

Egypt's Future is Unknown

Egyptian politics experienced a dramatic 24 hours. On the evening of Feb. 10, in his third live speech after the turmoil, President Hosni Mubarak said he was transferring power to his vice president, Omar Suleiman, and emphasized again that he would not leave the country. On the morning of Feb. 11, the military said it would make sure that President Mubarak would meet his commitment of amending the constitution. It looked like a hint that the formerly neutral military began to support Mubarak.

On that day, thousands of angry and disappointed people crowded into Cairo's Tahrir Square and asked Mubarak to step down. But just a few hours later, Vice-President Omar Suleiman announced Mr. Mubarak's resignation, and said on state TV that the high command of the armed forces had taken over. According to sources, President Hosni Mubarak and his family have already left Cairo to the Red Sea resort city of Sharm el-Sheikh.

"There was no other option", Professor Raymond Bush of Leeds University said to *Life Week*. After the breakout of the demonstration, Mubarak dismissed and replaced his Cabinet, accepted the proposal of amending the Constitution, released the limits of qualification of Presidential candidates, and announced that he and his son would not run for the presidential election in this September. On Feb. 5th, the top leadership of Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party, including the president's son Gamal Mubarak and the party secretary-general Safwat el-Sharif, resigned.

On Feb. 6th, Vice President Suleiman met with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition groups for the first time Sunday and offered sweeping concessions, granting press freedom and rolling back police powers in the government's latest attempt to try to end nearly two weeks of upheaval. Two days later, President Mubarak took another step toward democratic reforms, as he approved a committee to oversee constitutional changes. But those efforts did not calm the protestors in Tahrir Square.

Bahey eldin Hassan, director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, said there are three factors decisive to current Egypt politics: the move of protestors, the decision of the military, and U.S. policy. In 1952, 89 Military Free Officers established the Arab Republic of Egypt and parliamentary democracy. In the past 60 years, all four Egyptian presidents had military backgrounds. Mubarak was the Commander of the Air Force and Air Chief Marshal. After the breakout of the demonstration, four current and former military men entered the cabinet. The supreme head of Egyptian military, Defense Minister Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, became the highest government official to engage in dialogue with the protestors.

In the past 18 days, the stance of the Egyptian military shifted from relative neutrality to turning against Mubarak. Likewise, U.S. policy was also fluid.

According to Jeremy M. Sharp, specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs at the U.S. Congressional Research Service, at the beginning of the upheaval, the U.S. Administration said it would reassess U.S. foreign assistance to Egypt. But several days later, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that "there is no discussion as of this time of cutting off any aid."

On January 30, Secretary of State Clinton took a very rare move. She appeared in the news program of five TV channels to discuss the U.S. position on the Egyptian turmoil. She expressed the anxiety of the possibility of a new anti-U.S. and pro-Iran regime in Egypt. She said Egypt was always close partner of the U.S., which wanted an "orderly transition." But she did not mention Mubarak's resignation.

On January 31, President Mubarak named a new cabinet. “These figures represent continuity of the regime's hard military core, as well as a commitment to strategic alliances with the United States and pro-Western policies,” Sharp pointed out. Later, President Obama said Mubarak should transfer the power. On Feb. 1, Mubarak declared he would not run for the next presidential election. After Mubarak’s live speech on Feb. 10, President Barack Obama appeared dismayed by the announcement. He said it was not evidence of an “immediate, meaningful” transformation, and warned that likewise Egyptians were not certain that the President was earnest about real change. A few hours later, Mubarak finally resigned and President Obama immediately delivered a speech. He said it was the beginning of Egypt's transition, emphasized the military’s patriotism and their guardianship of the country.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, after the breakout of the Egyptian upheaval, one of the officials in U.S. National Security Council admitted that they had no preparation for the political change in Egypt. That may explain the U.S.’s ambiguity and variability during the upheaval. “For years, U.S. diplomatic relationships with friendly Arab governments have been based on close ties to individual rulers, such as Hosni Mubarak, whose contested but unrivalled power ensured cooperation with the United States on military, intelligence, and regional diplomatic matters,” Sharp pointed out. “The revolution in Egypt has put the Obama Administration in a major quandary.”

