:

Actual decisions are taken in Washington DC, at the US State Department, at the Pentagon, at Langley, headquarters of the CIA. at H Street NW, the headquarters of the World Bank and the IMF.

The relationship of "the dictator" to foreign interests must be addressed. Unseat the political puppets but do not forget to target the "real dictators".

The protest movement should focus on the real seat of political authority; it should target (in a

peaceful, orderly and nonviolent fashion) the US embassy, the delegation of the European Union, the national missions of the IMF and the World Bank.

Meaningful political change can only be ensured if the neoliberal economic policy agenda is thrown out.

Regime Replacement

If the protest movement fails to address the role of foreign powers including pressures exerted by "investors", external creditors and international financial institutions, the objective of national sovereignty will not be achieved. In which case, what will occur is a narrow process of "regime replacement", which ensures political continuity.

"Dictators" are seated and unseated. When they are politically discredited and no longer serve the interests of their US sponsors, they are replaced by a new leader, often recruited from within the ranks of the political opposition.

In Tunisia, the Obama administration has already positioned itself. It intends to play a key role in the "democratization program" (i.e. the holding of so-called fair elections). It also intends to use the political crisis as a means to weaken the role of France and consolidate its position in North Africa:

"The United States, which was quick to size up the groundswell of protest on the streets of Tunisia, is trying to press its advantage to push for democratic reforms in the country and further afield.

The top-ranking US envoy for the Middle East, Jeffrey Feltman, was the first foreign official to arrive in the country after president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was ousted on January 14 and swiftly called for reforms. He said on Tuesday only free and fair elections would strengthen and give credibility to the north African state's embattled leadership.

"I certainly expect that we'll be using the Tunisian example" in talks with other Arab governments, Assistant Secretary of State Feltman added.

He was dispatched to the north African country to offer US help in the turbulent transition of power, and met with Tunisian ministers and civil society figures.

Feltman travels to Paris on Wednesday to discuss the crisis with French leaders, boosting the impression that the US is leading international support for a new Tunisia, to the detriment of its former colonial power, France. ...

Western nations had long supported Tunisia's ousted leadership, seeing it as a bulwark against Islamic militants in the north Africa region.

In 2006, the then US defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld, speaking in Tunis, praised the country's evolution.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton nimbly stepped in with a speech in Doha on January 13 warning Arab leaders to allow their citizens greater freedoms or risk extremists exploiting the situation.

"There is no doubt that the United States is trying to position itself very quickly on the good side,..." (AFP: US helping shape outcome of Tunisian uprising)

Will Washington be successful in instating a new puppet regime?

This very much depends on the ability of the protest movement to address the insidious role of the US in the country's internal affairs.

The overriding powers of empire are not mentioned. In a bitter irony, president Obama has expressed his support for the protest movement.

Many people within the protest movement are led to believe that president Obama is committed to democracy and human rights, and is supportive of the opposition's resolve to unseat a dictator, which was installed by the US in the first place.

Cooptation of Opposition Leaders

The cooptation of the leaders of major opposition parties and civil society organizations in anticipation of the collapse of an authoritarian puppet government is part of Washington's design, applied in different regions of the World.

The process of cooptation is implemented and financed by US based foundations including the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and Freedom House (FH). Both FH and the NED have links to the US Congress. the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), and the US business establishment. Both the NED and FH are known to have ties to the CIA.

The NED is actively involved in Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria. Freedom House supports several civil society organizations in Egypt.

"The NED was established by the Reagan administration after the CIA's role in covertly funding efforts to overthrow foreign governments was brought to light, leading to the discrediting of the parties, movements, journals, books, newspapers and individuals that received CIA funding. ... As a bipartisan endowment, with participation from the two major parties, as well as the AFL-CIO and US Chamber of Commerce, the NED took over the financing of foreign overthrow movements, but overtly and under the rubric of "democracy promotion." (Stephen Gowans, January 2011 "What's left")

While the US has supported the Mubarak government for the last thirty years, US foundations with ties to the US State department and the Pentagon have actively supported the political opposition including the civil society movement. According to Freedom House: "Egyptian civil society is both vibrant and constrained. There are hundreds of non-governmental organizations devoted to expanding civil and political rights in the country, operating in a highly regulated environment." (Freedom House Press Releases).

