

Crisis in Cairo

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Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's announcement yesterday (1 February), that he will not seek re-election but will stay in power until the presidential elections in September to ensure a smooth transition period, is unlikely to satisfy the demand of the public for his immediate removal from power. The consensus on the street is that if a week of protest has led to Mubarak's halfway concession yesterday, then another week of protest will surely lead to his immediate resignation. However, such a scenario is likely to create a political vacuum which could plunge Egypt into a period of instability and violence. It may also have reverberations on the regional balance of power and Egypt's role as leader of the Arab world.

Beyond the calls for Mubarak to resign, very little unites Egypt's opposition parties, and so far they have struggled to produce leadership with clear aims for the day after. The most celebrated opposition figure, former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed el Baradei, is an experienced diplomat but an untested politician without a coherent political agenda to unite the public around him. Amro Musa, the Arab League General Secretary and former Foreign Minister, is another likely candidate, but he too lacks a popular support base. As for the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood – outlawed and persecuted under the Mubarak regime – they have so far refrained from joining the protests for fear of being castigated as drivers of the revolution. But as the largest opposition block (they won 20% in the 2005 parliamentary elections), and with Mubarak's imminent departure, they are likely to raise their profile and feature in whatever negotiations take place about the future governance of Egypt.

In this political vacuum, and with events unfolding by the hour, it is becoming increasingly clear that the future of Egypt's stability lies with the military. Unlike Egypt's reviled police, the military is widely respected and enjoys popular support and admiration amongst all walks of life in Egypt. Conscription in Egypt is compulsory, making it a people's Army which is integrated into the social fabric of the country. Whilst the generals have supported the Mubarak regime's close relationship with Washington, and the continuation of the cold peace with Israel, they have remained outside the political arena. In addition, the military's decision not to resort to the use of force against the protesters has won it the respect of the people and further strengthened their role as kingmakers in the aftermath of Mubarak's resignation.

Looking at the consequences for the region, as Washington turns a cold shoulder to Mubarak and following the recent revolution in Tunisia, the fate of neighbouring Arab regimes could be similar. King Abdullah of Jordan has yesterday dissolved his government, whilst the president of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, announced that he will not seek re-election after 32 years in power. Libya and Syria could also experience popular unrest, but their rulers are likely to respond forcefully to popular protests.

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