In 1979, under U.S. mediation, Egypt signed the Camp David Accords, becoming the first Arab country to conclude a peace treaty with Israel after 4 large scale wars. The cost was that 18 Arab countries cut off their diplomatic and economic ties with Egypt.

Debra Shushan, Assistant Professor of Government at the College of William and Mary and Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Center for International and Regional Studies at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Doha, told *Life Week* that through the peace treaty, President Anwar Sadat regained the Sinai Peninsula which Egypt had lost to Israel in the 1967 war. “Securing Sinai's return was critical to Sadat's domestic legitimacy, and Egypt's strong performance in the 1973 war helped persuade the United States to take the necessary steps to broker a peace between Egypt and Israel.”

“The US main interest in Egypt is to have the leading Arab state, in political and military terms, on its side in order to maintain regional stability and a balance of power that allows oil to flow to the world economy freely. Also with Egypt and Israel on the same side, the chances of a region-wide war involving the use of Weapon of Mass Destruction are much smaller,” said Jonathan Rynhold, a scholar at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

Furthermore, “We need an open and secure Suez Canal. We would prefer Egypt to show itself as a model of an Islamic country benefiting from democratic transition, rule of law, and close ties with the United States,” said Prof. Ian S. Lustick of The University of Pennsylvania.

After Sadat’s death in 1981, his successor Mubarak stably continued his policy. In the past 30 years, Egypt was the second biggest recipient of U.S. aid just behind Israel. “The US, in turn, has valued Egypt for its pro-Western orientation during the remainder of the Cold War, its role in spearheading Arab support for the US-led coalition against the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990-91, and its preservation of ‘stability’ when the US increasingly came to fear the influence of political Islam,” according to Shushan.

In recent years, Egyptian domestic discontent rose due to stagnant democratization. It shook the legitimacy of the regime. Jeremy M. Sharp of Congressional Research Service pointed out that since taking office, President Obama has devoted greater time and attention to the pursuit of Middle East peace than to efforts to promote reform and democracy in the Arab world. By all accounts, reform efforts remained a component of U.S. diplomacy toward Egypt both in private and in public.

“The US benefited in many small and convenient ways from Mubarak's rule. The US officially promoted democratization but not with a high enough priority. Political forces in the US have preferred that as long as Egypt cooperated with Israel behind the scenes, that no US pressure on Mubarak would be exerted,” Professor Ian S. Lustick said.

Two months before Egypt exploded in popular rage, Cairo was ignoring U.S. pleas to make coming legislative elections more credible by allowing international ballot monitors. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Egypt's Foreign Minister, in Washington. But after the meeting, both sides never mentioned disagreement publicly. Mrs. Clinton praised the longstanding partnership between the U.S. and Egypt as the "cornerstone of stability and security in the Middle East and beyond."

But this tactic is no longer working in Egypt due to the irresistible civil rage. “The US can have limited influence on Egyptian civil society, and has the ability to influence directly the Egyptian military” according to Shushan’s analysis. “In recent years, the US has cut political and economic assistance to Egypt while maintaining stable levels of military aid of \$1.3 billion annually. America maintains well-developed personal relationships with the Egyptian military which has included training in the US of the Egyptian officer corps.” “Given the crucial role the Egyptian military has placed as events have unfolded since 25 January, this mechanism for influence is quite significant,” she pointed out. “US officials, particularly Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, have maintained close contact with their Egyptian counterparts since the start of the protests in Tahrir Square.”

After the Higher Military Council took power from Mubarak, its spokesman underlined the military’s “commitment to all Egypt’s international treaties.” That means the Egypt-Israel peace treaty is still valid.

