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TEIM Election Watch Analysis

OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

EGYPT/ The Day of Rage

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Date of publication: 8 February 2010

Observatorio Electoral

Taller de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

www.election-watch.org

ISSN: being processed

www.observatorioelectoral.es

The 'Day of Rage' marked the beginning of Egypt's massive street protests, commencing in the 'rebel' city of Mahalla¹ and extending from there to six other cities around the country. In Tahrir (Liberation) Square, more than 10,000 Cairenes (according to government sources) raised cries against Hosni Mubarak and his son Gamal, shouting "Down with Hosni, down with Gamal" and calling for an end to the state of emergency and the Mubarak government. The protesters also expressed demands relating to the country's economic conditions.

The beginning of the revolt coincided with the national holiday in honour of the police. Few remember that January 26 marks the day in 1951, known as Black Saturday (or the beginning of Egypt's Second Revolution²), when the city of Cairo was set on fire by protestors opposed to foreign domination and the regime of the day, in what was a lead-in to the Free Officer's 'revolution'.

Inspired by the Tunisian revolt, Egyptians took to the streets with the slogan: "Tunisia is not better than Egypt"³. The regime responded with massive repression. The four deaths that followed, including those of a young girl and a policeman on the third day of protests, as well as the wave of arrests,⁴ are the result of the regime's naked violence, and an indicator of its fear. The protesters responded in the same way, attacking the police⁵, burning and destroying official vehicles, etc.

The Egyptian case presents many similarities to Tunisia's. The Egyptian regime led by President Hosni Mubarak, who has held the presidency for the last thirty years, controls nearly all the relevant channels of power, with the exception of ideological discourse, which is mainly controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Mubarak regime, a loyal ally of Washington, gives the impression of being in control of a semi-democratic country that holds regular presidential and parliamentary elections, and includes more than 26 legalised opposition political parties. In addition, the country follows the steps indicated to it by the international financial institutions, and has notably accelerated in recent years its policy of economic liberalisation. Mubarak's 'good behaviour' is internationally-recognised, as evidenced by the continuing political, financial and logistical support of the U.S. administration. Europe's support is not to be forgotten either, although it is less, given its lack of serious economic interests.

As in the case of Tunisia, the long imposition of authoritarian practices, constitutionally reinforced by a state of emergency in place practically since 1967⁶, cancels out any possibility of real change.

The opposition parties are relatively unorganised for a number of reasons. Firstly, the return of multi-party politics came about, not as a consequence of social pressure, but as a gift from the former president Anwar El Sadat, which thereby diminishes its role. Secondly, the opposition parties operate within a

¹ Mahalla, the centre of the main textile industry in Egypt, is seen as a symbol of Egyptian political and social activism. In 2008 an outbreak of workers' protests there was harshly repressed by the regime.

² The first revolution being that of 1919 against British occupation in Egypt and Sudan.

³ Remarks of Adel Abou Zeid, a member of al-Ghad party:

<http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/protesters-declare-open-ended-sit-tahrir-square-experts-fear-escalation>

⁴ As of 27 January, official reports spoke of 700 arrests while foreign sources referred to 1,000.

⁵ It is interesting to highlight that written and audiovisual material exists that indicate the involvement of policemen in the movement.

⁶ Anwar El Sadat ended the state of emergency in May 1980. His assassination in October 1981 led the regime to reactivate the law which has, since then, been extended by parliament continuously.

framework highly controlled by the regime, and their margin of manoeuvre is regulated by the emergency law which prevents among other things, freedom of assembly, of demonstration and of the press. At the same time, one cannot deny the responsibility of the opposition parties themselves, considered as they are, to be "one man acts." Intra-party authoritarianism, internal competition, and clientelar relationships among opposition leaders and the regime contributes significantly to the weakening of their role.

The Muslim Brotherhood, regarded as the most influential opposition force in modern Egypt, despite it being outlawed, has greater flexibility with regard to the limitations and obstacles that the legalised parties face. The internal division between reformists and conservatives, as well as the frequent collaboration of the organisation, directly or indirectly, with the regime weakens its influence in Egyptian society. But more important and indicative of the Brotherhood's real role and interests is the organisation's leaders' lack of enthusiasm for promoting democratic change, underlined, for example, by its own authoritarian internal form of government. Indicative of this was the Brotherhood's haste in declaring that the organisation would not participate in the protests⁷.

