

## After Mubarak

### The Politics of Modern Military Pharaohs

Ridwan Laher

In recent weeks Egypt has seen perhaps the greatest destabilisation of its political, economic, and social order since the end of the Muhammad Ali Dynasty in 1952. The ouster of President Hosni Mubarak came after an eighteen-day public protest in Cairo's Tahrir Square that garnered the world's attention. Some observers have gone so far as to proclaim the fall of Mubarak as a revolution brought on by public consensus and made possible by social-media technology. This Policy Brief does not discount the influences of public protest and social-media in building the momentum that forced Mubarak out of Kuba Palace. It does, however, press a more traditional approach to viewing what the post-Mubarak era may hold for Egypt. In so doing, the emphasis is on understanding the centrality of the military in modern Egyptian politics. The overall argument is that, through the duration of four presidencies, the military has always sought to consolidate its position of power and privilege in Egypt. In effect, the military is the most powerful political and economic sector of Egypt. The post-Mubarak era will not be any more likely to engage in democratic reforms because the military is unlikely to give up its monopoly of power and privilege. South Africa and its allies must, therefore, act multilaterally to force the military's hand towards democratic reform. Such action will necessarily require drawing together continental and international governments, including the United States (US), to pressure the military towards reform.

#### Introduction

On Friday, 18 February 2011, an estimated two million Egyptian citizens gathered in Cairo's Tahrir Square to celebrate the fall of eighty-two

year old President Hosni Mubarak. Just eight days earlier, Mubarak issued a defiant warning that he intended to stay in power until his term in office had ended.<sup>1</sup> His defiance in the face of growing instability and global scrutiny brought to mind

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the similarly defiant posture adopted by South African President P.W. Botha in his 1985 'Crossing the Rubicon' speech.<sup>2</sup> Both speeches were highly anticipated and watched by audiences across the globe and both had the inevitable effect of leaving hopeful audiences dismayed and deflated.

But Mubarak's fortunes following his speech would change much faster and more dramatically than those of Botha. In a move that stunned the world, Mubarak ended up relinquishing his power to the Egyptian military the very next day. This remarkable reversal of positions caught most political observers off-guard as very few among them, if any, could claim to have predicted this quick turnaround. All of a sudden, the face of Egyptian politics had changed. The protesters in Tahrir Square who had waged an eighteen-day protest calling for Mubarak to step down were elated. Compelling scenes of jubilation were broadcast in real time via television and social media instruments like Twitter and Facebook, and an assortment of blogging platforms.<sup>3</sup> Mubarak's fall from power became a global event much like the fall of Tunisia's President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali less than a month earlier. Speculation was rife, and not unduly so, that a growing people's protest movement in North Africa could have consequences for other Arab states such as Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup>

Though the intensity of jubilation in Egypt has barely subsided, there are some pressing questions that must be asked about the depth and quality of change that Mubarak's exit from Kuba Palace has brought. While it is certainly clear that his three-decade long grasp on power is over, it is also equally unclear whether the militarised police state he kept in place is willing, or even able, to change. Furthermore, it is very pertinent to wonder about the timing of Mubarak's fall – and the same is true for Tunisia's Ben Ali. What is it about this time in North African politics that has brought about the demise of these two strongmen?

Some political observers point to the power of social media to harness and direct the collective energy of protestors. What happened in Tahrir Square is said to be a Twitter and Facebook revolution enabled by the global reach of the internet and cell phones. The instantaneous quality of these technologies and the built-in ability to capture, collectivise, and broadcast protest into literal movements for change is what explains the timing and peaceful character of the leaderless revolution in Egypt. This argument is stretched further to explain the cross-national effect of protests from Tunisia to Egypt and on to Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain. The spread and influence of protest from

one Arab nation-state to another is seen to be an organic movement towards democratic reform, enabled by technology savvy protestors.<sup>5</sup>

These claims are interesting but have yet to be tested, and are speculative at best. It is certain that analysts will, for many years to come, spend time remarking on the role of social media in directing and capturing the revolt in Tahrir Square. But, even as we grapple with the meaning and influence of social media and cell phones on the content of protest, we must not lose sight of the mainstay influence that power and interests have on determining political outcomes and regime shifts. Mubarak may have been the powerful figurehead and symbol of despotic and corrupt rule in Egypt, but he is not the system that sustained the undemocratic nature of the Egyptian regime. The system he created and ran over three decades is still very much in place and, ironically, hidden from the purview of Twitter, Facebook and blogs. It is, therefore, imperative to depersonalise what has occurred in Egypt and to engage in a more traditional political analysis that is systemically focused on the politics of power and interests.