As President Obama said, Mubarak’s resignation is just the start of the change. Egyptian politics is still full of unknowns. On Feb. 12, many protestors celebrated Mubarak’s departure in Tahrir Square. The army began to clear the road blocks around the square. Curfew time was shortened. The stock market will resume trading on February 16. But the opposition was not fully satisfied. Youth activists say they will continue protesting until the Constitution is abolished, Parliament is dismissed, and an interim government is founded. Mr. El Baradei, the outstanding opposition politician, said the army should share the power with the civilians during the interim.

It is too early to say who will lead Egypt. Bruce Rutherford, a Professor at Colgate University and author of the book *Egypt after Mubarak: Liberalism, Islam, and Democracy in the Arab World*, told *Life Week*: “The enormous crowds that we are seeing are made up of ordinary people who have simply grown weary of the status quo and want change. It is unclear who their ideal presidential candidate is. “

The Muslim Brotherhood, which has been under conspicuous attention throughout the last week of protests, has deliberately deferred to secular opposition leaders and groups. According to one Brotherhood leader, “We’re supporting ElBaradei to lead the path to change.... The

Brotherhood realizes the sensitivities, especially in the West, towards the Islamists, and we're not keen to be at the forefront."

Prof. Rutherford pointed out that the Brotherhood's involvement in the demonstrations has been minimal. It did not officially call on its followers to participate until Jan. 28, several days after the uprising began. Although it has a presence among the demonstrators, it doesn't constitute a majority and does not control the events on Tahrir Square. "However, it remains Egypt's best-organized opposition group and will undoubtedly play a role in any political transition. " "Over the past 15 years, the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership has expressed a commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. It accepts Egypt's existing legal code and would seek to change it only through peaceful, parliamentary processes," in Rutherford's analysis. "But it still opposes allowing a Christian to serve as president or prime minister, or allowing a woman to serve as president. But its spokespersons have stated repeatedly that it wants to participate in the democratic process and pursue its goals through nonviolent means. Unfortunately, many Egyptians are not convinced and remain fearful that it harbors a hidden agenda. The Muslim Brotherhood needs to make particular efforts to assuage the fears of Egypt's Coptic Christian minority, which constitutes roughly 10 percent of the country's population."

To Israel, Mubarak's close aide Vice President Suleiman is the best choice. "U.S. interest lies with a new strong government from within the regime which includes some reformists and carries out reforms, but which excludes or keeps very weak the Islamists," said Jonathan Rynhold of Bar-Ilan University. But according to Debra Shushan, Suleiman has hardly won popularity due to his connection to Mubarak.

So far, the former IAEA Director General Dr El Baradei is supported by opposition groups including Muslim Brotherhood. "El Baradei will receive some support in the transition period as someone who can keep people unified while new arrangements are made for future elections. They do think he represents change and he has managed to convene support from a broad range of support. But these groups now may well find other leaders to promote for the Presidency," Professor Raymond Bush of Leeds University told *Life Week*. "Baradei has the advantage that he is not implicated with the old regime, he has an international reputation and knowledge of geostrategic issues but the disadvantage is that he is rather aloof and has less understanding of Egyptian politics and livelihoods. The Israelis don't trust him as he is against invasion of Iran and has criticized the Israelis for destruction of Gaza and the US see him also as a bit of an unknown character despite his experience and years in international service"

Facing plenty of unknowns, Israel is tense. Eli Shaked, a former Israeli ambassador to Cairo, said: "The only people in Egypt who are committed to peace are the people in Mubarak's inner circle, and if the next president is not one of them, we are going to be in trouble." Now, 40% of Israel's oil imports are from Egypt. Over the years, Israel mainly positioned its army along the Northern and Eastern borders. There are just a small number of troops stationed along the 250 km-long border with Egypt. Before the signing of the peace agreement with Egypt, the Israeli defense budget cost 25% of its GDP. Over the last 30 years, that share has dropped to 7%. Jonathan Rynhold pointed out: "Even in the best scenario, Israel's strategic situation would probably be worse than before, because the regime would be weakened and thus less inclined to act in unpopular ways – which would include co-operation with Israel."