

The Egyptian People Demand the Fall of the Regime

Written by John Chalcraft

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JOHN CHALCRAFT, JAN 31 2011

The “Tunisian wind”, stirred by the popular uprising that swept President Ben Ali of Tunisia from power on 15 January 2011, is inspiring the Arab world from Bahrain to Morocco. Ordinary people in their hundreds of thousands have joined activists in street protests. Men and women, old and young, have risen up with astonishing bravery against beatings, tear gas, and bullets. They are protesting corruption and authoritarian rule. They seek bread, housing, livelihoods, dignity, freedom and justice.

While protests (planned or actual) are happening across the region – even in Saudi Arabia – all eyes are on the popular uprising in Egypt, the most populous state in the region, and a key client state in the US informal empire. The thousands currently gathered in Midan Tahrir (Liberation Square) in downtown Cairo are determined not to leave until President Mubarak falls from power. No-one can foretell the future, but it is easy to forget how much depends on the determination and spirit of these crowds.

The idea that the US government has in fact been backing democracy activism in Egypt is naïve. The *Daily Telegraph* report is based on little more than the fact that some US officials showed some interest in a single activist who appears to have been ready to talk to them about activism in Egypt. This is not such stuff as revolutions are made of. On the contrary, the US government has been the single most decisive state-supporter of this sclerotic dictatorship – in terms of diplomacy, security and funds – since Egypt signed the Camp David peace agreement with Israel in 1979. And the White House knew all about routine police brutality and widespread torture by the security services in Egypt, as the timely WikiLeaks release (28 January) of US embassy cables confirms. At least the US – unlike Saudi Arabia, a country increasingly famous as a retirement home for dictators – has not publicly supported Mubarak. Instead, the White House has vacillated – assessing Egypt to be stable early in the week, then urging ‘restraint’ on both sides, speaking of respect for ‘universal rights’, and now broaching the possibility of an ‘orderly transition’.

If Mubarak falls, the US will try to maintain Egypt’s subservient client status and prevent any real democracy, which might imply independent foreign and economic policies. The US will look to the army that it has been funding and training, and seek a client President. Up first is the “Arab strongman”, ex-intelligence chief and new Vice-President Omar Suleiman, a key member of this defunct regime. The idea that the US will then pressure such generals towards democracy and social reform has no basis in evidence, reason, or precedent in the region and should be discarded as a snare and a delusion. The US places a vastly higher priority on the geopolitical position of its key “strategic asset” (read ‘attack dog’) in the region (i.e. Israel), a country whose version of settler colonialism has earned it the lasting enmity of any popular force in the Arab world, and which has already expressed its own horror of Arab democracy, pronouncing only fears for regional “stability”. The US, moreover, has been intimately involved in the design of the IMF-led packages that have created such social misery in Egypt, and is utterly susceptible to the Islamophobic and self-serving fantasy that Al-Qa’ida or the Muslim Brotherhood is about to take over the country.

While protestors made good use of Facebook, Twitter and other social media, UK-based Vodafone Group Plc agreed on Friday morning (28 January), apparently for legal reasons, to suspend at a critical moment the mobile phone network, the lifeline (in some cases, literally) of those on the front lines. Little or no support will come from the other kleptocracies in the region – from Libya to Yemen – with the exception of Qatar. This small state punches well above its weight thanks in part to *Al-Jazeera*, which has played an important role in reporting the protests as they

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happen, allowing ideas, inspiration and tactics to cross-borders, knitting together the Arab world in the process. Otherwise, the only cheering from authorities in the region came from that supposed opponent of democracy, Iran.

In short, faced with the vacillation, bet-hedging and outright opposition of many states, and the craven collaboration of at least one major multinational company, a very great burden has fallen on the protestors themselves, whose persistence one can only salute. Many Egyptians have overcome their fear of decades of repression and torture, and have taken much of Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and other towns from the regime. The essential dynamic has come not from the organized political parties, nor from Islamism or Marxism, nor indeed from abstract ideology as such. Instead, the moving force has been the determination of the people to secure bread and freedom, the culmination of decades of rising prices and repression, and the fruit of a diverse array of risky activism by workers, state employees, students, educated youth, and professionals going back to the protests surrounding the second intifada of September 2000.

Last Friday in Egypt the crowds began advancing peacefully, some bearing flowers. They gathered in the backstreets and streamed from the mosques after the Friday prayer. They were cheered and even fed from the balconies. The protagonists were determined to win over the riot police to their cause in the name of patriotism and justice. But, along with would-be President and Nobel Peace Laureate Mohammad el-Barade'i, and without provocation, the crowds were usually met with batons and tear gas. Instead of running away, the people defended themselves. The fight was joined over the symbols of the hated regime, and police stations, government buildings and even the headquarters of the corrupt National Democratic Party were set ablaze. On the other hand, protestors formed a protective ring around the Egyptian museum, and took the initiative to set up neighbourhood protection. At other inspiring moments, even senior elements from the police and army have been seen fraternizing and joining with demonstrators.

With some of Egypt's super-rich rumoured to have left, and with its stock-market plummeting, and with urban-centres resembling war-zones, and with the people in charge of Liberation Square – in uneasy co-existence with the army – the regime can no longer govern the country. Whatever happens now, the bravery of ordinary people, has inspired those in and out of the region to believe that the epoch of the increasingly sclerotic, hereditary and entrenched dictatorships, the bastard offspring of the popular post-independence governments, is finally coming to an end in the Arab world.

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