



## EGYPT'S 'COUP-VOLUTION'

BY NATHAN W. TORONTO

Now that Hosni Mubarak is out of power in Egypt, a host of commentators have triumphantly declared Egypt's revolution over. Trouble is, what has happened in Egypt is not yet revolutionary nor is it over, not by a long shot. Egypt has just undergone a coup, not a revolution. It was a soft, relatively peaceful coup, but it did nothing to alter the privileged economic position that the senior military leadership in Egypt enjoys. If the heady celebrations over Mubarak's ouster are to translate into something revolutionary, it is that privileged economic position that needs to change. Otherwise, Egyptians will continue to find themselves saddled with an inefficient bureaucracy and a lack of both entrepreneurial opportunity and meaningful rights. There is indeed a potential for revolutionary change in Egypt, but Egyptians are now at the beginning of their struggle, not its end.

Mubarak's ouster is most appropriately labeled a "coup-volution." Consider the following four questions, which are not answered by the prevailing narrative of triumphant mass demonstrations bringing Mubarak down. First, why did Mubarak deliver a defiant and confident speech on Thursday, and then relinquish power so suddenly on Friday? Giving what would turn out to be his final speech as president, Mubarak was condescending and defiant, conducting "a father's dialogue with his sons and daughters." This was consistent with the stance he had taken throughout the crisis, offering very few meaningful concessions and insisting, "[Egypt] will not part with me and I will not part with it until my passing." In that final speech, he was the picture of conviction, not a man confronting the creeping inevitability of his ouster less than a day later.

Perhaps just as important, why did Mubarak leave Cairo to go to Sharm el-Sheikh at all? King Farouk was not in Cairo when he was deposed in 1952, and Tunisia's Ben Ali had just fled to exile in Saudi Arabia, both salient examples that when a dictator leaves the center of power it is much harder to get that power back. Given the tenacity with which Mubarak had gripped power for thirty years, it is unlikely that he would have left Cairo unless he was convinced that his trusted advisors—and the Army—would secure his regime in his absence. His physical situation in Cairo was far from untenable. The protest at the Presidential Palace on the day after his final speech, though substantial in size, exhibited the restraint that the pro-democracy demonstrators had shown from the beginning. The protesters did not try to cross the Army's barricade, making plain that they had no intention of harming Mubarak's person. Mubarak left Cairo because he felt his situation was secure, not because he was afraid.

The third question left unanswered by the prevailing narrative is why the Army told protesters one day that all their demands would be met, but then the next day—the same day that Mubarak allegedly resigned—said that it supported Mubarak's decision to stay in power until September. If the Army was trying to respond to the expressed will of the people—which would correspond with the prevailing narrative—then it was doing a poor job of it. If, on the other hand, Army leaders were trying to convince Mubarak that they would preserve his hold on power while he was away from Cairo, then that was exactly the right approach. The Army had already entered Cairo as the saviors of Egypt, had displaced the deservedly-maligned Ministry of Interior as the purveyors of security in the city, and had already indicated strongly to the protesters that they would not fire on them to

preserve the Mubarak regime. The Army's waffling in the two days leading up to Mubarak's ouster makes sense if the Army was trying to reassure Mubarak, not if it was trying to reassure the protesters.

Another question begging for an answer is why Mubarak—if he handed power to anyone at all—handed power to the Supreme Military Council instead of a civilian caretaker government. Until recently, Mubarak had himself sat on the Supreme Military Council, but last week, for the first time, the Council met without him. Presumably, Mubarak would have had more influence over the shape of things to come if he had left his vice president—whom he had chosen—in charge of affairs rather than a group of generals of whose association he had recently quit. If Mubarak had relinquished power willingly, then his demonstrated penchant to vie for as much control as possible—as evidenced by his reluctance to make meaningful concessions to demonstrators—probably would have led him to leave power in the hands of those he could more plausibly influence.

Time is just as likely to validate a coup narrative of Mubarak's departure from power as it is to validate the prevailing, triumphant protest narrative. If it was a coup, then the Army managed to convince Mubarak of his hold on power so that he would leave Cairo, forced the vice president to make a statement saying that the president had stepped down and handed power to the Supreme Military Council, and then presented a *fait accompli* to Mubarak. At that point, there was nothing Mubarak could do except accept it; publicly retracting his supposed resignation would have been as clear a signal as any that he had already lost his hold on power. Those investigating what really happened in Egypt should consider this narrative in addition to that of triumphant protest.

Here's why: this is not the first time that thousands upon thousands of Egyptians have demonstrated in the streets. In 1919 and 1952, for example, protesters helped bring about dramatic changes, but not all of these changes proved lasting. Both times, Egypt eventually saw a return of dictatorial rule. If the current wave of protests is to have a different ending, then change in Egypt will have to be fundamental indeed. Guaranteeing the openness of parliamentary and presidential elections and overseeing the transition to a new government is a relatively costless gesture for the Egyptian military. The proof of Egyptian democracy will be what happens when—if—that new government challenges the oligarchic hold that serving and former military officers have on Egypt's economy, owning as they do the best of tourism and hotel interests, transportation infrastructure, and food production. Unless Egyptians have the economic opportunity and wealth to build civil society and defend their newly-won rights, then the history of Tahrir's protests could well ring hollow. The protests will have been, in that case, little more than *coup-revolutionary*.

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