

# Teim



## TEIM Election Watch Analysis

### OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

### EGYPT / Hosni Mubarak, the slow fall of a strong-man

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Egypt and the world are witnessing historic times. The Egyptian population, until now considered one of the most docile of peoples, has managed the unthinkable: bringing down the regime's strong man through popular protests.

The transformation of a national hero<sup>1</sup> into an authoritarian leader is a familiar story in different parts of the post-colonial world. But, how did Egypt's most hated man manage to retain his position as president during the 18 days that the demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square lasted, despite his continuation in power already being out of the question for the people, and despite the army having distanced itself and Washington clearly showing signs that Mubarak no longer had its support?

To understand Hosni Mubarak's resistance, it is necessary to cast a look backwards. For the last 30 years Egypt has been under the control of a regime that represented the evolution of the previous regime. For three decades, Muhammad Hosni Sayyid Mubarak led a heterogeneous group, made up of bureaucrats, business magnates, and of course, senior Egyptian army officers. Thus, despite the image of Egypt as a demilitarised country, control of the country was, in actual fact, largely in the hands of military officers<sup>2</sup>.

The advanced age and health problems of the president, led to the question of his succession emerging for the first time in the history of the Egyptian republic.<sup>3</sup> Against this backdrop, since the beginning of the 21st century, the regime's internal balance had changed as a result of the deep division of the regime into two main rival groups, competing to preserve their role in Egyptian politics: one made up mainly of bureaucrats and officials, headed by Omar Suleiman, head of the powerful *mukhabarat*, and another that included the main business stakeholders, including Ahmed Ezz<sup>4</sup>, under the apparent leadership of Gamal Mubarak, son of the *rais*.

The old guard, along with Omar Suleiman, was opposed to the nomination of Gamal Mubarak, given that the interests of the former were linked with the preservation of the interventionist state. Similarly, they were against the interests of the younger fraction of the regime that wanted greater liberalisation of the country.

However, faced with the population's demand that the *rais* resign, the two groups had a common interest in maintaining the hegemonic role of the regime, and this could only be assured through collaboration between the two. The situation was complicated even further by Washington's interest in keeping the Egyptian regime pro-American and stable. Friendship between Cairo and the U.S. administration, did not pose major difficulties, given that both of the two groups had close relations with Washington. Nevertheless, stability could only be guaranteed if the old guard gave its support to Hosni Mubarak's successor.

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<sup>1</sup> Hosni Mubarak participated and stood out in the Egyptian war against Israel for the recovery of the Sinai Peninsula. The war was considered the first Arab victory against the Jewish state and its Egyptian leaders became national heroes.

<sup>2</sup> It must be remembered that Hosni Mubarak is also a military man.

<sup>3</sup> The previous two presidents, Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar al-Sadat, died in power. Sadat was assassinated while Nasser died of a heart attack.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Ezz, Egyptian businessman, iron industry magnate and close associate of Gamal Mubarak, was considered one of the most important men of the regime. In 2006, Ezz controlled over 70 percent of the country's steel and 50 percent of the ceramics market. Ezz will be judged on March 8 on charges of speculation and of facilitating the illegal acquisition of public funds along with former Egyptian Trade Minister, Rachid Mohamed Rachid, and the former director of the Industrial Development Authority, Amr Assal.

Washington's interest in preserving Egypt's stability, and the need for all the actors in the Egyptian regime to maintain some level of cohesion in the search for an outcome that would be acceptable to all the concerned parties, was the main factor contributing to the success of the Egyptian revolution and the slow process of Hosni Mubarak's resignation.

For 18 days, Hosni Mubarak remained president because the protests simply could not end in an absolute victory for the population that would force all the figures of the regime out. The nomination of Omar Suleiman as vice president of the country, was a clear sign of the defeat of the new guard<sup>5</sup> and the attempts to carry out a controlled transition of the country. The wrath of the Egyptian people was the catalyst for the imbalance of the Mubarak regime. The country's stability and the continuation of the old guard could not be secured without popular consensus. The unshakable, massive, peaceful and secular character of the protests underscored the fact that the Egyptian people's support was a condition sine qua non.

Thus, for more than two weeks, Hosni Mubarak remained in power to fill the void that would have been generated by a precipitated departure, while helping the officers to consolidate their power. The personal style of rule that Hosni Mubarak had exercised for 30 years, allowed the old guard to escape the wrath of the Egyptians.

Ever since its forces were ordered out onto the country's streets, the army took a 'neutral' position, in compliance with the orders from its superiors<sup>6</sup>. At no time did it attack demonstrators, but it didn't act alongside them either. Thus the army preserved its image of 'servant of the people', and managed to completely disconnect itself from the Mubarak regime.

Washington's interests obliged it to support the army. Since the demonstrations erupted, the Obama administration stated its support for the democratic aspirations of the protesters, while trying not to openly abandon an old ally or to encourage a revolt that could spread throughout the region. While Obama called on President Hosni Mubarak to implement immediate democratic reforms, his administration did not at any time withdraw American support for the Egyptian regime. "The military have served responsibly and patriotically as guardians of the state, and will now have to ensure a transition that is credible in the eyes of the Egyptian people", Obama said<sup>7</sup>.

Washington's need to keep the Middle East under control is compatible with the interests of Tel Aviv. Thus, the Israeli authorities maintained a low profile during the events in Egypt, which included the express prohibition made by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the members of his Cabinet, forbidding them from speaking publicly about the situation in Egypt. "Peace between Israel and Egypt has spanned over three decades and our goal is to ensure that relationship continues to exist," Netanyahu said. "We are closely following developments in Egypt and the region, and are making efforts to preserve its security and stability."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rumours of the flight of Gamal Mubarak and that the Egyptian magnates had withdrawn their money from the country were the first signs of the defeat of the new guard.

<sup>6</sup> One cannot exclude the possibility that if the officers had ordered their troops to fire on the protesters, the soldiers would have disobeyed.

<sup>7</sup> 11 February 11 2011:

[www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2011/February/20110211170758su0.5503896.html](http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2011/February/20110211170758su0.5503896.html)

<sup>8</sup> Source: The Scotsman.

<http://thescotsman.scotsman.comwww.ipsnews.net/wap/news.asp?idnews=54354>

It could be argued that we have witnessed the third revolution in the history of the Arab Republic of Egypt. After years of docility, Egyptians have demonstrated that the people can be a force for change. Hosni Mubarak's fall is a clear manifestation of that. However, this change seems for now to be limited, given that rule by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces during the transition period, does imply a certain continuity in power for the *ancien régime*. This concern is shared by some of the demonstrators, who are continuing their protests in Tahrir square. As Mohamed ElBaradei remarked, "People are starting to worry that the revolution is being curbed and limited to cosmetic changes. The military must take steps that give confidence". The speed with which constitutional changes are being planned and the proximity of elections may impose additional obstacles to radical change in contemporary Egypt.