NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Egyptian uprising 'far beyond what people expected'

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Jan. 31, 2011

A water cannon blasts a protester holding an Egyptian flag during clashes in Cairo, Egypt, Jan. 28. (CNS photo/Yannis Behrakis, Reuters)

Events in the Middle East and North Africa have been unfolding at a dizzying pace over the past month -- a revolt in Tunisia, the release of a cache of confidential Palestinian records with their damning revelations on the Mideast peace process, the fall of a pro-Western government in Lebanon, and now the uprising in Egypt.

Monday morning, amid ever-changing reports on the protests in Egypt, *NCR* spoke with John Esposito, a professor of religion and international affairs and Islamic studies at Georgetown University, and author of *The Future of Islam*. Esposito is currently in Oman. The following is an edited version of that phone conversation.

***NCR*: Can you talk about the Egyptian popular uprising in the context of what has been happening in the region over the past month?**

Esposito: Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia are countries that have governments that are authoritarian, repressive, very limited freedom of the press, etc.

In Egypt, you have to remember many young people have grown up and known only one president, and one restrictive, repressive system. It has a bad economy. For years, there has been a growing gap between rich and poor, high level of corruption, and increasingly a more aggressive policy. As a result, for many Egyptians, there is a feeling of no future. Many Egyptians have had runs in with the police who are very brutal. People feel, as a nation, as well as a people, as if they don?t get any respect. They feel humiliated by their own government.

The example in Tunisia became a stimulus. Because [in Egypt], there were opposition movements in the streets during two elections- parliamentary and national. So the discontent was there. The question was how to express it.

And what of the American response? Why do you think the U.S. seems blindsided by the Egyptian uprising?

Part of is that you have a consistent policy of administrations, whether Democrat or Republican, supporting

authoritarian regimes and doing it not because we like them but because we think it is in our national interests, i.e., we can count on them and get what we want. Whereas if you have elections, you can never be sure who is going to come in and how independently-minded they might be vis-à-vis our interests.

While we say we stand for democracy in general, up until several years into the George W. Bush presidency we never bothered to promote democracy in the Middle East. In fact, one of Bush?s senior officials, Richard Haas, gave a major speech just before America went into Iraq in which he acknowledged that all administrations, including George W. Bush in his early years, had practiced what they called ?democratic exceptionalism.?

The challenge for the Obama administration was not simply to balance support for an authoritarian regime versus any other option, because we could not be sure who was going to be elected. But ultimately, the choice they should have known we were going to have to make was to figure out a way to deal with one, rather than the other, to the extent that they could. And they just weren?t ready for it.

What do you mean by ?democratic exceptionalism??

In the post Cold War period, the United States aggressively promoted democracy in Eastern Europe, all over the world, to the extent that it could. The US did not do that in the Middle East, as a matter of policy.

Why?

Because they saw it in their national interests -- access to oil, the security of Israel -- to continue to support Tunisian president Bin Ali and Mubarak in Egypt. They could count on them when it came time to take positions that we considered amenable with regard to Palestine and Israel. We could count on them much more than we could count on free and fair elections.

We were worried about Islamic parties coming to power. The irony here is that if you opened up the political system, as in Tunisia, for example, where you?ve got multiple parties, the Islamists parties will not do nearly as well as they did when they ran against the government ten or fifteen years ago when they were the only viable opposition party. People, who voted for them, were not only their supporters but people who wanted to vote against the government.

If they were a popular election in Egypt, how do you predict the Islamists would fare?

It?s hard to predict. If they were an open political system in Egypt, you would certainly have multiple parties. You have plenty of people in Egypt who want a secular government and don?t want to see an Islamist party in power.

The Muslim Brotherhood also does enjoy a lot of support. But if you look at the demonstrations in the street, this was not led by the Muslim Brotherhood. This was led by a very diverse group.

There is not certitude the Muslim Brotherhood would come to power. And if they did, the reality is, given the magnitude of repression under Mubarak, what are we talking about?

People are acting like we don?t know what the alternative would be. Did we know exactly what Bin Ali was? He was a guy who came to power with somebody who was a dictator for life. Bin Ali ran the Tunisian Interior Ministry which arrested and tortured people. He came to power in a coup d?état. He promised democracy. When he didn?t like the results, he arrested the opposition or drove them into exile and won the next election by 99.1 percent of the vote.

So are you saying that out of fear of the unknown, the U.S. has tolerated pretty bad stuff?

Absolutely. That?s the reality. Everybody?s known it. There have been many human rights reports throughout the years, including reports by the U.S. government, that talked about the level of repression, the torture that went on in Egyptian prisons, and also that they had not had clean elections.

Do you think Mubarak is going to hold onto power?

I don?t know. I don?t think anybody expected the Egyptians to go the way of Tunisia. Mubarak?s military and police have always been overwhelming and able to keep things down.

While there was great dislike for Mubarak, people had grown up in a culture of repression and knew that if you step up, you?ll get slapped down. But things have gone far beyond what people expected.

Editor's Note: Claire Schaeffer-Duffy will be interviewing experts on Mideastern politics throughout the week. Check back to NCRonline [1] for more. For a sampling of photos of the unrest in Egypt, see the slideshow of CNS photos below.

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