Any serious analysis of shifts in power must ask why they have happened. Egypt is no exception to this rule. To begin an analysis of power and interests, it is necessary to recognise that the military is the very centre of political power in the modern Egyptian nation-state. Mubarak was a military leader and he never strayed too far from its power structure. Most of his cabinet and close political allies were drawn from the military. In these contexts, it is not surprising that he handed over power to the military and not to the parliament, or more precisely the speaker of parliament, as the constitution required.

This raises three interrelated questions: Is the demise of Mubarak a sign of shifting political power and interests inside Egypt? Second, what can we expect from the re-emergence of naked military rule in Egypt? And finally, what are the prospects for democratic reform in the post-Mubarak era? This policy brief will address these questions in keeping with the Africa Institute of South Africa's mandate to contribute to the policy discussions and debates that are important to the South African government.

## **The Politics and Ethos of Military Power in Egypt**

Key to understanding the political stakes in Egypt is an appraisal of the protracted presence and overwhelming might of the military in Egyptian

affairs. Over the last six decades the military has been the most powerful influence on Egyptian politics, society and national identity. It was a bloodless military coup that put an end to one-hundred-and-fifty years of monarchical rule under the Muhammad Ali Dynasty. King Farouk, who was considered by many to be a British stooge, fled into exile and the coup to this day is celebrated as the 1952 Egyptian Revolution. It is a historical moment which marks the emergence of modern Egypt.<sup>6</sup>

The officers who led the coup belonged to the Free Officers Movement and were relatively junior military men. Their fortunes would, nonetheless change dramatically. Among the coup leaders were General Muhammad Naguib and Army Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser. These two men, starting with Naguib, would go on to become the first two post-monarchy presidents of Egypt. Their rise to power and the presidency would set a precedent for Egyptian politics. That precedent is that every president since the end of monarchical rule has been drawn out of the military. In effect, modern Egyptian politics, society and national identity, have been shaped by the powerful influence of the military.

Although the role of the military is undeniable, it would be an oversimplification to assume that the politics and direction adopted by various presidents have not been contested from inside and outside the military. President Naguib soon found out that his leadership was being challenged by his coup comrade, Nasser. In fact, Naguib's time in office was cut relatively short by his running battles with Nasser over the control of the military. When Naguib started losing control of the military it was Nasser who forced him to resign just four years after becoming president. Nasser immediately seized the presidency in 1956 and banished Naguib into forced isolation in a Cairo suburb where he remained until 1972.

Nasser's rise to power was swift and dramatic and imbued with grandiose calls for a modernised society based on socialist principals which he defended as being aligned with Islam. He was an ardent proponent of pan-Arab Nationalism and decidedly anti-Western in his global political stance. At home Nasser consolidated military power over any semblance of domestic politics by banning all political parties. In their place he instituted the Liberation Rally which was meant to take the place of political parties. Nasser also put all of the state media organs under his control and cut off any access to anyone he perceived as an enemy.

Nasser's fate, and that of Egypt, would change very dramatically in 1967 when Israel attacked

Egypt, killing more than three thousand military personnel. The military strike allowed Israel to move swiftly through the Sinai Peninsula to the Suez Canal, which was the actual bone of contention. Nasser was devastated by the outcome of the so called 'Six- Day War'. He apologised to the Egyptian nation and even resigned the presidency, but was persuaded to return to office by both military and public supporters. Despite vowing revenge on Israel, Nasser was never the same and on 29 September 1970 he died a defeated man.<sup>7</sup>

