Will Egypt's "Day of Rage" Become a Revolution?

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Brief Analysis

Inspired by events in Tunisia, tens of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets on January 25 in major cities from Alexandria to Cairo, the largest demonstrations to hit the country since the bread riots of the 1970s. The government, which did not initially confront demonstrators in Cairo's Tahrir Square, finally took forceful action to remove them late last night. Today, January 26, the Interior Ministry announced that public gatherings and protests will no longer be tolerated; there were further clashes in Cairo and Suez. More protests are anticipated after Friday prayers (January 28). Will the government's tactics quell the demonstrations or cause them to spread? And what approach should Washington take?

Another Tunisia?

In his January 25 State of the Union speech, President Obama made clear that the United States "stands with the people of Tunisia and all people striving for democracy" -- a statement with obvious, if ambiguous, implications for Egypt, America's closest Arab ally. But how similar are Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution and Egypt's "Day of Rage"? On the surface, many of the symptoms are the same, but Egypt's more flexible authoritarianism coupled with a much stronger and more well respected military make it highly unlikely that a full-scale revolution will topple the Mubarak regime in the days ahead. Nevertheless, the protests should serve as a wakeup call to the ruling National Democratic Party that its hopes of a smooth political transition are in deep trouble, and that a purely economic response (e.g., easing subsidy reform) will be insufficient to restore a badly damaged social contract.

It's the Economy, Stupid?

As in Tunisia, young Egyptians -- who constitute nearly 70 percent of the population -- suffer from high unemployment. Even educated Egyptians find it difficult to land jobs in either the public sector (which has been shrinking) or the private sector (for which their educations have ill prepared them). The vast majority of the

country's more than eighty million people subsist on less than $4 per day. Meanwhile, the cost of living has steadily climbed as the government has pursued aggressive macroeconomic reform, which has earned plaudits from the International Monetary Fund but resulted in remarkably little trickledown.

Recent efforts to reform subsidies for gasoline, electricity, and bread have only exacerbated growing frustrations and a sense of impotence similar to that of twenty-six-year old Muhammad Bouazizi, whose self-immolation sparked the Jasmine Revolution. In fact, since the ouster of Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, a wave of Egyptians have tragically imitated Bouazizi, leading the government to ban the sale of gasoline in containers and equip guards at public buildings with fire extinguishers.

The economic hardships do not fully explain the protests, however -- Egyptians have long known such hardship. Although longtime observers shrug at the notion that Egyptians, often labeled as passive and depoliticized, would seek change over stability, Tunisians were often similarly dismissed, and their initial quest for economic redress turned dramatically to political demands and wholesale change as protests grew.

A New Media Revolution?

In a striking similarity with Tunisia's revolution, Egypt's massive protests were spurred by Facebook and Twitter messages. Yet Egypt's movement had more traditional leadership and did not have the same spontaneous quality that characterized the Jasmine Revolution. Both the Kefaya ("Enough") Movement (born in the "Arab Spring" of 2005) and the April 6th Movement (associated with the labor strikes of 2008) were active in organizing the day's protests.

In fact, the government had ample notice to prepare, as the Day of Rage and its coordination plans were publicly announced at least a week beforehand. In response to the announcement, state security forces resorted to their usual tactics, arresting known opposition members and threatening them with severe punishment if they participated. This threat may have worked with regard to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which did not officially participate (though it sanctioned the participation of thousands of its members "in their individual capacity"; see below for more on the MB). In a statement released well ahead of the scheduled protest, the government's director of security in Cairo did not mince words: "The security apparatus will deal firmly and decisively with any attempt to break the law."

The government undoubtedly believed that such tactics would fragment the opposition leadership as normal, and that the promised protests would be small and manageable. They were wrong. Even the traditional opposition players, perennially criticized for their ineffectiveness, were stunned by the turnout, with ordinary Egyptians proving to be the main protagonists. By late afternoon, the government took the dramatic step of blocking both Twitter and Facebook, an unprecedented move by a government that normally prides itself on refraining from internet censorship.

The simultaneous weakness and strength of the Tunisian protests lay in their spontaneity, and also in the fact that no single leader or leaders emerged as spokespeople for the demonstrators, permitting organic growth based on individuals. In Egypt, the combination of traditional opposition leadership and broader willingness among average Egyptians to join the demonstrations suggests an evolution in Egyptian protests that may yet become truly broad-based.

Where Was the Muslim Brotherhood?

The Day of Rage was primarily organized as a secular affair, but the MB broadly supported its aims. Days before the Egyptian demonstrations, the group recognized the profound significance of events in Tunis and weighed in on the toppling of Ben Ali.

On January 20, the MB issued an official statement congratulating Tunisians on their revolution and pointing out the "unambiguous message" to "corrupt authoritarian regimes that they are not secure." Importantly, the group noted, Tunisia represented a "historic turning point" because "the reasons and motives that led to this holy uprising are found in many countries of the region...in particular in our country Egypt." The MB also reissued a series of longstanding demands shared by the broader opposition, including an end to the state of emergency, implementation of real economic reforms, measures against official corruption, amnesty for all political prisoners, and the severing of all ties with Israel.

Days after its statement on Tunisia, the MB confirmed that it would participate in Egypt's own protests. According to the group's leader, Muhammad Badie, MB participation represented Egypt's commitment to "achieving change through peaceful methods." Yet for reasons that remain unclear, the group apparently decided that its leadership would not participate, and that it would not play a central role in the events of January 25. This did not stop the Interior Ministry from blaming the MB for the demonstrations, however.

For now, the group is remaining behind the scenes, perhaps hoping to avoid the harsh crackdown on MB members that typically follows such protests. (Avoiding involvement in any demonstrations after Friday prayers would be challenging.) The MB may be looking to capitalize on the Day of Rage at the expense of its political rivals. For example, in the run-up to the event, MB websites highlighted the fact that both Egypt's Coptic Christian community and key presidential contender Mohamed ElBaradei would be abstaining from the protests.

Will the Protests Continue?

It is difficult to envision how the organizers of the Day of Rage will sustain the protests without access, if government interference continues, to cell phones, the internet, and logistical resources. Tunisia is a relatively small, largely homogeneous country in which protests began organically outside the capital and worked their way in slowly; by the time the regime recognized the movement's significance, it was too late. This is not the case in Egypt. Moreover, the Egyptian military -- which until now has reportedly stayed out of the fray -- is a much stronger and more politically important institution than Tunisia's military. Its instincts are to support the Mubarak family. In any case, the internal security services, even without the army, can prevent the protestors from linking up for the time being and would likely impose a curfew if general lawlessness broke out.

Even so, the breadth and depth of the Day of Rage have likely sent shockwaves through the regime, which was already deeply uneasy about the transition accompanying President Hosni Mubarak's anticipated departure from the political scene within the next few years. The protests will probably serve as a final, indigenous wakeup call to a government that has long sought to reverse the various political openings it created in 2005, with Cairo strategically closing off any channels for influencing policy outside the ruling party.

For now, the government has announced a rollback of subsidy cuts and will likely search for other ways to attenuate the people's sense of economic hardship. In political terms, Cairo should permit the largely non-Islamist labor unions to operate freely, end harassment of Egypt's largely secular parties, and allow new parties to form. Similarly, the steps it has taken against free media and the independent judiciary should be reversed. For its part, the Obama administration, which stated on January 25 that "the Egyptian government has an important opportunity to be responsive to the aspirations of the Egyptian people," should encourage the regime to move forward rapidly. Choosing to pursue more repressive policies is unlikely to solve the crisis and would put Cairo on a collision course with the United States.

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