

LIMITS OF US POWER

EGYPT ERUPTS

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People's quest for democracy in Egypt has torn away the façade of legitimacy Mubarak was covered with, and has thrown him onto the heap of the despised. His, the once-ablest representative of the Egyptian ruling elites, destiny was decided long ago as it turned that the regime was breeding discontent that could endanger the ruling machine and strategic alliance.

Two factors are now defining the character and extent of democracy with opposing goals in Egypt: the people and the external king makers. Both of the factors are maneuvering within respective limits and with respective strengths, and array of political forces are changing fast. The moves by both the factors show respective limits of strength and weakness.

The elated Egyptian people challenged state power, kept it perplexed for days, made cracks in the wall of authority, but offered it opportunity to reassert its power of authority. While a section of the ruling elites appeared appeasing the revolting people the other, stupid thieves, relied on thugs to quell people's rising. People's political initiative faced hard days and significant sacrifice: at least three hundred citizens died for democracy. One journalist has virtually been murdered.

The king makers from an Empire afar used all diplomatic tact and powers including public diplomacy to manipulate the boiling situation. People gradually retreated to the backyard of uncertainty with their unfulfilled desire for democracy as jockeying for leadership overwhelmed people's political actions and people were used as weight in emerging balance of political forces. First scene of first act of contemporary Egyptian politics has virtually come to an end.

Two weeks of demonstration by people, and clash, arson, loot by Mubarak hirelings sent the dictator to his disgraced political demise. His days were numbered a few years back by his external master, friend and guide as reports emerged from Washington DC. His friend turned foe was pulling strings to ensure his downfall.

Unemployment, rising food price, poverty, inequality, corruption and autocracy in all its forms in Egypt galvanized the protest. People there along the Bahr al-Nil, the Nile, and near coast had energy and courage to challenge autocracy patronized by Empire. The force people power showed was not astonishing to Egypt observers as it is the normal expression of people deprived, subdued and silenced for decades. Only autocrats, appearing wise but ignorant in essence, fail to fathom depth of hatred and anguish they germinate. They live happily as they feel assured with force and intrigue.

Two powers stood face to face in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez: an old, over-stretched autocracy overburdened with its corruption and non-responsiveness inherent in its body and soul, and a new political action unorganized, uncertain, appearing undefined, almost spontaneous and dependent on other internal and external political actors. Days of protests entered into static action in a city square for days with a broader demand and without specific political course, and with all possibilities of getting steamed out. Initiatives were handed over to parties to autocracy as autocracy was allowed to regroup as well. Swinging

days kept door open for status quo. Those were the days of bold, fearless action and of unaware inaction.

People's courageous days witnessed historic moments: fled away tools of repression, public fraternizing soldiers, unarmed peaceful mass demobilizing tanks. Montgomery's and Rommel's tanks had no such experience; Gamal Abdel Nasser's *The Philosophy of Revolution* has not mentioned similar mobilization. Equations of powers and ruling factions, stalemates and tensions within ruling camp got mirrored in these fleeing acts, accommodating fraternization and getting demobilized. The Cairo political panorama was of revolt, not of revolution, ready to get cheated influenced by euphoria of a section of scholars.

And, the game was concluded long ago. Only a mass was kept aimlessly active to ensure an "orderly transition", so that strategic alliance does not face uncertain future. At least two major Egyptian actors were in Washington during the initial days of protest, and they returned home in the midst of Mubarak meltdown. By then, on January 29, demonstrators started celebrating atop tanks in Tahrir Square and sharing food with soldiers sent to restore order. Egypt's defense minister spoke by phone to Robert Gates, the US defense secretary, the US vice-president spoke to the newly appointed Egyptian vice-president, Admiral Mullen, the US chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff talked to the Egyptian army chief. The US secretary of state unswervingly continued pulling levers of public diplomacy. The US president was not negligent to his duty. Mail from EU to Cairo carried the same message: exit of Mubarak was the call of the hour as the old friend has now turned a liability. The World Security Conference in Munich also made the same conclusion. Mubarak's fate was sealed by his masters. They were utilizing mounting pressure from streets.

The political upheaval that sent shudders through the Middle East and among global investors turned dependent on military for a democracy that will usurp the seat of power riding tank. Financial markets as well as Israel can only depend on the Egyptian army as speculators and Israel have limits. All, the Muslim Brotherhood and El Baradei, showed the same limit. The Egyptian army with the prowess to ensure stability and continuity of strategic arrangement tolerated the protesters that showed sign of rift within the ruling machine.

The other aspect was also revealed. In absence of people's democratic leadership the army appeared as the only institution in the society that could make and unmake political deals in Egypt. The ruling elites have efficiently obstructed development of institutions that could have nurtured democratic practices, and have developed institutions that are in alliance with army, a politicized institution that claim to be apolitical. It, in essence, confirmed its position as a tool for manipulation by masters. Limits of strength of the imported section of leadership in protest also got exposed. El Baradei, a non-leader turned leader to a movement that lacks a leader, appealed to Obama while he was among the protesting people in Tahrir Square, to time on Mubarak : "Obama is the last one to say to President Mubarak, It's time for you to go". The Empire's tribune indeed!

Mubarak meddling is not the dictator's crisis. It shows inefficiency, corruption, etc., and the dwindling power of the Egyptian ruling elites to keep people subdued. It is a crisis of those ruling elites. Its thievery has devoured its credibility, an almost universal process among ruling elites in the periphery. Its tools of torture have now turned blunt with the only hope of sharpening it with new face. Now, it is inching back with a hope of making a master stroke to reclaim its lost ground. The people of Egypt will experience new pharaohs in unstable political period.

Relying on youth and "wise men" will not ensure victory for the people. A democracy that can spell the end for tyranny is still a far cry. People, however, can win a breathing space, which can also be snatched away if people's initiative loses thrust. But the political experience they will gather will be valuable: a pseudo victory will visit without people's

organization and leadership, and with static political actions that rely upon external powers to unseat a tyrant.

Taking help of part of the establishment, the military, and of the Empire for dumping away the dictator and establishing democracy is the dilemma the people are facing. The reality of the dilemma is the product of the society, not any individual's or groups of individuals' choice. People's movement failed to conserve, develop and master strength that could have allowed it to take lead and foil deals. It has to partner with forces that stand for status quo, the unloved reality of deprivation and inequality in economy and politics.□