General Anwar Sadat, who was a minister in Nasser's government and a close confidant, took office from 1970 through to 1981. Sadat became the third president, and he was able to do what Nasser could not. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Sadat waged a successful military campaign that liberated the Sinai Peninsula from Israeli occupation. Israel's defeat led to the reopening of the Suez Canal, which was the centrepiece of Egypt's economy. The closure of the Suez Canal over six years after the 1967 war had taken a devastating toll on the Egyptian economy. Sadat's victory shattered the myth of Israel's invincibility, but the region remained tense. The United States under President Jimmy Carter then brokered the Camp David Accords, which were held in secret, in 1978. The Camp David Accords led to the signing of the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty by Sadat and Israel's Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

Sadat's signing of the peace treaty with Israel was condemned by many in the Arab world and members of his military. The leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), Yasser Arafat, described the treaty as a 'false peace'. In 1978 Sadat and Begin were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their combined efforts to bring peace. This added to the frustration of many Arab nations and Egyptian citizens who thought that Sadat had sold Egypt's interests. The Arab League was so incensed by Sadat that it banned Egypt from membership in 1979. Within the Egyptian military, Sadat's status had been severely tarnished. He had made mortal enemies both inside and outside of the military, and the power balance was shifting. On 6 October 1981, he was assassinated by a military man, Lt. Khalid al-Islambouli. General Hosni Mubarak was at the time of the assassination a close confidant of President Sadat and vice-president. It is said that Mubarak was injured in the assassination of President Sadat but that he was spared by Lt. Khalid al-Islambouli.<sup>8</sup>

The 1952 Egyptian Revolution was three decades old when Sadat was laid to rest. In that time it had seen three presidents who never strayed too far from the military base. The military remained

front and central in the politics of Egypt even as the fortunes of each president waned with the passage of time. Despite the respected demise of each president, the torch of power was passed without much disruption to the power base and interests of the military. There was never a time when the power and interests of the military were seriously challenged from outside. A major reason for this can be attributed to the overall restriction on civilian political participation. In effect, military rule was undemocratic, with each president being decidedly autocratic. It is from within this hegemonic political culture and military ethos that General Mubarak rose to become the fourth president of Egypt.

### **Mubarak Consolidates the Role of the Military in Egyptian Politics**

General Mubarak's rise to power in the military was not unlike those of his presidential predecessors. He was a pilot in the Egyptian Air Force who fought in the wars with Israel in 1967 and 1973 and rose through the ranks to become Air Chief Marshall. His premier position in the military led to his becoming a close confidant of President Sadat. His loyalty paid off when in 1975 he was appointed to the office of the Vice-President of Egypt by Sadat. Mubarak served loyally under Sadat, and was even entrusted to represent Egypt in the international arena.

Sadat's increasing unpopularity inside the military did not rub off on Mubarak. Instead, it was Mubarak who moved swiftly to reassert the authority of a military presidency. He used his military power base to consolidate the interests of the military in Egyptian politics even while he paid lip service to democratising the nation-state. Mubarak did, however, stand out from his three predecessors in the extent to which he positioned the military in terms of political, economic and societal visibility. He did this through a process of civilianisation that saw him elected – though not without managing the election and manipulating the electorate – to the post of civilian president. Nonetheless, like his predecessors, Mubarak never strayed too far from the military presidency role he inherited. Most of his cabinet members and political confidants were drawn from the power base within the military.<sup>9</sup>

Once in office as a civilian president, Mubarak extolled the virtues of a democratic government while implementing draconian control measures over his people. A constitutional order was implemented with the view of keeping Mubarak in power through a host of emergency laws that prohibited marked individuals and political groups/

parties from engaging in the political sphere. This included two elections, the first and the second, where no candidate other than Mubarak was allowed to run for office. After the first two elections Mubarak used the police and the military to repress political dissent, which allowed him to be elected repeatedly to the office of president.

