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Egypt on Fire

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Since January 25, 2011, Egypt has been on fire. Inspired by the fall of the Tunisian president, millions of Egyptians have taken to the streets to call for President Hosni Mubarak's resignation. Defying curfews and intimidation by F16s, they have demanded democracy, social justice and an end to corruption. Mobilized through social networks, the Egyptian people seem no longer afraid. They are excited and believe that they can bring about change. Although the government shut down communications, they continue to resist and protest.

Mubarak's attempt to wear out the protests failed. The Egyptian people have shown remarkable persistence, resilience and solidarity in the face of the ensuing chaos, lawlessness and looting. They have organized themselves to protect their homes, neighborhoods and museums. On February 11, Mubarak finally relinquished his power and left Egypt.

The events in Egypt caught the world completely off guard and posed a dilemma: to support undemocratic regimes that are close allies, or to support popular movements that demand the right to select governments and leaders democratically. The only outspoken supporter of Mubarak was Israel, which further undermined Mubarak's legitimacy.

The unrelenting protests in Egypt that led to the oust of Mubarak showed the world that the norm of undemocratic regimes in the Middle East is no longer sustainable. The protests in Tunisia and

the fall of its regime were responsible for this recent awakening. People in the Middle East are fed up with oppressive regimes, social inequality, unemployment and communal violence. These events also coincide with the 32nd year of the Iranian revolution, in which a strong leader, supported by powerful Western allies, was toppled as the result of popular uprising.

But unlike the Iranian revolution, which ended in the creation of an authoritarian regime, the events in Tunisia and Egypt herald more positive developments. Further democratization in the Middle East is highly likely and countries of the region should be able to develop democratic systems that reflect their own religious, cultural and historical realities.

Turkey is emerging as the successful model for an Islamic democracy. The Islamic opposition in both Tunisia and Egypt has cited Turkey as their model for the future. According to Zoghy International's polls, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan is the most admired leader in the Muslim world. Recently, Rachid Ghannouchi of the An-Nahda Islamic party in Tunisia commented that Turkish democracy was a model for his movement. Over the last few years, Turkey has shown significant improvements in its economy, as well as in its commitments to democracy and human rights. Turkey continues to pursue a European integration policy, despite the reluctance of European countries. Yet, Turkey has not limited its social and economic ties only to Europe but reached out to countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It has further developed military and economic partnerships with countries like China. Turkish investments are burgeoning in countries like Sudan, Tanzania, Iraq, China, and many Central Asian countries. At home, the Turkish economy continues to grow despite the worldwide economic recession. Turkish television programs also have built bridges between the Arab and the Turkish worlds.

Erdogan's anti-Israeli rhetoric and defiant attitude have also increased his popularity in the Muslim world. Turkey's bold and outspoken foreign policy has shown that one does not have to be a satellite of the West to be a Muslim democracy. Erdogan's party, with its Islamic roots, has shown that it is possible to be both Muslim and democratic. Turkey has become a more proactive regional actor and has played the role of mediator in the region, even if it was not always successful.

A democratic attitude is learned and it takes time and practice in order to be successful. Different groups in Egypt must find a way to work together to establish institutions that will facilitate the transition from a dictatorial regime to a democratic one. The question then is, how long will this process take?

Egypt has been living in an un-democratic environment since 1952. There are no democratic institutions in place that can be operationalized. Many of the political movements display an intolerant attitude towards one another and lack internal democratic mechanisms. There is danger of civil discord between different segments of the society, which will likely differ in how to address societal needs and what the future of Egypt should be. Recent attacks against Coptic Christians in Egypt have signaled some of the other societal problems in the country. More radical groups in the country might deepen the already sharply defined divides. The chaos and disorder that are likely to follow recent events will provide more opportunities for these groups to further undermine security and divide the society. Outside groups may find new opportunities to manipulate these groups as well.

