

Democracy's hard spring

Also in this section

32 Arab economies

CAIRO

Once the protests are over, institutions need building up—often from scratch

AS A dramatic revolutionary moment, the storming of Egypt's notorious State Security Investigations Directorate (ssi) seemed to rank with the fall of the Stasi headquarters in East Berlin in 1990. Over the first weekend in March furious crowds surged into the imposing bureaus of the secret police in half a dozen Egyptian cities. At their sprawling main complex in a Cairo suburb, some gleefully hunted for documents and computer discs. Others searched for hidden dungeons, shouting into air vents and frantically prising up floor tiles in the hope that long-missing relatives might be found underground.

Yet the buildings were largely empty, their floors deep in drifts of shredded paper. The ssi had not only withdrawn its own men, emptied its prisons and destroyed archives; among documents that did leak onto the internet, some appeared to be plants designed to throw up a smoke-screen. One, for instance, contained the scarcely credible revelation that a son of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's fallen president, had sponsored a series of terrorist bombings in revenge for failing to secure a cut in a lucrative deal to sell natural gas to Israel.

In East Germany the people were luckier. Most of the Stasi archive was saved. Unification with West Germany soon al-

lowed for an orderly transition to a fair and open political system. For Egypt and other Arab countries in the throes of revolution or on its verge, overhauling the ship of state will be much more difficult. Not only are institutions such as the secret police hard to clean out; there is also no ready model for an open, democratic Arab society, whether republic or constitutional monarchy. Bits may be borrowed from the manuals of other democracies, but much will need to be invented from scratch.

Tunisia and Egypt, the region's revolutionary pioneers, are already running into turbulence. The core of activists who mobilised their revolutions have been joined by motley groups pursuing narrower agendas, ranging from higher wages to women's rights to the imposition of sharia law, and to demands that other demonstrators stop protesting. Criminality is on the increase, as ordinary police have been slow to return to the streets. Businessmen protest that attempts to prosecute former officials and their cronies for corruption have broadened into witch hunts that frighten off investment. Purges continue in universities, government agencies and state-owned industries, where officials implanted by the former ruling parties and security agencies now face open revolt.

Pre-revolutionary social ills are also re-

surfacing. In Egypt, where the revolution featured heartwarming scenes of cohesion between Muslims and the 10% Coptic Christian minority, sectarian clashes have again erupted, with at least 13 killed in riots on the outskirts of Cairo. The fatal stabbing of a Polish monk in the Tunisian capital on February 18th was ascribed by some to Islamist radicals. Others blamed renegade policemen bent on implicating Islamists and maintaining a state of fear.

Aside from such surface troubles, deeper problems have emerged. Their source is not just the shakiness of both countries' interim governments, which have largely been purged of ministers associated with old ways and are now led by fresh, untainted prime ministers. Debates rage over whether to scrap the old constitutions immediately or to reform them temporarily, whether to push for early elections or hold off until rules are set and the playing field levelled, and whether to opt for presidential or parliamentary political systems. Such essential questions as the proper relation between religion and the state, and between central and local government, remain to be resolved.

In Egypt, where such debates are more intense and better reflected in a broader, more mature press, some progress is being made. The army high command that as-

• summed overall control after Mr Mubarak's overthrow sketched a basic political road map early on. They appointed an expert panel to revise the constitution so as to allow for fairer presidential elections in six months' time. Egyptians are set to vote yes or no to a package of revisions on March 19th. Should this pass, and a new president be elected, he would then be "invited" to oversee more sweeping constitutional changes. These could include a reduction of the regal presidential prerogatives enjoyed by Mr Mubarak, more independence for the judiciary and a stronger legislature.

How far, how fast?

So far the military men have not shifted from this plan, but a chorus of doubts is growing. Some point to the absence of guarantees that a new president would agree to surrender powers. Others say that too fast a transition would strengthen existing parties, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and the remnants of Mr Mubarak's corruption-riddled National Democratic Party, at the expense of newer groupings. Among intellectuals and the core of revolutionary activists there is wide agreement that a longer transitional period is needed. They want the army to appoint a temporary ruling executive council, charged specifically with setting up a body to draft a completely new constitution. This would set the rules for both parliamentary and presidential elections.

To general surprise, the army has proved responsive to protesters' demands so far. Senior officers have had regular meetings with a range of opposition leaders, and at their urging removed the last prime minister appointed by Mr Mubarak. In a gesture to the Facebook generation, the army has set up its own page, and uses it to broadcast its views. Soldiers have largely allowed protests to continue, and at first stood aside to let citizens invade secret police offices. To back down on the constitutional referendum, however, might be viewed as showing too much flexibility.

Already there are signs of stiffening. Calls to dissolve the ssi, as Tunisia recently did with its similar secret-police organisation (even announcing the move on Facebook) have so far been rebuffed. Soldiers now guard its offices, and the army has demanded the return of all missing documents. It has tightened the midnight curfew in Egypt's main cities. On March 9th soldiers forcibly removed a remaining encampment of protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square. The new cabinet also issued its first decree, setting severe penalties for the hazily defined crime of "thuggery".