Mubarak used the military and the police to keep political activism and media coverage severely repressed.<sup>10</sup> He instructed the military to police and arrest people who were suspected dissidents. People were prohibited from demonstrating or striking for their rights. Mubarak prohibited gatherings of more than five people at a time throughout the three decades of his rule. He fashioned his massive Ministry of Interior to spy on civilians and anyone else he suspected of sedition. Few personal liberties were afforded to Egyptians as every aspect of civil society was heavily policed. Those who dared to cross Mubarak and his generals, such as the banned Muslim Brotherhood, were spared no mercy and marched off to prisons where they were tortured and made to languish alongside thousands of other political prisoners without recourse to courts or any semblance of democratic justice.<sup>11</sup>

Under these political conditions Mubarak's regime was nothing more than a front for the usual military excesses. His autocratic rule drew billions of dollars from the United States which acted to keep Egypt a key ally in its Middle East foreign policy strategy. In turn, Mubarak did not threaten Israel and he honoured the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty by not becoming entangled in the Palestinian struggle for independence. To keep his regime strong, the US armed and trained the Egyptian military without paying heed to the undemocratic substance of Mubarak's rule. Mubarak even collaborated with President George W. Bush in the War on Terror. His loyalty was rewarded. Bush remarked that he considered Mubarak a personal and generous friend. In effect, the United States, over three decades of Mubarak's rule, turned a blind eye to the massive wealth that he extracted for himself and his loyal generals.<sup>12</sup>

President Barack Obama did little to alter the tenor of foreign relations between Mubarak and Washington right up to the resignation of Mubarak.<sup>13</sup> In fact, his administration, like those before him, considered Mubarak a friend and ally of the United States. Obama, like his predecessors, did not point to the undemocratic excesses of the Mubarak regime.<sup>14</sup> The strength of the military and its influence over Egyptian affairs was obviously considered to be a good and sound policy

for Middle-Eastern control. Mubarak's emphatic policing of any dissent was ignored in large part because he portrayed any and all dissidents as "Islamists" who stood in the way of a secular and democratic Egypt. But even as the War on Terror began to unravel for the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan and beyond, Mubarak's fortunes also began to change for the worse.

### Handing over Power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces

It is too early to be certain about the internal contexts that led to the resignation of President Mubarak. His defiance in his speech of 10 February, in retrospect, implied an uncertainty. He must have thought that he would be allowed to hold onto power by the generals who had previously supported him and the military to which he remained loyal. It is obvious that Mubarak had miscalculated. His departure and handing over power to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces and not the civilian parliament signalled a familiar consolidation of political power and interests by the military. Some have argued that Mubarak was pushed, and that his handing over power represents a bloodless coup.<sup>15</sup> This argument is not compelling and is somewhat sensationalist.

Mubarak's exit from power, like his rise to power, is consistent with the manner in which the military has run and controlled the politics of Egypt since 1952. Whatever the dimensions of crisis Mubarak may have faced, he opted to reassert the primacy of the military. Members of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces served in his cabinet and the rest hold senior positions in the military. In fact, his vice-president, Omar Suleiman, the former Intelligence Chief, is a loyal military man who announced on 11 February that Mubarak would be stepping down and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces would be taking over from him.<sup>16</sup>

What we are witnessing is a consolidation of military power and interests. The leader of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, is a former Minister of Defence and he has long been considered to be the successor to Mubarak. In fact, in 1995 a failed assassination attempt on Mubarak's life raised Tantawi's profile as the successor to Mubarak. The 75-year-old Tantawi is a loyal military man who has been closely associated with Mubarak, and his rise to what is now the effective or de facto president does not represent a hostile break or coup. Like his predecessors before him, Tantawi has acted swiftly to consolidate military power in Egyptian political affairs. He has suspended

the constitution and dissolved both houses of parliament. Tantawi can also be seen to be getting tough on strikers as Egypt's economy stalls. The Supreme Council of Armed Forces has issued a warning to strikers to desist their disruption of the economy.<sup>17</sup>

It is very likely that in the coming weeks the military will clamp down even harder on what they perceive to be a disruption of national life. As it stands right now, there is a promise from Tantawi that elections will be held in six months. Whether we will see elections in July 2011 is not certain. Much needs to happen and take shape before the military will call a general election. And, even if an election is called, there will need to be a lot of scrutiny of who is eligible to run for political power, and why, and how. The latter question is particularly important because Egypt has never had a civilian-dominated political process. Even where Mubarak feigned a civilian political system, it is hardly surprising that the military trumps the parliament in the political interest game. This does not bode well for any semblance of democratisation. The military has proven time and again that it will not tolerate any political interference in its domination of the political and economic realms.

