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Democratic Egypt 'best thing possible' for US policy

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Feb. 10, 2011

A Christian supporter of pro-democracy actions in Egypt carries a crucifix amid the crowd in Tahrir Square in Cairo Feb. 9. (CNS photo/Yannis Behrakis, Reuters)

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak defied demonstrators request that he resign today, saying in a speech he "can not and will not accept to be dictated orders from outside." Amid reports of the demonstrations spreading yesterday, *NCR* asked Stephen Zunes, a professor of politics and international studies at the University of San Francisco and chair of their program in Middle East studies, for his take on the upheaval in the North African nation.

Zunes also serves as senior policy analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus, a project of the Institute for Policy Studies and chairs the academic advisory committee for the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. He is the author of *Nonviolent Social Movements* and *Tinderbox: US Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism*.

Following is our conversation, edited for length and clarity.

***NCR*:We are now in the third week in a stand-off between Egyptian protestors and the Mubarak regime. The government has reportedly made some reforms, and yet, the pro-democracy activists in Tahrir Square are saying this is not enough. What do you think could happen here?**

Zunes: I don?t see how these minor reforms are going to satisfy the protesters. I think ultimately they won?t satisfy the Egyptian people either. They are talking about democracy -- which is impossible under the current regime. They did not demand reforms within the current system.

Even if Mubarak goes, and presumably someone like Suleiman comes to power, there are going to be continued protests. He is head of the dreaded secret police. He?s the torturer-in-chief.

This is not to say that it is going to be an all-or-nothing situation where the protesters get defeated, or they acquiesce to these minor reforms and that?s it. Presumably, it is going to be something more protracted.

And what of the Obama administration?s response over the past two weeks?

In many ways, [Obama] has been playing catch-up. When things began, the statements coming from Vice President Biden and Secretary of State Clinton were pretty ambiguous, saying both sides should show restraint and ?yeah, yeah, let?s have some reforms.?

But as the movement grew, I think what it came down to is Obama deciding he didn?t want to be on the wrong side of history. And so, he started talking in terms of a transition to democracy, not just reforms within, but a transition to a democratic system.

While personally, I think it has been too little too late. One area that I give Obama credit for is that he has really stressed not engaging in repression. I don?t think there is much question that somewhere along the line, he made it clear that if the regime did a Tiananmen-Square-style massacre, using U.S. equipment, they could forget about 1.3 billion dollars in annual military aid and other security cooperation. That was certainly a disincentive on the Egyptian military.

But I also think Obama recognizes that if there is going to be change, its going to have to be by the Egyptian people themselves. The more space that is guaranteed the Egyptian people to organize, to protest, the better the transition is going to be.

If there is severe repression, people go underground. Then some of the radical Islamists really might become influential in the anti-Mubarak struggle. Not to mention that it would look pretty bad in Egypt and around the Middle East if there was American equipment killing everybody.

To Obama?s credit, unlike Bush and some others who tended to emphasize elections which could easily be manipulated or stolen, Obama has a more agency view of human rights. He has a much stronger emphasis on freedom of the press or internet, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech -- because he really sees those as the driving force for building democracy from the ground up.

What about this fear in the West and Israel that if there is no Mubarak in Egypt, its going to be the Muslim Brotherhood in charge, or turn into another Islamist state like Iran?

Civil society in Egypt today is much, much stronger than it was in Iran in 1979.

In Iran, you had the ayatollahs, and Shia Islam. You had this hierarchy and this strong organization that they can mobilize to their benefit. Sunni Islam, which is practiced in Egypt, is de-centralized, egalitarian. The Brotherhood, or the clerics, don?t have that kind of organizational structure.

Also, the merchant class in Iran was allied with the clerics, whereas in Egypt, they are not. In fact, they are very dependent on the tourist industry so obviously they don?t want to go off in a direction that will scare off the tourists.

More fundamentally, the movement in Egypt is being driven by these younger, secular activists. I met these folks. I worked with some of them. They see the Brotherhood, and their ageing leadership, as out of touch with their day-to-day reality as the regime, in a lot of ways.

Although the Brotherhood has spawned some radical, extremist movements over the years, today it is a pretty moderate group. They are willing to work within the system. They are a conservative force, though not a terrorist, extremist kind of force.

In many ways, they are comparable to the Islamic parties that are in Parliament in countries like Jordan and Morocco. Indeed, if they were legal and could operate openly, they could very well split into various factions

themselves because it is a pretty diverse movement.

Since the initiation of the War on Terror, security has been the trump card for the US in dealing with the Arab States. How might events in Egypt over the past two weeks change that?

In the long term, one could say that while a democratic Egypt might not be willing to cooperate with the United States in some areas of foreign policy, security policy, and economic policy, they will oppose terrorism as much as the current regime.

More fundamentally, when you have a democratic structure that is the best inoculation you have for extremism. Extremism grows out of conditions where people feel frustrated, powerless, and hopeless about working nonviolently for change within an established political order.

While in the short term there could be set-backs in U.S. policy goals, for the long-term issues -- particularly fighting these mega-terrorists groups that could be a threat to the United States and its allies -- a democratic Egypt would be the best thing that could happen.

I should also mention that in terms of U.S. security assistance to Egypt, only a tiny percentage is involved in legitimate counter-terrorism work. Virtually none of it has anything do with Egypt?s overall defensive needs. It?s primarily been for domestic repression and subsidies for U.S.-arms manufacturers.

Are you saying the U.S. has been funding the domestic repression?

The tear gas that has been lobbed at the protesters has been made in the U.S.A. The jeeps and the trucks for the police are made in the US. Some of the other riot control equipment -- the water cannons, for example -- are U.S.-manufactured.

NCR contributor Claire Schaeffer-Duffy is conducting interviews with people connected to the unrest in Egypt this week. For her previous interviews, see:

- **Egyptian uprising 'far beyond what people expected'** [1], a conversation with Egyptian expert John Esposito
- **In Egypt, most powerful example of 'people power' in history** [2], a conversation with Gene Sharp, a renowned scholar of nonviolent struggle
- **Violence on Cairo streets, Egyptian demonstrators say 'will not be silenced'** [3], a conversation with says Philip Rizk, an Egyptian filmmaker and activist
- **Egyptian protester: 'Since we were born, everything had paused'** [4], a conversation with Moroug Badawy, a 24-year old Egyptian graduate student
- **Gazan activist: We need democracy and stability in Egypt** [5], a conversation with Husam el Nounou, a human rights activist living in Gaza
- **In Israel, Egypt's unrest raises questions** [6], a conversation with Adam Keller, a founding member of the Israeli peace organization Gush Shalom
- **Israeli: Mubarak should have cooperated** [7], a conversation with Ovadia Keidar, an Egyptian-born Israeli Jew

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