



## An end or a beginning?

CAIRO

As Hosni Mubarak fights back, where Egypt's revolt will go, and how far it will spread, are still unanswered questions

IT IS the greatest drama to shake Egypt since the killing of Anwar Sadat in 1981. Huge nationwide protests have challenged the long rule of President Hosni Mubarak, threatening to dislodge him. As yet, the denouement remains unwritten. Will it match Tunisia, where a popular uprising sent another strongman president into exile, toppled his ruling party and opened the way to real democracy? Or will it look like Iran in 2009, where a hardline regime crushed a popular protest movement with iron-fisted resolve?

The protests have left hundreds dead, frozen Egypt's economy, forced a cabinet to resign, brought the army onto the streets and prompted Mr Mubarak to promise reforms. Egypt's tough 82-year-old president, in charge for the past three decades, now says he will go-but only at the end of his term in September, with dignity and with a subtle threat that if he does not get his way, things could turn uglier still. While offering a bare minimum of concessions, he has driven a wedge between millions of protesters who demand change and millions of others who fear chaos and want a return to normal. By February 2nd the two sides were battling each other.

Mr Mubarak has been slow to respond throughout the crisis, but his few appear-

ances have been cleverly pitched. When he finally spoke, after midnight on January 28th, a day when hundreds of thousands across the breadth of Egypt had battled furiously with his police, it was with a husky voice and the petulance of a master betrayed by bungling servants. He said he understood his people's concerns, and as a concession fired his cabinet. But he blamed the unrest on miscreants and agitators, declaring that protests had grown so loud only because he himself had magnanimously granted rights to free expression.

There was something in this. During his rule Egyptians have changed, as has the world they live in. They do speak more freely now, but not only because Mr Mubarak's regime has belatedly allowed the airing of more critical views. New technologies have also made it impossible for states such as Egypt's to retain the information monopolies they once enjoyed.

Mr Mubarak was right in a wider sense, too. It has been on his watch, and in part because of his policies, that Egyptian society has ripened for a sudden outburst that now threatens to blow away his regime. This is true not only because he failed to improve the lot of Egypt's poorest very much, because he throttled meaningful political evolution, or because he let his

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police humiliate victims with impunity. Some of Mr Mubarak's modest achievements, such as improving literacy, keeping peace with neighbours, extending communications networks and fostering the emergence of a large urban middle class, have also sharpened tensions.

This is one reason why the unrest in Egypt and Tunisia echoes resoundingly across the region. Most of the other countries there, whether monarchies or republics, also have structures that seem increasingly anomalous in the modern world. Since the 1950s the Arab social order has been run by paternalist strongmen, bolstered by strong security forces and loyalist business grandees. Those below have been marginalised from politics, except as masses to be roused for some cause, or as a rabble with which to frighten a narrow and fragile bourgeoisie. They have been treated as subjects, rather than citizens.

But much as in southern Europe in the 1970s, when authoritarian regimes in Portugal, Spain and Greece fell in a heap, or later in Latin America, where juntas collapsed like dominoes, Arab societies are changing in ways likely to provoke a sweeping political reordering. Because of

- the extreme violence of a radical fringe, much of the outside world's concern for the region has focused on the rise of Islamism as a social and political force.

The role of groups such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is important. But it is underlying social changes that affect all, rather than the ideological aspirations of some, that are jamming the mechanics of authoritarian control. Islamists in both Tunisia and Egypt may soon emerge as leading political actors. So far, however, they have taken a back seat.

### The bellwether country

Egypt is bigger and poorer than most other Arab states, and not necessarily a model. But it is a more of a bellwether than Tunisia was. It was Egypt's 1952 revolution, ushering in the military-backed authoritarianism of Gamal Abdel Nasser that Mr Mubarak inherited, which inspired similar regimes to emerge, from Algeria to Iraq to Yemen. The direction Egypt chooses now could have a similar influence.

Egyptians of all classes and persuasions have joined today's protests. But in their vanguard, except perhaps in the thickest combat, have been thousands of urban professionals, or university students who hope to be professionals one day. Such people have typically shunned politics, seeing Egypt's stage-managed version as a waste of time. In private they have often complained that they do not feel they own their country, as if it is someone else's private estate.

