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## Egypt: The Distance Between Enthusiasm and Reality

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On Feb. 11, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned. A military council was named to govern in his place. On Feb. 11-12, the crowds that had gathered in Tahrir Square celebrated Mubarak's fall and the triumph of democracy in Egypt. On Feb. 13, the military council abolished the constitution and dissolved parliament, promising a new constitution to be ratified by a referendum and stating that the military would rule for six months, or until the military decides it's ready to hold parliamentary and presidential elections.

What we see is that while Mubarak is gone, the military regime in which he served has dramatically increased its power. This isn't incompatible with democratic reform. Organizing elections, political parties and candidates is not something that can be done quickly. If the military is sincere in its intentions, it will have to do these things. The problem is that if the military is insincere it will do exactly the same things. Six months is a long time, passions can subside and promises can be forgotten.

At this point, we simply don't know what will happen. We do know what has happened. Mubarak is out of office, the military regime remains intact and it is stronger than ever. This is not surprising, given what was said about recent events in Egypt, but the reality of what has happened in the last 72 hours and the interpretation that much of the world has placed on it are startlingly different. Power rests with the regime, not with the crowds. In our view, the crowds never had nearly as much power as many have claimed.

Certainly, there was a large crowd concentrated in a square in Cairo, and there were demonstrations in other cities. But the crowd was limited. It never got to be more than 300,000

people or so in Tahrir Square, and while that's a lot of people, it is nothing like the crowds that turned out during the 1989 risings in Eastern Europe or the 1979 revolution in Iran. Those were massive social convulsions in which millions came out onto the streets. The crowd in Cairo never swelled to the point that it involved a substantial portion of the city.

In a genuine revolution, the police and military cannot contain the crowds. In Egypt, the military chose not to confront the demonstrators, not because the military itself was split, but because it agreed with the demonstrators' core demand: getting rid of Mubarak. And since the military was the essence of the Egyptian regime, it is odd to consider this a revolution.

### Mubarak and the Regime

The crowd in Cairo, as telegenic as it was, was the backdrop to the drama, not the main feature. The main drama began months ago when it became apparent that Mubarak intended to make his reform-minded 47-year-old son, Gamal, lacking in military service, president of Egypt. This represented a direct challenge to the regime. In a way, Mubarak was the one trying to overthrow the regime.

The Egyptian regime was founded in a coup led by Col. Gamal Abdul Nasser and modeled after that of Kemal Ataturk of Turkey, basing it on the military. It was intended to be a secular regime with democratic elements, but it would be guaranteed and ultimately controlled by the military. Nasser believed that the military was the most modern and progressive element of Egyptian society and that it had to be given the responsibility and power to modernize Egypt.

While Nasser took off his uniform, the military remained the bulwark of the regime. Each successive president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, while formally elected in elections of varying dubiousness, was an officer in the Egyptian military who had removed his uniform when he entered political life.

Mubarak's decision to name his son represented a direct challenge to the Egyptian regime. Gamal Mubarak was not a career military officer, nor was he linked to the military's high command, which had been the real power in the regime. Mubarak's desire to have his son succeed him appalled and enraged the Egyptian military, the defender of the regime. If he were to be appointed, then the military regime would be replaced by, in essence, a hereditary monarchy — what had ruled Egypt before the military. Large segments of the military had been maneuvering to block Mubarak's ambitions and, with increasing intensity, wanted to see Mubarak step down in order to pave the way for an orderly succession using the elections scheduled for September, elections designed to affirm the regime by selecting a figure acceptable to the senior military men. Mubarak's insistence on Gamal and his unwillingness to step down created a crisis for the regime. The military feared the regime could not survive Mubarak's ambitions.

This is the key point to understand. There is a critical distinction between the regime and Hosni Mubarak. The regime consisted — and consists — of complex institutions centered on the military but also including the civilian bureaucracy controlled by the military. Hosni Mubarak was the leader of the regime, successor to Nasser and Sadat, who over time came to distinguish

his interests from those of the regime. He was increasingly seen as a threat to the regime, and the regime turned on him.

The demonstrators never called for the downfall of the regime. They demanded that Mubarak step aside. This was the same demand that was being made by many if not most officers in the military months before the crowds gathered in the streets. The military did not like the spectacle of the crowds, which is not the way the military likes to handle political matters. At the same time, paradoxically, the military welcomed the demonstrations, since they created a crisis that put the question of Mubarak's future on the table. They gave the military an opportunity to save the regime and preserve its own interests.