### Conclusion

The recent events in Egypt which led to the fall of President Mubarak confirm that the military is the key player and overwhelming stakeholder in the political life of Egypt. The rise of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces under the leadership of Field Marshal Mohamed Tantawi must be viewed as a consolidation of political power and interests that is in keeping with military rule since the 1952 Egyptian Revolution. It is not of paramount importance to know the exact details behind the reverse decision of Mubarak to exit Kuba Palace and go into retirement in Sharm-El-Sheikh. The fact that Mubarak has effectively faded from public view confirms that he is of little relevance to the unfolding processes. Mubarak, health permitting, will live quietly and unseen like General Mohammed Naguib who was exiled internally by President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The precedent is clear.

What is also most probable is that the military will re-focus its energies to bring Egypt under its control once more. The protests and strikes that have characterised recent events are a credible threat to reasserting absolute control. The military cannot allow for a deepening of political dissent

and protest. Its history is, after all, steeped in controlling dissent and banishing protest. For these reasons, the events unfolding in Egypt are far from over. The protestors have won credible recognition and the world is watching closely. The military, for its part, has remained distant from overtly and expressly clamping down on protestors and strikers. That aspect will have to change if the military is to move beyond the present historical moment.

It is, therefore, important that policymakers in South Africa recognise just how arduous and challenging a road lies ahead in Egypt if true democratic values are to be imbued into the overall system. Military rule in Egypt has always been undemocratic and removed from the overall welfare of its rank and file citizenry. This is, nonetheless, a momentous time in the evolution of Egyptian politics because it offers an opportunity to reverse this longstanding undemocratic tradition. The citizens of Egypt have arisen en masse to signal their desire for drastic democratic reform, and the peaceful reception of their demands suggests that the military is open to negotiation. The moment must be seized before it passes.

South Africa, as a constitutional human rights based democracy, must act to put pressure on Tantawi to engage the representatives of the people. Popular leaders like the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohammed Mustafa el Baradei, for example, must be engaged to negotiate a transition towards democratisation. Such a process must be aimed at depoliticising the military and civilianising the political process. This will not be an easy task. The military is powerful and the support that it has garnered from the United States over three decades of Mubarak makes it a formidable part of the economy. For this reason, pressure towards democratic reform will necessarily need to be multilateral. South Africa must engage the United States and other key players in Egypt's economy to place pressure on Tantawi to hand over political power to an elected civilian government.

At the regional level it remains a matter of great concern that the African Union (AU) has been so distant and silent on what has transpired in Egypt. The same is true for the violent fallout that is currently taking place in Libya. It is imperative that South Africa place pressure on the AU to fulfil its continental mandate to ensure that, whatever happens in Egypt, it will be in keeping with the African Charter on Human Rights. South Africa should also act to pressure the United Nations to ensure that human rights and state obligations, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are implemented and observed.

Failure to act multilaterally at the international and continental levels will reduce the amount of leverage that the global community has over the outcome of Mubarak's fall from power. Any such failure to pressurise towards democratic reform will be a devastating and destructive blow to the momentum on the streets and in the hearts of the vast majority of citizens who mostly subsist outside the all-powerful military.

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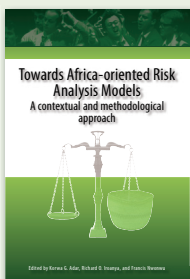
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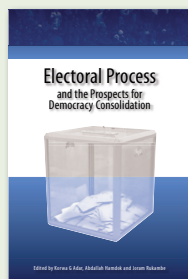
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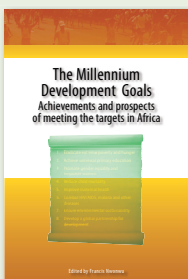
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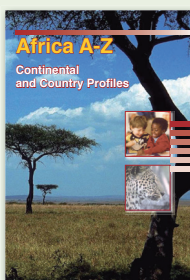
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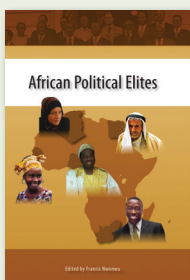
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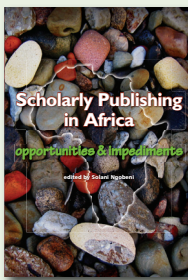
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