In the past-for example, in the riots that erupted in 1977 when Sadat's government doubled the price of subsidised bread-it was the poor who forced simple demands on Egypt's government. To prevent another climbdown, Mr Mubarak's regime built its riot squad into a daunting force of perhaps 150,000 well-trained and well-equipped men. It also kept the economy burdened with subsidies, with bread, cooking fuel and public transport priced at fractions of their real cost.

Some 40% of Egyptians still live on less than \$2 a day. In recent years, even as Egypt's overall economy has grown apace and more consumer goods have filled even lower-income households, the poor have won little relief from relentlessly rising food prices and sharper competition for secure jobs. Such anxieties have found expression in a growing number of strikes and local protests across the country. Yet in a sense, persistent poverty has helped prop up the regime. "People survive on a day-to-day basis," says a young Cairo lawyer. "They can't go for long without a daily wage and daily bread, so they can't afford to make trouble."

Economic strains have squeezed better-off Egyptians, too, but other factors raised their anger with Mr Mubarak's government to boiling point. Even to a people in-

ured to politics as a farcical pageant, the blatant fakery of parliamentary elections held in November and December, which virtually shut out any opposition players, seemed a lurid insult, added to the injury of Mr Mubarak's apparent plan to foist upon them his son Gamal as their next ruler. Equally lurid are the tales of corruption involving not just rich businessmen but also institutions of Mr Mubarak's state. Dismay over police cruelty has also risen, especially after an incident in June when plainclothes agents in Alexandria beat to death a young internet aficionado, Khaled Said, spawning a Facebook campaign that prompted silent vigils across the country.

That such overlapping concerns seemed unlikely ever to coalesce into political action testifies to the effectiveness of Egypt's police state. This relies less on repression than on co-opting, dividing and, perhaps most important, demoralising potential challengers. Its other prop has been a political shell-game, whereby Mr Mubarak and his inner circle simply blame any shortcomings on his ministers, and explain repression as a needed defence against menacing Islamists. Despite rising calls for change, bitter quarrels-between Islamists and secularists, conservatives and leftists-have dissipated the energies of Egypt's opposition.

Two new factors seem to have tipped the balance. One was the emergence of loosely related groups pressing for reform, run via the internet by youths of generally secular outlook but no particular ideology. Some coalesced around labour rights. Some promoted human rights or academic freedom. Others were inspired by the appearance on the scene of Mohamed ElBaradei, the Nobel prize-winning former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN's nuclear watchdog. For such a respected figure to demand an end to dictatorship seemed a breath of fresh air to educated Egyptians. Some of these groups studied other people-power movements, such as Serbia's, and began quietly

organising for a similar campaign.

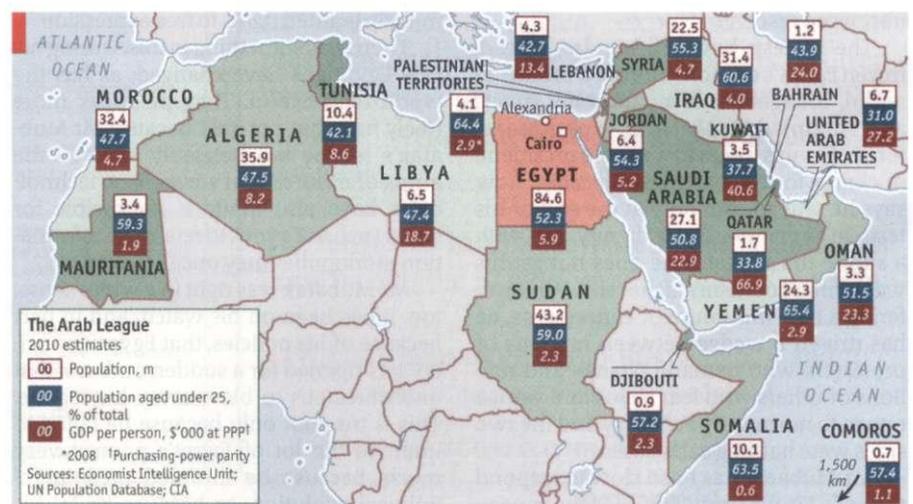
The second factor was Tunisia. It was not only the speed and success of its revolt that convinced many Egyptians that their regime might prove equally flimsy. The most obvious outcome of Tunisia's unrest was the exit of its president, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, after 23 years of rule. His flight to exile in Saudi Arabia concentrated Egypt's dissident minds on the one thing they could all agree on: the demand that Mr Mubarak should go.