Egypt is not Tunisia

Popular movements that sprung up with the second Intifada and continued with the "Cairo Spring" of 2005 put the country into a slow but steady wakeup process. With the approach of the 2005 presidential election, the then political demands became work and economy related, and saw the formation of 'Kefaya'. The creation of the 'National Assembly for Change' headed by Mohamed ElBaradei, former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Nobel Peace Prize winner, represented one of the latest attempts by part of Egyptian society to demand political changes. It subsequently failed however⁸.

But Egypt is not Tunisia, not only because it is the most populous Arab state, but because Egypt is no longer a perfect dictatorship. Its imperfection is derived from the deep division between the regime's new and old guards in recent years. The advanced age and poor health of the current president are generating competition between the regime's two main factions over Hosni Mubarak's succession.

The old guard, led by Omar Suleiman is opposed to the imposition of Gamal Mubarak, the president's son and representative of the new guard, made up mainly of businessmen. The interests of the old guard, mainly the reservation of the central role of the state and the army, collide with the interests of the regime's younger faction who want greater economic liberalisation for Egypt.

⁷ Brotherhood members do however, participate on an individual basis. Statements may be consulted at: <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/mb-we-didnt-participate-tahrir-square-demonstrations>

⁸ In an attempt to embarrass the regime, the 'National Association for Change' (made up of major opposition groups including the Muslim Brotherhood, and all the opposition parties with the exception of Neo-Wafd, the Nasserist Party and Tagammu) proposed a mass boycott of the 2010 parliamentary elections. Despite an initial agreement, the opposition parties and the Brotherhood ultimately did participate in the elections, but due to excessive fraud in the first round were forced to withdraw from the second. The results were: out of a total of 508 seats, 440 seats for the National Democratic Party, 6 seats for Neo-Wafd, 5 for Tagammu, and one seat each for Al-Ghad, Al-Gil, Al-Salam and Social Justice. Finally, the Muslim Brotherhood won one seat for Mohamed Ashour, who participated in the second round despite the group's decision to withdraw.

Egypt is also unlike Tunisia, because Washington's interests will not let their privileged alliance be endangered. Indicative of US concerns were the first statements by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, stressing that the Egyptian government is stable and looking for means to respond to the aspirations of its citizens. Even more indicative is the telephone conversation between the US president and Hosni Mubarak, the first Obama had with any Arab head of state following Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali's hasty departure on 14 January.

Can the 'Day of Rage' end in real change? Pessimism prevails. None of the actors involved, be they Egyptian or foreigners (apart from the Egyptian population, that is) really wants a democratic country. But the continuity of the protests and their dynamics and violence do leave some margin for optimism.

Satisfactory change will not be easy to come by. On the one hand, the economic situation⁹ both locally and internationally, leaves little room to meet the economic demands of the Egyptian people, although it is very likely that rentier mechanisms can be activated, with Washington's support. Politically, the regime could propose holding fresh parliamentary elections to appease the people and the opposition. But it is unlikely that the way will be opened voluntarily for the democratic election of a new president.

In this context, Mohamed El Baradei's offer¹⁰ to lead a democratic transition in Egypt seems to have little real value, considering the former head of the IAEA's inability to hold sway of Egypt's powerbrokers.

Egypt's future depends on the Egyptian population's ability to maintain both the massive and militant character of the protests, at a time when the regime is on alert. This has been made clear not only by the violence carried out, but also by the release of some detainees to reassure protestors. However, it is possible that the regime will use the military, trained to confront such threats, to impose calm. For the time being, to handle the situation the Egyptian government has decided to increase the secret police's presence to 100,000 men. In addition, the government has contacted the representatives of the foreign communities resident in Egypt, to demand their collaboration¹¹.

⁹ On the second day of the protests, the Egyptian pound touched its lowest level against the U.S. dollar since 2005.

¹⁰ Two days later, Mohamed ElBaradei made an appearance in the international news media declaring " *I am going back to Cairo, and back onto the streets because, really, there is no choice. You go out there with this massive number of people, and you hope things will not turn ugly, but so far, the regime does not seem to have gotten that message.*"

¹¹ According to unofficial reports, representatives of the Greek community have been contacted by the Egyptian government, reminded about recent attacks on the Copts, and told that the regime's defeat would lead to an increase of inter-religious violence and consequently, an impact on the Greek community.