



Egypt- the revolution at a turning point?

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In Egypt the massive demonstrations on 4 February have shaken the establishment once again, consolidated opinion against Mubarak further, and is still the overriding feature of Egyptian politics today, writes Simon Hardy, eyewitness

It dominates all discussions in the capital and in every major town and city. The battle lines are drawn and barricades have gone up.

Tahrir square stands as a magnificent tribute to what feels like a new world that we live in. Speaking to Egyptians they say that for decades pundits and commentators had described the Egyptians as being complacent ? simply accepting their lot in life. Yes there were complaints and anger at times, they say, but nothing intrinsically revolutionary or radical about the Egyptian spirit. International commentators too mocked the old fear of how the ?Arab street? would react. Indeed if they feared the ?street? it was because they assumed if it broke loose it would be a reactionary Islamist one.

This reminds me of what those same wiseacres were saying about the British before the students occupied the Tory party HQ. OK in Egypt they actually burned down the NDP HQ. So the Egyptians trumped us on that-but there is a clear parallel despite all the differences. When hard pressed, when your back is to the wall and your just not going to take it any more, huge numbers of people can find the strength within them to resist and to rise up.

In that sense, we are all in Tahrir square ? or we should fight to make every capital city like Tahrir square. A beacon of hope in a world where our rulers are determined to make us pay the price of a world crisis their system brought about.

But whilst we all can celebrate the courage and imagination of the demonstrators ? the many women young and old as well as the men who have been occupying the square and defending it against brutal attacks coordinated by Mubarak and his cronies. The best tribute to their courage is to critically assess their tactics and whether they can achieve what they so desperately want - the ousting of Mubarak and the downfall of the military-police dictatorship of which he was only the personal expression.

Whilst the mass demonstrations are essential to the continued momentum of the movement we have also to be aware of their shortcomings. The last capital city, which saw its centre taken over by pro democracy activists for weeks on end as they barricaded themselves in, was Bangkok in Thailand. Nor should we forget Tiananmen Square. Both ended badly for the movement, as the army and police moved to crush it.

The situation in Egypt is not the same ? yet. But it runs the risk of these examples from history repeating themselves unless a decisive push is made. The police have not gone away, they have taken off their uniforms for sure, but they are now also working with a fascistic mob paid 100 Egyptian pounds and given a free meal at KFC to spend hours on the street intimidating people, including handing western journalists over to the army in the hope of blocking news worldwide.

The army in Tahrir square acts to break up the fighting, ostensibly arrests NDP thugs and pro Mubarak agents and takes them away, whether they are subsequently released is not clear. On the streets outside Tahrir however the army acts very differently. They are hostile to foreigners, Lebanese, Syrian, European, all of us are fiercely interrogated, searched, intimidated by the young thugs standing around us.

The difference in psychology between the counter revolution and revolutionaries in Tahrir square is marked. In Tahrir square people are friendly, helpful, excited to see you. Outside you are viewed with suspicion, even hatred.

The veteran radical journalist Neal Ascherson comments in today's Independent

The course for the Cairo insurrection now seems to be passive, rather than active. It will simply hang on in the square, enduring attack by government thugs and possibly the army, in the hope that its presence will eventually break the regime's nerve. In other words, the great protest has come to a halt. What else should it be doing? Nobody seems sure.

Most of the demonstrators in the square, especially the militants who have occupied it for ten days non-stop know that if Mubarak stays in power, if the army and the police resume control of the streets, if the Suleiman and the NDP dominated parliament retain power to say yes or no in the negotiations with the opposition's self appointed leaders then the forces of revolution will dissipate and gradually or suddenly the counterrevolution will reassert its control.

Some of these forces suggested that yesterday the crowd should march on the parliament and presidential palace. This certainly could have had a very bloody outcome and without a full general strike, the creation of committees and a militia and attempts, not just to assure the neutrality of the soldiers, but also to win them over, would in all probability have ended in disaster. The preparatory stages of not only mobilising the masses for a single day but of organising them as a counter-force to the state. To attempt to advise dates and times for an insurrection in a revolution from a distance is unwise to put it mildly.

But those he did call for this were raising a critical point - power must be seized from those who still hold it and this cannot be done without a confrontation with the armed power of the old regime- without a mass popular insurrection. Of course the aim must be in the process to crack the discipline of the soldiers, to win them over with their rifles and tanks too.

Every decisive question in politics - above all whether a dictatorship falls or not - comes down to the question of force. And here another decisive question poses itself. The more determined and well organised the revolutionaries, the more they carry the masses in their millions with them, then the more likely it is that the apparatus of repression will crumble.

Anyone who believes that a revolution can be entirely peaceful, as many of those in Tahrir square still do, or did till the last few days. Have seen for themselves that the difference between living and dying in a police cell is whether you choose to run or fight. In these situations it can be impossible to run. If this is true in a localised tactical battle it is true for the strategy of the revolution as a whole.

Now the opposition politicians are readying themselves to negotiate whilst seeking only legal constitutional guarantees that things will not return to normal. If they succeed in dividing and demobilising the mass popular movement then the old regime will eventually dispense with them too. If, as the American and European imperialists want, there is a transition to a stable regime that still assures the capitalists of their profits and guarantees the US-Israeli governments the Egyptian army's support for the siege of Gaza and the remorseless robbing of the Palestinians of their homeland, then democracy in Egypt will turn out to be an empty façade. The independent unions, the youth organisations will come under heavy repression.

These latter forces need to fight with all their strength - as we are sure they will - to continue the mass mobilisation and to formulate in the clearest terms the demands of the masses economic and social as well as democratic. But they need now to also turn to the creation of a party that can embody these objectives and use any temporary period of liberalisation to communicate this programme to the masses. When the time for an uprising against the old order again presents itself, as it surely will, the workers must have the organisation ready to take its direction in hand and lead it to victory.