### Revolution's trigger

The Facebook page for solidarity with Mr Said, the victim of police brutality, was what drew the widest audience for the idea of a "day of rage" to be held on January 25th. Yet few among the page's 375,000 followers anticipated the impact this would have. The peaceful crowds that turned out that day were not huge: they numbered in the tens of thousands only in Cairo and Alexandria. By the end of the day, police recaptured Tahrir (Liberation) Square, the symbolic heart of Cairo, in a brutal charge.

But the eruption of protests in nearly all Egypt's main cities at once had proved a stunning shock. As in Tunisia, the regime appeared paralysed at first. It responded solely through security measures, such as cutting off mobile telephones, text-messaging services and the internet. By the time Mr Mubarak decided to speak, three days later, it seemed too late to turn the tide.

Demonstrations on Friday January 28th prompted him at last to break his silence. Protesters were numbered not in tens but in hundreds of thousands, including people from all walks of Egyptian life. In Cairo itself pitched battles between protesters and riot police raged in more than a dozen places, leaving scores dead and thousands wounded. Flames roared through the halls of Mr Mubarak's National Democratic Party in Tahrir Square, where youths danced amid the lingering



• fumes of tear-gas around the smouldering wrecks of overturned police vehicles. When night fell it was not only the riot police who retreated, beaten and exhausted. The entire uniformed manpower of Egypt's mammoth Ministry of Interior, amounting to perhaps a million policemen, vanished from the country's streets.

Exactly as in Tunisia, their suspiciously complete exit sparked a wave of looting, vandalism and banditry. Rioters breached the walls of several of Egypt's main prisons, freeing more than 20,000 convicts, including several hundred on death row. In the strategic north-east corner of Sinai, along the border with Gaza, local Bedouin blew up police stations and grabbed their arsenals. Reports from Alexandria claimed that some 20,000 police guns had gone missing. The city of Suez, where the toll of casualties was particularly high, fell entirely into the hands of protesters.

The evacuation of police also fanned rumours, backed by reports of security agents engaging in arson and thievery, that the chaos was planned. If so, it had its effect. Despite the hasty organisation of citizen militias, reports of roving bands of thugs terrified many, especially in poorer districts. This kept people at home, away from the demonstrations. As bread became scarce in the shops and salaries went unpaid, many also began blaming the protesters for provoking chaos.

### The regime hangs on

With his police in disgrace, Mr Mubarak sent in his army and decreed what only weeks before would have been seen as a radical change. He appointed as vice-president his dour, dapper 74-year-old intelligence chief, General Omar Suleiman. Since Mr Mubarak had never anointed a deputy, this was widely seen as a first step to his own graceful retirement. He also picked a new prime minister, a former air-force commander, Ahmed Shafik.

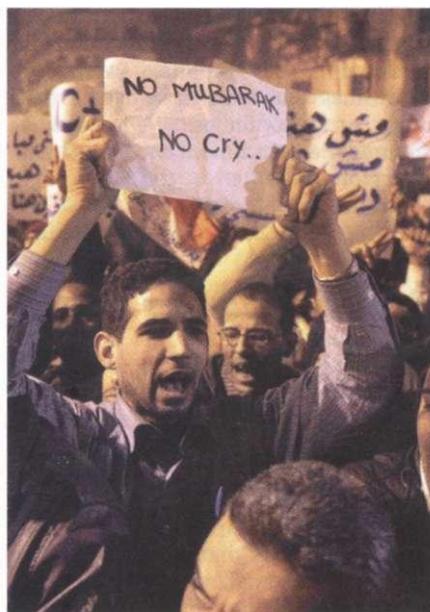
The army's intervention has been broadly greeted with relief, particularly since its command declared it would not use force. But Mr Mubarak's other moves did not assuage protesters, now joined by the enraged families of those injured by police in previous clashes, as well as by the full might of previously hesitant Islamist groups, led by the Muslim Brotherhood.

