

31.01.2011 - Egypt: Death throes of a dictatorship

Robert Fisk

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The Egyptian tanks, the delirious protesters sitting atop them, the flags, the 40,000 protesters weeping and crying and cheering in Freedom Square and praying around them, the Muslim Brotherhood official sitting amid the tank passengers. Should this be compared to the liberation of Bucharest? Climbing on to an American-made battle tank myself, I could only remember those wonderful films of the liberation of Paris.

A few hundred metres away, Hosni Mubarak's black- uniformed security police were still firing at demonstrators near the interior ministry. It was a wild, historical victory celebration, Mubarak's own tanks freeing his capital from his own dictatorship. In the pantomime world of Mubarak himself ? and of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton in Washington ? the man who still claims to be president of Egypt swore in the most preposterous choice of vice- president in an attempt to soften the fury of the protesters ? Omar Suleiman, Egypt's chief negotiator with Israel and his senior intelligence officer, a 75-year-old with years of visits to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and four heart attacks to his credit. How this elderly apparatchik might be expected to deal with the anger and joy of liberation of 80 million Egyptians is beyond imagination. When I told the demonstrators on the tank around me the news of Suleiman's appointment, they burst into laughter.

Their crews, in battledress and smiling and in some cases clapping their hands, made no attempt to wipe off the graffiti that the crowds had spray-painted on their tanks. "Mubarak Out ? Get Out", and "Y our regime is over, Mubarak" have now been plastered on almost every Egyptian tank on the streets of Cairo. On one of the tanks circling Freedom Square was a senior member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Beltagi. Earlier, I had walked beside a convoy of tanks near the suburb of Garden City as crowds scrambled on to the machines to hand oranges to the crews, applauding them as Egyptian patriots. However crazed Mubarak's choice of vice-president and his gradual appointment of a powerless new government of cronies, the streets of Cairo proved what the United States and EU leaders have simply failed to grasp. It is over.

Mubarak's feeble attempts to claim that he must end violence on behalf of the Egyptian

people ? when his own security police have been responsible for most of the cruelty of the past five days ? has elicited even further fury from those who have spent 30 years under his sometimes vicious dictatorship. For there are growing suspicions that much of the looting and arson was carried out by plainclothes cops ? including the murder of 11 men in a rural village in the past 24 hours ? in an attempt to destroy the integrity of the protesters campaigning to throw Mubarak out of power. The destruction of a number of communications centres by masked men ? which must have been co-ordinated by some form of institution ? has also raised suspicions that the plainclothes thugs who beat many of the demonstrators were to blame.

But the torching of police stations across Cairo and in Alexandria and Suez and other cities was obviously not carried out by plainclothes cops. Late on Friday, driving to Cairo 40 miles down the Alexandria highway, crowds of young men had lit fires across the highway and, when cars slowed down, demanded hundreds of dollars in cash. Yesterday morning, armed men were stealing cars from their owners in the centre of Cairo.

Infinitely more terrible was the vandalism at the Egyptian National Museum. After police abandoned this greatest of ancient treasuries, looters broke into the red-painted building and smashed 4,000- year-old pharaonic statues, Egyptian mummies and magnificent wooden boats, originally carved ? complete with their miniature crews ? to accompany kings to their graves. Glass cases containing priceless figurines were bashed in, the black-painted soldiers inside pushed over. Again, it must be added that there were rumours before the discovery that police caused this vandalism before they fled the museum on Friday night. Ghastly shades of the Baghdad museum in 2003. It wasn't as bad as that looting, but it was a most awful archeological disaster.

In my night journey from 6th October City to the capital, I had to slow down when darkened vehicles loomed out of the darkness. They were smashed, glass scattered across the road, slovenly policemen pointing rifles at my headlights. One jeep was half burned out. They were the wreckage of the anti-riot police force which the protesters forced out of Cairo on Friday Those same demonstrators last night formed a massive circle around Freedom Square to pray, "Allah Ahkbar" thundering into the night air over the city .

And there are also calls for revenge. An al- Jazeera television crew found 23 bodies in the Alexandria mortuary, apparently shot by the police. Several had horrifically mutilated faces. Eleven more bodies were discovered in a Cairo mortuary, relatives gathering

around their bloody remains and screaming for retaliation against the police.

Cairo now changes from joy to sullen anger within minutes. Yesterday morning, I walked across the Nile river bridge to watch the ruins of Mubarak's 15-storey party headquarters burn. In front stood a vast poster advertising the benefits of the party: pictures of successful graduates, doctors and full employment, the promises which Mubarak's party had failed to deliver in 30 years: outlined by the golden fires curling from the blackened windows of the party headquarters. Thousands of Egyptians stood on the river bridge and on the motorway flyovers to take pictures of the fiercely burning building: and of the middle-aged looters still stealing chairs and desks from inside.

Yet, the moment a Danish television team arrived to film exactly the same scenes, they were berated by scores of people who said that they had no right to film the fires, insisting that Egyptians were proud people who would never steal or commit arson. This was to become a theme during the day: that reporters had no right to report anything about this "liberation" that might reflect badly upon it. Yet, they were still remarkably friendly and: despite Obama's pusillanimous statements on Friday night: there was not the slightest manifestation of hostility against the United States. "All we want: all: is Mubarak's departure and new elections and our freedom and honour," a 30-year-old psychiatrist told me. Behind her, crowds of young men were clearing up broken crash barriers and road intersection fences from the street: an ironic reflection on the well-known Cairo adage that Egyptians will never, ever clean their roads.

Mubarak's allegation that these demonstrations and arson: this combination was a theme of his speech refusing to leave Egypt: were part of a "sinister plan" is clearly at the centre of his claim to continued world recognition. Indeed, Obama's own response: about the need for reforms and an end to such violence: was an exact copy of all the lies Mubarak has been using to defend his regime for three decades. It was deeply amusing to Egyptians that Obama: in Cairo itself, after his election: had urged Arabs to grasp freedom and democracy. These aspirations disappeared entirely

when he gave his tacit if uncomfortable support to the Egyptian president on Friday. The problem is the usual one: the lines of power and the lines of morality in Washington fail to intersect when US presidents have to deal with the Middle East. Moral leadership in America ceases to exist when the Arab and Israeli worlds have to be confronted.

And the Egyptian army is, needless to say, part of this equation. It receives much of the



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\$1.3bn of annual aid from Washington. The commander of that army, General Tantawi who just happened to be in Washington when the police tried to crush the demonstrators has always been a very close friend of Mubarak. Not a good omen, perhaps, for the immediate future.

So the "liberation" of Cairo where, grimly, there came news last night of the looting of the Qasr al- Aini hospital has yet to run its full course. The end may be clear. The tragedy is not over.

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