The Egyptian military is opaque. It isn't clear who was reluctant to act and who was eager. We would guess that the people who now make up the ruling military council were reluctant to act. They were of the same generation as Hosni Mubarak, owed their careers to him and were his friends. Younger officers, who had joined the military after 1973 and had trained with the Americans rather than the Soviets, were the likely agitators for blocking Mubarak's selection of Gamal as his heir, but there were also senior officers publicly expressing reservations. Who was on what side is a guess. What is known is that many in the military opposed Gamal, would not push the issue to a coup, and then staged a coup designed to save the regime after the demonstrations in Cairo were under way.

That is the point. What happened was not a revolution. The demonstrators never brought down Mubarak, let alone the regime. What happened was a military coup that used the cover of protests to force Mubarak out of office in order to preserve the regime. When it became clear Feb. 10 that Mubarak would not voluntarily step down, the military staged what amounted to a coup to force his resignation. Once he was forced out of office, the military took over the existing regime by creating a military council and taking control of critical ministries. The regime was always centered on the military. What happened on Feb. 11 was that the military took direct control.

Again, as a guess, the older officers, friends of Mubarak, found themselves under pressure from other officers and the United States to act. They finally did, taking the major positions for themselves. The demonstrations were the backdrop for this drama and the justification for the military's actions, but they were not a revolution in the streets. It was a military coup designed to preserve a military-dominated regime. And that was what the crowds were demanding as well.

### Coup and Revolution

We now face the question of whether the coup will turn into a revolution. The demonstrators demanded — and the military has agreed to hold — genuinely democratic elections and to stop repression. It is not clear that the new leaders mean what they have said or were simply saying it to get the crowds to go home. But there are deeper problems in the democratization of Egypt. First, Mubarak's repression had wrecked civil society. The formation of coherent political parties able to find and run candidates will take a while. Second, the military is deeply enmeshed in running the country. Backing them out of that position, with the best will in the world, will require time. The military bought time Feb. 13, but it is not clear that six months is enough time,

and it is not clear that, in the end, the military will want to leave the position it has held for more than half a century.

Of course, there is the feeling, as there was in 2009 with the Tehran demonstrations, that something unheard of has taken place, as U.S. President Barack Obama has implied. It is said to have something to do with Twitter and Facebook. We should recall that, in our time, genuine revolutions that destroyed regimes took place in 1989 and 1979, the latter even before there were PCs. Indeed, such revolutions go back to the 18th century. None of them required smartphones, and all of them were more thorough and profound than what has happened in Egypt so far. This revolution will not be “Twitterized.” The largest number of protesters arrived in Tahrir Square after the Internet was completely shut down.

The new government has promised to honor all foreign commitments, which obviously include the most controversial one in Egypt, the treaty with Israel. During the celebrations the evening of Feb. 11 and morning of Feb. 12, the two chants were about democracy and Palestine. While the regime committed itself to maintaining the treaty with Israel, the crowds in the square seemed to have other thoughts, not yet clearly defined. But then, it is not clear that the demonstrators in the square represent the wishes of 80 million Egyptians. For all the chatter about the Egyptian people demanding democracy, the fact is that hardly anyone participated in the demonstrations, relative to the number of Egyptians there are, and no one really knows how the Egyptian people would vote on this issue.

The Egyptian government is hardly in a position to confront Israel, even if it wanted to. The Egyptian army has mostly American equipment and cannot function if the Americans don't provide spare parts or contractors to maintain that equipment. There is no Soviet Union vying to replace the United States today. Re-equipping and training a military the size of Egypt's is measured in decades, not weeks. Egypt is not going to war any time soon. But then the new rulers have declared that all prior treaties — such as with Israel — will remain in effect.

What Was Achieved?

Therefore, we face this reality. The Egyptian regime is still there, still controlled by old generals. They are committed to the same foreign policy as the man they forced out of office. They have promised democracy, but it is not clear that they mean it. If they mean it, it is not clear how they would do it, certainly not in a timeframe of a few months. Indeed, this means that the crowds may re-emerge demanding more rapid democratization, depending on who organized the crowds in the first place and what their intentions are now.

It is not that nothing happened in Egypt, and it is not that it isn't important. It is simply that what happened was not what the media portrayed but a much more complex process, most of it not viewable on TV. Certainly, there was nothing unprecedented in what was achieved or how it was achieved. It is not even clear what was achieved. Nor is it clear that anything that has happened changes Egyptian foreign or domestic policy. It is not even clear that those policies could be changed in practical terms regardless of intent.

The week began with an old soldier running Egypt. It ended with different old soldiers running Egypt with even more formal power than Mubarak had. This has caused worldwide shock and awe. We were killjoys in 2009, when we said the Iranians revolution wasn't going anywhere. We do not want to be killjoys now, since everyone is so excited and happy. But we should point out that, in spite of the crowds, nothing much has really happened yet in Egypt. It doesn't mean that it won't, but it hasn't yet.

An 82-year-old man has been thrown out of office, and his son will not be president. The constitution and parliament are gone and a military junta is in charge. The rest is speculation.