The cabinet soon sworn in by Mr Shafik retained half the ministers of the previous government, a sign, perhaps, of the difficulty of manning what many perceived as a sinking ship and a signal, to some, that Mr Mubarak was up to his old trick of blaming failings on subordinates, in this case the outgoing ministers. The new vice-president failed to impress with a brief statement, his only public appearance so far. Mr Suleiman said he was open to talks with opposition forces, and would respect court verdicts over challenges to Decem-

ber's election results. This could prove a big concession, since many jurists say the whole vote was fraudulent.

Not surprisingly, protests mounted to a new pitch. Despite the continued suspension of the internet and text-messaging, and the blockage of rail and road links into Cairo, a crowd of nearly half a million crammed into Cairo's centre on February 1st, overflowing Tahrir Square onto adjacent streets and bridges. As many as 100,000 also marched in Alexandria.

Knocked back, Mr Mubarak replied with the skill of a seasoned general. In a masterful speech that night, he declared that he had never intended to run for a sixth term this September, without explaining why he had never revealed this before. He also said he would revise articles in the constitution, inserted by him-



Citizens find a voice

self, that narrowly restricted the field of presidential challengers. He restated his willingness to negotiate with the opposition, and reasserted his paternal concern for the people. "I am a military man and it is not my nature to abandon my duties," he said gravely. "I have defended the soil of Egypt and will die on it, and be judged by history."

To protesters camped in Tahrir Square, who had spent days screaming for his departure, this was again far too little, too late. But many other Egyptians, particularly the elderly and the poor, saw it as a dignified way out of the impasse. Amid a backlash of pro-Mubarak sentiment the next day, foreign newsmen were attacked by Egyptians accusing them of plotting to undermine stability. In Alexandria and Cairo large pro-Mubarak mobs of youths, some reportedly fortified by plainclothes thugs and paid criminal stooges, tried to storm the protesters' camps, leading to melees in

which dozens were injured.

Such dirty tactics, accompanied by calls from the army, which has remained scrupulously neutral, for the protests to end, suggest that Mr Mubarak's regime believes it can complete what appears to be a well-devised script. Middle-class protesters will be frightened back to their homes, and most ordinary Egyptians relieved to see the unrest end. The president's opponents will be able to declare that they have won key reforms. But the regime will remain in charge, controlling the pace of change.

Whether this will succeed in restoring stability remains to be seen. Egypt has now become starkly polarised. The fury against Mr Mubarak felt by many has only increased. Despite numbers thinned by the defection of those fearful of getting hurt, the anti-Mubarak protesters may still be able to mount mass protests, perhaps after Friday prayers. The Muslim Brotherhood has declared that it will not negotiate with the government until Mr Mubarak steps down. Mr ElBaradei has described pro-Mubarak demonstrations as criminal acts by a criminal regime.

### From pharaohism to democracy

As Egypt's powerful state regroupes its forces and continues to capitalise on fears of insecurity, Mr Mubarak's men may have their way. Still, even within his army, which has so far remained loyal to the president, many may believe that only Mr Mubarak's departure can calm Egypt's streets. The president could possibly announce an early retirement on health grounds. But if there is one quality Mr Mubarak has shown during his three decades of rule, it is stubbornness.

Whatever the outcome, it is already clear that Egyptian society as a whole has evolved. Despite the ugly clashes of recent days, the change has mostly been peaceful. Egyptians have graphically demonstrated that they will no longer accept the old rules. They are moving, in the words of Fahmi Huweidi, a popular columnist sympathetic to the Muslim Brothers, from pharaohism to democracy.

Even if protests fizzle for the time being, a certain pride of reclaiming possession was vividly in evidence. Protesters in the notoriously trash-strewn megalopolis of Cairo swept and tidied the squares they occupied, and ordinary Egyptians cheerfully and quite efficiently directed traffic or joined neighbourhood patrols in the absence of police.

In the posh district of Zamalek, one volunteer manning a citizens' roadblock at night gleefully displayed a photo he had taken with his mobile phone, showing his patrol demanding to see the driving licence of a police officer whose car they had stopped. In such ways, Egyptians have begun to establish themselves as citizens of their own country.