



'RESCUING THE REVOLUTION'

NOTES FROM CAIRO

BY MICHAEL C HUDSON

For those of us that thought the Egyptian revolution had run out of steam, the experience of last Friday's marathon "happening" in Tahrir Square was firm evidence that any death knell remains premature. Equal parts political rally, religious celebration, Woodstock (Egyptian style), carnival, and family outing, this was Egyptian society--suddenly free--and exuberantly expressing itself. I watched toddlers happily having their cheeks painted the colors of the Egyptian flag, a group of veiled women camped out under a bush taking refuge from the hot sun, a teenager beating a drum while held up by his buddies, an old man with his granddaughter on his shoulders proudly displaying a handmade poster proclaiming "rescue the revolution," a couple of guys sitting and chatting with a poster reading "Facebook... Reload" propped up beside them, and the eminently entrepreneurial souvenir sellers. The enthusiasm and optimism evoked the spirit of an American political rally -- with the buttons and banners showcasing the "January 25 Revolution" to boot.

On the whole, this was a youngish crowd of middle class Egyptians -- almost everyone was plugging at mobile phones and cameras -- alongside laborers and others. I saw a few bearded men but not many: the two main Islamist tendencies, the Muslim Brothers and the much more radical *salaffiyin*, were not discernibly present. More significantly and conspicuously absent were the military and the security forces. Hard as I looked I could not find any uniformed men or tanks. In fact, even the armored personnel carriers lined up in front of the old Nile Hilton just the day before were nowhere to be seen. I heard that this demonstration would be bigger than any other since Mubarak's downfall, and it was. At any one point there must have been tens of thousands in the square.

The collective expression of *Egyptianness* -- "raise your head, you are Egyptian" was the slogan of the day -- was unforgettable. But the other remarkable thing about it was its length. People just couldn't get enough. I got to Tahrir around noon while a large crowd was observing Friday prayers led by an imam delivering a sermon that fused religion and protest. I mingled for a couple of hours and then decided that was about it. But when I came back three hours later the crowds were even larger, and they remained there well after dark. By that point there were a half dozen grouplets of demonstrators eddying here and there through the square: a handful of teenage girls led by a fiery young woman in full niqab; a very elderly Coptic priest assisted by young followers; young men on a makeshift stage, replete with powerful loudspeakers, exhorting the crowd to "rescue the revolution."

And the revolution does need rescuing.

Despite the carnival-esque atmosphere, these people were in Tahrir on serious business: they sense that their revolution is in danger, and they are right. The Higher Military Council who sent Mubarak packing to a comfortable retirement in Sharm al-Shaykh has so far been opaque in its decision-making, and answers to nobody.

The military, led by Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, rushed through a package of constitutional amendments with minimal consultation but via referendum, which set a speedy timetable for elections next September. (The rapid pace certainly favors the best-organized political tendencies, the Muslim Brothers and the

apparatchiks of Mubarak's National Democratic Party, which have been playing at Egyptian politics for decades -- longer than most of the revolutionaries have been alive.) They proposed rules that would severely discourage strikes or demonstrations that might adversely affect the economy. Further, the Council has been suspiciously slow in bringing to trial Mubarak's closest cronies--men like Safwat Sharif and Fathi Suroor--on corruption charges (not to mention the President himself). The protesters, students, think tank experts, and professors I spoke with fear that Egypt may be trading in one dictator only to have him replaced with another form of authoritarian rule. Will the old structure minus its longtime boss actually recreate itself? Some think it hasn't disappeared at all. One newspaper commentary was headlined "Egypt is still Mubarakstan."

Granted, the Egyptians have achieved something unprecedented in the modern Arab world: the ousting of a dictator through popular will. But it remains unnervingly uncertain whether genuine civilian government will emerge to complete the revolution. It's difficult to avoid observing that the revolution has to come to terms with some enduring political realities. One is the army. The other is the Islamists.

The military has been the backbone of republican Egypt since the Free Officers' coup of 1952 that brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power. The three men who have ruled Egypt since then, Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak, were all military officers. Over the years the armed forces have garnered popular respect, especially for the October 1973 War in which Egypt, partnered with Syria, scored a moral victory against Israel. Thanks further to generous American aid contracted into the peace treaty with Israel, they have become a substantial and wealthy institution, carving out for themselves something of a parallel economy and holding major shares in Egypt's biggest companies. It is hard to imagine a civilian president stripping them of their perks. And let us not forget that the military enjoys intimate contact with and support from the Pentagon.

The Muslim Brotherhood, long suppressed, outlawed, and feared, now present themselves as moderates along the lines of Turkey's democratically elected Justice and Development (AK) Party. Neither Egypt's old opposition parties like the Wafd and the Tagammu nor, so far, the youthful protesters in Tahrir have the organizational capabilities of the Brothers. Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid, an eminent Egyptian political scientist estimated that the Muslim Brothers might get 30 percent of the vote in a free election but that its actual influence in the People's Assembly would be even better due to its discipline, while the other 70 percent would be distributed among small fractionated groupings. Yet if we have learned anything from this new generation of Egyptians, it is that their collective will cannot be underestimated; one of Egypt's tycoons, Naguib Sawiris, put his name and fortune behind the creation of a new liberal Free Egyptians Party earlier this week and is fast gaining support.

There is still another grouping whose influence cannot be so easily estimated. The Islamists of the Salafi movement are the new boys on the block -- or Square, as it were -- and are far more radical than the Brothers. As apparent ideological successors to the *al-Gama'a al-Islamiya*, mercilessly repressed by Mubarak in the 1990s, the extent to which their radical Islamist orientation will find an echo remains to be seen.

Maybe the most realistic outcome the protesters of Tahrir can hope for would resemble the Turkish model of the post-Ataturk period in which the military allowed long stretches of significant party politics and competition. Unlike Turkey today, in those years there was no doubt as to who was in charge when push came to shove: every decade or so the Turkish army would push aside the civilian politicians and reset the system to their liking. One veteran insider told me that the Egyptian officers are quite uncomfortable being in the spotlight at this moment of transition; they much prefer the shadows. Whether down the road Egypt might continue to emulate Turkey, where the military no longer plays that decisive role, and moves toward a genuinely civilian political system is certainly a possibility. In any event, the Egyptians of Tahrir, heady with freedom and empowerment, and mobilized as never before by the new satellite and social media, are not going to let their revolution, incomplete as it may now be, slip away.

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