Many Egyptians welcome such moves as necessary to restore stability. Egypt's new prime minister, Essam Sharaf, is genuinely popular. An expert in traffic management, he served briefly under Mr Mubarak as minister of transport before resigning.

As a university professor he joined in the mass demonstrations calling for Mr Mubarak to go. On his first day in office he pointedly walked to Tahrir Square to address the crowd, promising to uphold the aims of the revolution.

And although Egypt's broader political evolution is sure to take time, changes are already being felt. In the last decade of Mr Mubarak's 30-year rule, Egypt's privately owned press began to overtake the stodgy state-owned media. Both, however, were subject to intense pressure to convey the regime's views. State-security officers frequently reprimanded editors, or summarily banned unwanted voices from the airwaves. During the revolution, Mr Mubarak and his minister of information personally telephoned television presenters to berate them for unfavourable coverage.

The revolution has greatly emboldened Egypt's press. Private TV channels now venture into the previously forbidden realm of news coverage, and workers in the state-owned press have managed to eject editors appointed by Mr Mubarak. Mr Sharaf's briefly installed predecessor as prime minister, Ahmed Shafiq, is widely believed to have been removed after acting arrogantly on a talk show.

Another institution subject to manipulation by the security services, Egypt's judiciary, is also showing signs of greater independence. Not only is it vigorously prosecuting former officials, including Mr Mubarak and senior ministers; it has also overturned bans on some political parties. The new justice minister has also reduced his own power to appoint judges, in favour of selection by their peers.

Egypt's state universities, which account for some 90% of college enrolment, have also been convulsed by change. In the past not only their presidents, but even minor academic appointments and candidates for student unions, were vetted by

security officers. Faculty and students in many institutions have now united to get rid of unwanted administrators.

The collapse of the secret police has brought relief in smaller ways. Arbitrary checkpoints on roads, which snarled traffic and humiliated drivers, have vanished. Egyptian mobile-phone operators, whose licences gave the ssi unlimited rights to snoop, now want them revised. Businesses and even government agencies that once felt obliged to hire former security officers, or contract companies owned by them, feel free to look elsewhere.

Anew-found sense of freedom appears even to have infected the Muslim Brotherhood, where many of the younger members who manned the barricades in Tahrir Square now want a greater say, open internal elections and revisions to the group's political platform. Among other things, they suggest dropping the idea that a body of clerics should vet future laws.

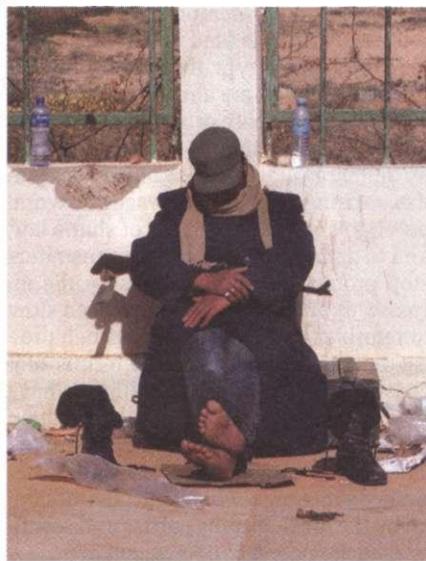
Even without such internal pressure, the Brotherhood appears to be maturing as it ceases to be the main target of state repression. By its count, some 40,000 members were jailed during the last two decades of Mr Mubarak's rule. None remains inside, but the group has made it clear that it intends to act as a responsible and even loyal opposition. Spokesmen say it will abide by the army's commands, would accept minor constitutional reforms and does not intend to run a presidential candidate or seek a parliamentary majority.

The wider picture

Egypt's emerging democracy remains very much a work in progress, but already it is having a wider influence. Rebels opposed to Muammar Qaddafi in eastern Libya say they also seek to create a pluralist parliamentary democracy with reduced executive powers (see page 54). Islamists there, including former members of groups linked to al-Qaeda, have shown a willingness to accommodate secular views.

Yemen, embroiled in massive protests against the 33-year rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, has traditionally looked to Cairo for guidance and will do so again. But the template of a successful Egyptian transition to democracy will prove harder to apply in Arab monarchies. These, so far, have been more resistant to change, although pressure is mounting against hereditary rulers from Morocco to Oman, and even in Saudi Arabia.

Except in the Gulf kingdom of Bahrain, where anger among the majority Shias against the ruling Sunni royal family has intensified after a failed police crackdown on protests last month, the call in all these countries is not for the overthrow of monarchs but for constitutional limits to royal rule. If just one Arab monarchy finds a new people-empowering model that works, the rest will be pressed to follow. ■



Freedom's tiring