

Six observations about Egypt's unrest

The Drum

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1. It is too early to tell whether this week's protest in Egypt will lead to the overthrow of Mubarak's regime. The size and spread (ie. not just Cairo but other major cities) of the demonstrations is significant, although not unprecedented in Egypt. The demonstrations have gone on for two days now, but they will have to go on for a lot longer to seriously challenge the regime.

Is there a Tunisia effect here? Absolutely. Tunisia has meant that the Egyptian regime's most powerful weapon, public resignation ('why bother, it won't change anything'), is much weaker this time. Protesters will be more resilient (because they think they can win) and the regime more nervous (because it fears it will lose).

A regime not known for its subtlety or adroitness has to make a very fine judgement about how to respond to the protests: too soft and it won't move the protesters; too hard and it risks the protest snowballing and opening fissures within the regime. A key indicator here will be the army. If the army is ordered onto the streets, rather than just the police, then you know the regime thinks it is in trouble.

2. The protesters seem a very grassroots and very diverse bunch: students, professionals, industrial workers, online activists, veteran activists and even football fans, according to one report. People are angry about a range of things — unemployment, prices, corruption, lack of freedom to express themselves. What unites them is that their lives keep getting harder, they see no hope for change and they blame that on the guy at the top. They may or may not be realistic enough to know that Mubarak's fall won't lead to rapid change, but they believe that change must start there.

3. I had my doubts about the extent to which social media played a role in Tunisia's revolution (in part because I know little about Tunisia and even less about social media). But there is no doubt that it has played a key role in Egypt. The protest was organised via Facebook and Twitter at a time when the big opposition movements (both legal and illegal) including the Muslim Brotherhood were equivocating about taking to the streets.

This is not to say that what we are witnessing in Egypt can be attributed to social media alone: people have to be angry enough to protest, and they have to believe that they have a chance of success (see Tunisia point above). Other forms of media also played a role, including 'old-fashioned' al-Jazeera. Nevertheless, social media has undoubtedly been a lubricant for dissent. It almost makes you want to sign up to Twitter (almost).

4. We will not see the outcome of this for days, weeks or months. Although the action will be on the streets, the critical decisions will be inside the regime. Key elements — including state security, the army and business elites — will have to decide whether their interests are best served by sticking with Mubarak or abandoning him.

In Tunisia, the regime decided that abandoning the leader served their interests, but the calculations are different in Egypt. For one thing, the profits of corruption are more widely spread within the regime and among its supporters. Moreover, the regime will have the Tunisian example to follow, and they will have noticed that it is not yet clear that just getting rid of the dictator is enough to save their own skins.

5. It is also possible that the protesters will rally behind some figure outside the regime and put him (or less likely, her) in power. I am discounting this possibility because no such figure has emerged yet; certainly not one that the opposition and the diverse protesters on the streets would be willing to unite behind.

It is noteworthy that the organised opposition is starting to get in on the action; the leaders of one of the legal opposition parties, the Wafd, has issued a set of reform demands. But the really important actor here is the Muslim Brotherhood. It could double the numbers on the streets and bring its impressive organisational machine to bear on the protests. If the Muslim Brotherhood decides to join the protests, it will be another sign that the regime is in serious trouble. So far, it is staying out.

6. Because Egypt is a pivotal American ally in the region, Washington will be hyper-cautious about being seen to abandon Mubarak — and the realist in me understands why that is the case. But this will cost America even more public support in the region, even if (especially if) Mubarak survives. It does not help matters when Secretary of State Clinton says dumb things, such as her initial response to the unrest:

"...our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people."

What, with tear gas? Clinton has since made a better statement: 'We believe strongly that the Egyptian government has an important opportunity at this moment in time to implement political, economic and social reforms to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people.'

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