



A call to revolution - Egypt must be free

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A call for protests after Friday prayers will see hundreds of thousands demonstrating against the hated Mubarak regime in Egypt, Simon Hardy explains what is at stake not just in Egypt but across the Arab world

When Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to himself in Tunisia on 17 December 2010 it was an act of rage against his humiliating treatment by uncaring bureaucrats who had deprived him of his only way of making money. He was one of hundreds of thousands of unemployed graduates, forced to sell cheap goods on the street to tourists from the west and when municipal officials seized his wares, all the hope drained out of him. His short life epitomised the poverty, the alienation - the wretchedness of life for so many people.

How could he have known that what he did would set in motion movements that could change everything? Living under dictatorships and reactionary government, unelected monarchies and western supported military juntas, the hope of freedom stirred constantly. But after so many movements and democratic challenges were defeated, usually through brute force, these regimes became complacent, happy that their countries would remain stable and secure.

And in the western world the governments were happy. Dictators like Ben Ali and General Mubarak, along with the Saudi and Jordanian royal families, are a welcome presence for the US state department and the EU. They allowed them to exploit the people of the region, happy in the knowledge that the police and armies of their allies could contain any threat and that security was assured for western investment.

But now something fundamental has changed in the Arab world. That desire for freedom has burst out onto the streets of cities across four countries. Irrespective of borders or boundaries, the cause is the same, the driving force is the same. The economic crisis combined with the oppressive nature of these regimes are the conditions that has caused this struggle to emerge.

These are democratic movements, they are fighting for democratic revolutions. Their goals are simple and their tactics the same as so many others before - mass demonstrations, strikes and street blockades. The movement has already achieved one important victory in Tunisia when Ben Ali fled the country. He was sacrificed by the powers-that-be in order that they might retain the real power behind the throne. After all, who cares who sits in the presidents chair? As long as the generals, police chiefs, the captains of industry and banking and the various western ambassadors sit in office this can carry on with some cosmetic changes. At least that is what they hope. Now weeks after Ben Ali fled people are still protesting, demanding not just a reshuffling of the cabinet by a thorough purge of all officials who worked under Ben Ali, starting with the Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi.

But in Egypt the struggle takes on a whole new significance. Egypt is not only the most populous Arab state, it has the largest working class, it has played a historical role in leading the Arab world under General Nasser and his Arab nationalist project in the 1960s and 70s.

Crucially it borders Israel and the Gaza strip.

And what the Egyptian government knows is what the Israeli government knows is what Hilary Clinton knows. That a radical change in Egypt which brings to power a new government would change the power relations across the region. It might commit itself to supporting the Palestinians, it might open the borders with Gaza, it might lead a revolt against

Israel. A revolutionary government of workers and the urban poor in Egypt is the single biggest threat to imperialism, Zionism and every other reactionary regime in the region, it would finally signal the liberation of the Palestinians. The road to Jerusalem lies through Cairo.

The movement in Egypt has for three days been growing in strength and force. Over 1,000 arrests and seven shot dead by police have not stopped it. The government has cut off Twitter, Facebook and text messaging in a bid to disable and demobilise the movement. They seem to forget that when the Shah was brought down in Iran there was none of these gadgets. People organised face to face, not through Facebook. They held meetings and discussion circles. The revolution finds a way to organise. There was no twitter feed when the Shah fled Tehran in 1979.

For 30 years Mubarak has ruled Egypt with an iron fist. For 30 years the state of emergency has given him unlimited powers. Security forces have tortured, beaten and killed people with impunity. Every year the US contributes over a billion dollars to the Egyptian security forces to maintain the stability of the regime. The Obama regime gave Mubarak \$1.3 billion for military spending in 2009 and again in 2010.

Hilary Clinton watches the equipment that her government has provided being used by police against the democracy movement. She urges restraint on both sides - she says that the US is neutral in the conflict. What disgusting hypocrisy. The Obama regime in Washington was happy to see the continued existence of these repressive regimes, was happy for Mubarak to remain in office until he wanted to hand power over to his son. So much for spreading democracy across the region.

But everyone knows that the US is not really neutral in this conflict. No doubt it will emerge in leaked emails and dossiers in the future that during this time of crisis the US or some European power contacted Mubarak and pledged whatever help he needed to repress the movement. The French were exposed after Ben Ali fled Tunis as having offered to send elite special forces units to the capital to restore order. No doubt Mubarak could rely on a similar offer if he felt it was expedient. As the west often says about such men, Mubarak might be a bastard, but he is our bastard.

If the movement can maintain its energy and numbers today then the regime might start to crack. But Mubarak will be a tougher nut than Ben Ali, there is so much more at stake in his regime. But the people of Egypt know this, and that will only double their determination. Many feel that this is the time, after so many failed movements and martyrs in the last 30 years - 2011 is the year of hope.

The mass protests are crucial, but the working class must begin to fight as well. Not simply as individuals on the demonstrations, but as a class, using their social and economic power. The Shah in Iran was toppled by the movement on the streets and the strikes in the oil industry, when these two forces came together he became helpless and his days were numbered. Now the same must happen in Egypt.

The working class in Egypt is strong in numbers but weak in leadership. The Egyptian Trade Union Federation is in hoc to the regime. Its website mentions nothing of the revolution happening on the streets. No doubt when the people marched past the ETUF offices the bureaucrats shut the windows to keep the noise out then got on the phone to the government to ask how it could help 'calm things down'. The ETUF even released a statement congratulating the hated interior minister on Police Day. Such workers leaders should be thrown into the Nile.

A new workers movement has emerged in the last few years, built around magnificent strikes in places like Mahalla. Now new forms of organisation will be needed, workplace meetings and workers councils. The urban poor and youth need to go to the workers movement and vice versa. They need to meet in the middle, both on the streets and at the point of production. A signal of this unity was in Suez when the demonstrators marched to the factories and the working class districts and their numbers swelled from a few thousands to over 40,000 people, joined by workers pouring out of the factories. A strike wave across the country would scare the regime more than anything else. A general strike could force massive concessions from it. An all out general strike could bring it down.

The workers only really becomes a class for themselves when they fight the capitalist class that rules over it. It is when

it confronts the enemy class as an organised force that the revolution takes on a whole new dynamic and direction. From this point the revolution begins to outstrip itself. The struggle for democracy becomes a fight not just against this or that general but against the entire social order upon which it is built. What the Egyptian workers lack is a revolutionary party to transform this fight for democracy into the smashing of the capitalist state and for workers power and for socialism. The urgent task of the day is to forge such a party in the struggle, to build a working class party that has a strategy of workers revolution.

If not then the leadership of this movement will fall to other forces, for instance liberal democrats, desperate for change of government but not of system and an opening up of the economy for more investment and profits. It might fall to the Muslim brotherhood, the largest opposition force in the country who have been relatively silent during these recent days, only offering to join the protests after Friday prayer. They are a profoundly conservative organisation whose agenda would not offer democratic freedoms for the Egyptian people but instead a new kind of regime that ruled over the working class, women and poor with a socially reactionary programme.

All of these are possibilities - anything is possible in times like these. There is no force more powerful than the desire to be free. It has brought down kings, queens, military regime and more than a few so called democratic governments in its time. Nothing will come easily, real power is never given it is taken, and the regime will resist tooth and nail the pressure for change. Everywhere the eyes of workers and young people are on Egypt today. They see in Egypt the music of the future being played out.

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