



# The revolution in Egypt at a crucial stage

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Soldiers and demonstrators mingling on the streets, a strike wave in Suez and calls for a general strike indicate that the revolution is on the move, but Mubarak is not finished yet, writes Simon Hardy

"Down, down Mubarak!" It is clear that after a week of protests there is a kind of stalemate. The army is out on the streets, the police were chased away but are slowly coming back, the mass demonstrations are a permanent feature of Tahrir square of every major city and town centre. The protesters won't go home until Mubarak resigns. Mubarak refuses to resign. Who will blink first?

The demonstrators know that this state of affairs cannot go on forever. They must escalate, they must force things to a conclusion - before Mubarak does. That is why the calls for a general strike are so important. If the working class comes into this struggle then Mubarak is finished - working class strikes and threats of strikes have brought down the King of Nepal and President Ben Ali in Tunisia in recent years. The mass demonstration on Tuesday could be decisive in the power struggle.

The presence of the army and what it has done, or rather what it has so far not done, is instructive. The army has not yet opened fire on the crowds. The US made bayonets have not been thrust into the chests and necks of their fellow Egyptians. The US manufactured grenades have not been lobbed by the soldiers. Instead the soldiers sit on their tanks, they have been laughing and talking to the protesters, there have been high fives and shaking of hands. They are friendly but still under the command structure of the military apparatus. The threat is still very real.

But this will change - one way or another. Somewhere in Cairo a furious power struggle is going on within the army high command. No doubt Mubarak has given the order to "clear the streets", and someone, or some group within the chain of command, has refused to implement it. Instead the soldiers are told to wait for further orders. In fact some of the generals are loyal to Mubarak whilst others are increasingly of the opinion that he has to go. Pressure comes from multiple points, applied to different degrees. There are the phone calls from Obama, the press statements of Hilary Clinton and Joe Biden. The Israeli government has made it clear that the Arab people are "not ready for democracy". All of this confirms that Mubarak should stay on in some form.

But the greatest pressure comes from the people on the streets. There are thousands upon thousands. Maybe some of the generals are even sympathetic to them. But what is important here is the question of when the decisive moment comes, when the orders are given to drown the movement in blood, will the soldiers fire or not? If they do not then Mubarak is finished - if they do then a civil war begins. Winning the soldiers over to the revolution, and many seem to have already come over, is essential. If the monopoly of the use of force by the state is broken then Mubarak's days are numbered.

The signs are good. A new trade union federation has been established, the Centre for Trade Unions and Workers Services. It is essential that workers in these trade unions take the lead in mobilising for the general strike, establishing workplace committees and defence groups to protect themselves and the movement from the police. This will not only strike at the political question of the regime but the social economic relations of Egyptian society. It will mark the beginnings of a social revolution against capitalism, one that would not just see one president replaced by another but the possibilities of a new kind of society, one based on working class democracy and power. In Suez already a mass strike wave has reportedly led to workers committees being established in the city.

So far, the call for a constituent assembly has not been raised by any serious numbers. The call for a constituent assembly is crucial now, it is the highest form of democracy that can be achieved under capitalism, it would allow the people to come together and really debate the options for a new kind of society. Within such a framework the voice of the working class and women would be heard louder than it has been before. That is why none of the 'established' opposition groups want it. Instead the Muslims Brotherhood and various other bourgeois oppositional forces are proposed a national unity government, headed by Mohamed ElBaradei. ElBaradei was head of the International Atomic Energy Agency where he was an outspoken critic of the invasion of Iraq. Israel does not like him, they believe he has been too soft on Iran's nuclear programme during his tenure in the IAEA.

He might have angered George W Bush and Benjamin Netanyahu, but as far as the international community is concerned he is a perfect alternative to Mubarak - should the need arise. He is popular with the Egyptians, he is not too obviously a stooge of the west and most importantly of all, he is not a revolutionary. What they fear more than anything is the arrival of a Lenin at the proverbial Finland station. By contrast, ElBaradei's arrival in Cairo after the protests began was just what the west needed, a moderate constitutional reformer who all the opposition parties can unite around. It is understandable that he would be popular on the streets, he promises a new beginning. But ElBaradei would mark a return to the Sadat era in Egypt, a supposedly democratic government resting on a powerful military, unable to meet the desperate needs of the Egyptian poor and working class. In other words it will only postpone the revolutionary struggle that will come, or it will be the prelude to another dictator further down the line.

But in situations like these, nothing is set, everything is in motion, all that once seemed so solid has melted into air. Everything seems possible on the streets of Egypt, and the atmosphere of hope and promise is contagious, it is spreading across the region, indeed possibly even across the world.

These times are tense and the protests have been long. But there is no sign of fatigue in the faces of the people on the streets the ones so determined to make history. They are fuelled by the passion of a people who are waking up from a 30 year nightmare. However, for Mubarak, for all dictators across the world, for the US state department and for the Israeli government the nightmare is only just beginning.

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