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## **The Uprising in Egypt: An Initial Assessment**

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President Mubarak is currently facing the biggest challenge to his regime since taking office close to thirty years ago. On January 28, after several days of violent demonstrations throughout Egypt, the 82-year old Mubarak called on the army to quell the unrest, announcing he “would not allow anything to threaten the peace, law, and future of the country.” On January 29, Mubarak appointed Omar Suleiman, head of Egyptian intelligence, to the post of vice president, and charged Ahmed Shafiq, a former Egyptian air force commander and the new prime minister, with the task of forming a new government to undertake reforms and calm the masses. At the time of this writing, the crisis is in full force and definitive outcomes cannot be predicted.

### **The Crisis**

Egypt has a population of 81 million; the annual growth rate of the population is estimated at 2 percent, and the GDP is \$6,200 (in terms of buying power). The economic situation of the weaker classes, government corruption, and the encouragement the population drew from the uprising in Tunisia underlay the spontaneous eruption of the protests. While those close to the Egyptian regime enjoy a lavish lifestyle, the weaker classes stagger under the burden of the most basic subsistence and the middle class is disappearing. Unemployment stands at close to 10 percent and the price of basic foods is skyrocketing – in part because of the steep rise in food prices worldwide, which despite the subsidies for basics goods has affected prices on the local market. This phenomenon is also a fundamental reason for the waves of protest in Tunisia, Yemen, and Algeria.

The standard of living of the lower class in Egypt is particularly low, at the level of basic existence, because the average income is much lower than the international average and because the country lacks advanced mechanisms of social welfare available in developed nations. As a result of urbanization, more than two-thirds of the Egyptian population work in services, trade, and industry, and unlike in the past, have no access to sources of food in the rural areas.

The protests are popular in nature and do not seem to be directed by the Islamic opposition (although the protests were joined by Islamic elements). The lack of a central organization responsible for the events makes it difficult for the regime to identify targets to suppress. Opposition leaders, such as Mohamed ElBaradei who sees himself as a candidate in this year's presidential elections, have joined the protests, but they are not directing the protesters. Thus far the army has deployed at key locations in the cities but has not reined in the masses. At this point it seems that military forces are concerned with protecting government edifices rather than taking significant action to restore public order.

Mubarak's difficulties are compounded by American pressure. On January 26 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said: "We support the universal rights of the Egyptian people including the rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly. And we urge the Egyptian authorities not to prevent peaceful protests or block communications, including on social media sites." On January 28 President Obama made statements to the same effect. The administration's reserved stance towards the Egyptian regime's self-defense efforts are reminiscent of the Carter administration's attitude to the fall of the shah in Iran on the eve of the Islamic Revolution in 1979; it is liable to affect the standing of the United States among similar regimes in the region.

As in Tunisia, there has been widespread use of social media resources such as Twitter and Facebook. Activists use the net not only for propaganda purposes and reports on regime violence but also to recruit participants, organize protests, and direct events. Therefore, the regime blocked access to the internet and disrupted some mobile communications. An additional challenge for the regime is the extensive presence of foreign media broadcasting directly from the scene, which makes it hard for the regime to act aggressively toward the protesters.

### **Historical Precedents**

Mubarak is well aware of the risks of a shaky economy to internal stability. In the so-called "Bread Riots" in January 1977, sparked by the steep increase in prices of basic foods following the government's attempt to cut back on subsidies, 50 people were killed and some 600 were injured. Then-Vice President Mubarak acted to quell the unrest but after three days, the regime abandoned this attempt. In February 1986, riots were started by soldiers from the central security units in Cairo and quickly spread to other areas in Egypt. The Egyptian press reported that the riots rose from the economic situation and the gap between a rich minority and a poor majority, and that the riots were started by particularly embittered soldiers who were joined by poor civilians. The rioters, who aimed their fury at economic targets – stores, banks, and so on – were ultimately stopped by the army.

Despite the similarity, it seems that the current crisis in Egypt is already larger than those events, which the regime managed to suppress.

## **What Lies Ahead**

The question of how deep the crisis will go and what the outcomes will be depends on the ability of the protesters or the opposition to translate the protest into a political force opposing the president's power and the apparatus at his disposal. The position of the generals is likely to be very influential, as was evident in the deposal of Tunisian President Ben Ali. It is not clear if there are any cracks in the military's support for the regime, but there seems to be no willingness on the military's part to confront the demonstrators. How much the military will be willing to act to ensure the continuation of Mubarak's regime is a critical question.

The outcome of the riots may not necessarily be connected to what or who ignited them, rather to whatever power structure is created and those who succeed in leveraging it for their own benefit. In such a power structure, the Islamic opposition is liable to expand its influence. At the same time, even if the regime succeeds in suppressing the uprising, it seems that Egypt will not be able to go back to what it was and that the Mubarak regime will end this year, one way or another.

Even if Mubarak remains in power, it seems that he will have to abandon his attempt to crown his son Gamal as president in the 2011 presidential elections. This will spell the end of a move seen by many Egyptians as an attempt to restore the monarchy through the back door, as Hafez Asad did in Syria by appointing his son Bashar as his successor. And should the crisis expand, the regime leaders are likely to urge Mubarak to retire early and appoint a temporary president to serve until the elections, thereby preserving the regime, albeit in a different composition.

Alternatively, Egypt is liable to find itself in a period of instability, highly undesirable by all sides. Under certain circumstances, undermining the current power bases may generate an extremist Islamic regime, in part because of the organizational capabilities of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

The shockwaves of the events in Egypt and Tunisia may well spill over to other Middle Eastern countries, as many of them suffer from similar syndromes. The concern that the riots in Egypt will spread to other Arab states caused the price of oil to spike by 4.5 percent already on January 28.

## **The Israeli Context**

For now, the crisis has no Israeli connection and Israel has not been mentioned in the recent clashes. Nonetheless, Israel has excellent reason to follow developments closely, in light of its interest in maintaining the peace agreement, its growing dependence on Egyptian gas, and the ramifications for regional stability (e.g., a radical change in Egypt is liable to generate a dramatic change in the Middle East balance of power).

In any case, a weakened Egypt preoccupied with internal affairs portends poorly for the pragmatic camp supporting the political process and encourages the radical camp, intent

on Israel's destruction. Even if the regime succeeds in suppressing the uprising, Egypt is in for a year of difficult political challenges that threaten its stability. In the current crisis, Israel has neither the capability nor a reason to intervene, and Israeli senior figures would do well to demonstrate restraint. Still, the possibility that Egypt might pursue a new direction is no longer theoretical and Israel must consider the implications of the various possible scenarios.