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Egypt: The protests in historical context

LSE Ideas

By Guy Burton

It has been hard to keep up with the current protests in Egypt and what the eventual outcome might be. Indeed, only a few weeks ago, as Tunisians' 'Jasmine revolution' gathered pace, it was not certain it would transfer over to Egypt. When it did it began in an uncoordinated and small-scale way.

By the middle of the week it looked as if the protestors were beginning to take control; Mubarak dismissed his cabinet and then he offered not to stand for re-election later this year. At the same time the army, a key actor, refused to use force against the demonstrators. Then, towards the end of the week, groups supposedly loyal to Mubarak entered the fray, attacking the demonstrators while the army stood by.

A leaderless movement?

What is striking about the demonstrations in Egypt is their popular nature, including people from all walks of life. Much of its organisation and coordination has taken place through the use of mobile phones and social media; supporters within and outside the country have worked around the government's removal of Internet service to find other ways to communicate.

The movement does not appear to have any clear leadership. The former head of the UN atomic energy agency and potential presidential candidate later this year, Mohammed ElBaradei, remains a largely unknown figure inside Egypt. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood, the main opposition group in Egypt for decades, offered support for the movement relatively late.

A dominant state

The protests are against a regime which has dominated the country since the 1952 coup, which brought Gamal Nasser and the army to power. The new government provided hospitals, schools, public housing and infrastructure, but at a price. Egypt became a one-party state with civil and political restrictions on its people. To form trade unions and other organisations required government permission and intervention.

Over the following decades the political restrictions meant that the only significant extra-government actor to emerge in the decades that followed was the clandestine Muslim Brotherhood. It was constantly harassed, with its members regularly locked up.

Rising tensions

What the all-powerful state was unable to control was a changing environment. In the 1950s the government's political restrictions were part of a trade-off which involved more social and economic development. In recent decades however the government has not held to its side of the bargain. Egypt's population has grown and become younger while the economy has not provided sufficient jobs or income. In 1977 Nasser's successor, Sadat, faced riots when the government removed subsidies for bread. His survival was only assured by the army's support.

Sadat's successor, Mubarak, learned from the experience. At the same time Mubarak recognised that more democracy might help increase development and reform. This reflected the changing political context from the 1980s and the end of the Cold War, when liberal democracy and economic growth appeared to trump socialist state planning.

The regime faced a problem though: more democracy meant political uncertainty and the regime's possible demise. It therefore adopted a controlled liberalisation process. In the absence of other political actors, it was the Muslim Brotherhood that emerged as the main opposition. The regime's reaction to this threat was to reverse course during the 1990s and 2000s.

Where next?

The current protests in Egypt suggest that the country may be at a critical juncture. The movement against Mubarak is more than an isolated protest and includes a wide range of people with little direct control by the Muslim Brotherhood. Meanwhile, the regime is ambivalent about greater public participation.



Uprising in Egypt shakes the world. Photo: revolutionarycommunist.org

It is therefore difficult to predict what may happen. There is the 'China option', where the army steps in and uses force against the protestors, as happened in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Yet even if the army remains uncommitted, this will not prevent the violence being carried out by the regime's proxies against the protestors in recent days may. By contrast, if the protestors stand firm and continue to demand that Mubarak go, his departure may not spell an end to the regime; another individual, from within the regime could be brought forward.

If the regime collapsed – by the army withdrawing support – the nature of state-society relations in Egypt would still work against the protestors. The movement would fragment, opening up space for a smaller, more organised and cohesive clique that will benefit – just as Nasser and his fellow mid-ranking officers discovered when they exploited the nationalist uprising in 1952. For the protestors to counter this, they need to ensure that sufficient mechanisms are put in place to enhance the scope, capacity and organisation of civil society in whatever model might follow Mubarak's departure.

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