Furthermore, there is no strong charismatic leader that can lead the movement. One person that emerged as a possible leader is Mohamed El Baradei. After receiving his law degree in the U.S., Baradei served in the UN and was present at the Camp David talks. He also served as the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency. He is the closest to the West among the potential future leaders of Egypt and has strong diplomatic skills. He also received the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize. However, he is not a very charismatic leader. He lacks popular support from certain segments of the society, as he has been living abroad until his retirement last year. Still he is the candidate that seems to unite different opposition groups at the moment.

Sheikh Gamal Qutb of the Muslim Brotherhood, who served as the Head of the Fatwa (religious pronouncement) Committee at the distinguished Al-Azhar Islamic Seminary in Cairo, is another name that appeared as a potential new leader. Supporting the protests, Qutb stated that demonstrations help direct governments to the right path. But the protests have not taken on an Islamic color and initial fears of the West that this is an Islamic revolution—and that Islamic groups hostile towards the West and Israel, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, will take over—has not been realized. Islamic groups have not played a big role in initiating the movement,

though they have tried to seize the opportunity. Currently, they do not receive wide support among the protesters in the street. Protestors have not resorted to Islamic messages, nor have they called for an Islamic government. In fact, in a recent interview with Turkey's *Zaman Newspaper*, the Muslim Brotherhood representative stated that the movement endorses a democratic form of government for Egypt.

Although the Muslim Brotherhood does not have much support from the people at the moment, a democratic election is quite likely to elect some Muslim Brotherhood representatives. This will certainly create tensions between secular and Islamic segments of the society. Egypt will have to find a balance between secular and religious tendencies in the country if it wants to have a healthy democracy supported by a broad segment of its society.

We forecast the following situation in the next 18-months time:

Egypt has openly democratic elections. No one-party will emerge with an outright majority. Democratic centrists, led by El Baradei and similar secular liberal intellectuals, will lead a coalition government. Some important government positions, perhaps including the Foreign Ministry, will be held by Islamic parties. They will be modeled on Turkey, so they will be democratic but populist. They will maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, but will be very vocal in their criticism of Israeli policies toward the Palestinians. The Egyptian military will push to maintain close ties with the United States, but the new government may call for a re-evaluation of the relationship.

In terms of geo-strategy, we anticipate some new developments. The United States may be selective and strategic in providing its aid to Egypt. Israel, unnerved by the "loss" of its partner, may push for an agreement with Syria, in order to find a "substitute" stable neighbor to replace Egypt. In other words, the Israelis will feel that Syrian President Bashar Assad is a moderate "strongman" whom they must deal with (The Israeli opposition leader Tzipi Livini has already said that Israel must make peace with its neighbors immediately, in order to stem the tide of instability that has emerged from the challenge to the Mubarak regime in Egypt). Similar progress may develop with the Palestinian Authority, but it is less likely—given the fact that

there are two Palestinian governments (in the West Bank and Gaza) that cannot agree on a common line or even the principle of negotiation with Israel.

Economically, we believe that U.S. investment in Egypt will decline. This will include both direct U.S. foreign support as well as investment from U.S. multinationals. But other nations, possibly China and Turkey, will “jump in” opportunistically to gain a strategic foothold in the Egyptian market. One challenge for Egyptian Islamic parties modeled on Turkey is that, unlike Turkey, they do not have a strong economic base of support. The Egyptian Islamic parties have the support of some small shop owners, but do not have economic and business networks like the Islamic movement in Turkey. Because of this lack of an economic base that can produce wide-scale investment, the Egyptian Islamic parties may be amenable to multinational investment and joint ventures, in order to create jobs and generate economic growth. They will be predisposed toward Turkish foreign investment, because it is from a “fellow Muslim land.” However, Turkish multinationals do not have the ability to rapidly step in and begin large-scale public works projects like super highways. Rather than deal with U.S. or EU investors (seen as linked to the old regime), Chinese and other investors will likely be approached instead.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of either the Asan Institute for Policy Studies or the United States Institute of Peace.



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