In a bitter irony, Washington supports the Mubarak dictatorship, including its atrocities, while also backing and financing its detractors, through the activities of FH, the NED, among others.

Under the auspices of Freedom House, Egyptian dissidents and opponents of Hosni Mubarak were received in May 2008 by Condoleezza Rice at the State Department and the US Congress. They also met White House National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, who was "the principal White House foreign policy adviser" during George W. Bush's second term.

Freedom House's effort to empower a new generation of advocates has yielded tangible results and the New Generation program in Egypt has gained prominence both locally and internationally. Egyptian visiting fellows from all civil society groups received unprecedented attention and recognition, including meetings in Washington with US Secretary of State, the National Security Advisor, and prominent members of Congress. In the words of Condoleezza Rice, the fellows represent the "hope for the future of Egypt."

Political Double Talk: Chatting with "Dictators", Mingling with "Dissidents"

The Egyptian pro-democracy delegation to the State Department was described by Condoleezza Rice as "The Hope for the Future of Egypt".

In May 2009, Hillary Clinton met a delegation of Egyptian dissidents, several of which had met Condoleezza Rice a year earlier. These high level meetings were held a week prior to Obama's visit to Egypt:

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton praised the work of a group of Egyptian civil society activists she met with today and said it was in Egypt's interest to move toward democracy and to exhibit more respect for human rights.

The 16 activists met with Clinton and Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman in Washington at the end of a two-month fellowship organized by Freedom House's New Generation program.

The fellows raised concern about what they perceived as the United States government distancing itself from Egyptian civil society and called on President Obama to meet with young independent civil society activists when he visits Cairo next week. They also urged the Obama administration to continue to provide political and financial support to Egyptian civil society and to help open the space for nongovernmental organizations which is tightly restricted under Egypt's longstanding emergency law.

The fellows told Clinton that momentum was already building in Egypt for increased civil and human rights and that U.S. support at this time was urgently needed. They stressed that civil society represents a moderate and peaceful "third way" in Egypt, an alternative to authoritarian elements in the government and those that espouse theocratic rule. (Freedom House, May 2009)

During their fellowship, the activists spent a week in Washington receiving training in advocacy and getting an inside look at the way U.S. democracy works. After their training, the fellows were matched with civil society organizations throughout the country where they shared experiences with U.S. counterparts. The activists will wrap up their program ... by visiting U.S. government officials, members of Congress, media outlets and think tanks."

These opposition civil society groups --which are currently playing an important role in the protest movement-- are supported and funded by the US. They indelibly serve US interests.

The invitation of Egyptian dissidents to the State Department and the US Congress also purports to instil a feeling of commitment and allegiance to American democratic values. America is presented as a model of Freedom and Justice. Obama is upheld as a "Role Model".

The Puppet Masters Support the Protest Movement against their own Puppets

The puppet masters support dissent against their own puppets?

Its called "political leveraging", "manufacturing dissent". Support the dictator as well as the opponents of the dictator as a means of controlling the political opposition.

These actions on the part of Freedom House and the National Endowment for Democracy, on behalf of the Bush and Obama administrations, ensure that the US funded civil society opposition will not direct their energies against the puppet masters behind the Mubarak regime, namely the US government.

These US funded civil society organizations act as a "Trojan Horse" which becomes embedded within the protest movement. They protect the interests of the puppet masters. They ensure that the grassroots protest movement will not address the broader issue of foreign interference in the affairs of sovereign states.

The Facebook Twitter Bloggers Supported and Financed by Washington

In relation to the protest movement in Egypt, several civil society groups funded by US based foundations have led the protest on Twitter and Facebook:

"Activists from Egypt's Kifaya (Enough) movement - a coalition of government opponents - and the 6th of April Youth Movement organized the protests on the Facebook and Twitter social networking websites. Western news reports said Twitter appeared to be blocked in Egypt later Tuesday." (See Voice of America, Egypt Rocked by Deadly Anti-Government Protests)