

PRINT

## Power and gravity in post-Mubarak Egypt

Thursday, 03 March 2011

In the realm of politics, the role of power can be compared to the law of gravity in physics, and ignoring the power struggle in Egypt is like defying gravity while standing on the ledge of a skyscraper.

Therefore, while demonstrators in Cairo's Tahrir (Liberation) Square chanted in support of freedom, they're unlikely to take power and turn Egypt into a democracy. One can imagine an open society with leaders focused on ending the extreme poverty, but imagination and hope are rarely transformed into political reality. In the Middle East, as demonstrated by Iran, power still comes out of the barrel of a gun and through mob violence in the streets.



Egypt is not Iran, and the differences are important. Since 1952, Egypt has been ruled by a wealthy and corrupt military dictatorship, backed by very powerful secret police. The volcanic explosion that we saw in the centre of Cairo was the much-delayed reaction to 60 years of this mis-rule, and it was triggered by a similar situation and response in Tunisia.

For now, after pacifying the demonstrators by evicting Mubarak, the military elite remains in control of Egypt and is attempting to reassert its power. But their rule has been shaken and will continue to be challenged, particularly by the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the only organized opposition force in Egypt. If the Iranian precedent is repeated, this fundamentalist Islamist organization (Sunni rather than Shia) will emerge as the dominant force.

This scenario, which is the opposite of the enticing democratic dream, would be a major danger for the world, the Middle East and for Israel. The Muslim Brotherhood provided the foundation for the creation of Hamas, and if they take power in Egypt, increased terror is likely to follow.

But the military regime is unlikely to disappear quickly – they have a much wider base than was the case in Iran, with at least three million people in powerful positions, all of whom have too much to lose in a real revolution.

Instead, look for a coalition involving the post-Mubarak military leadership and the Islamists, possibly led by Amr Moussa. An intense nationalist, Moussa headed the regime's hard-core Nasserist faction and exercised power as Mubarak's foreign minister for many years. When Moussa's anti-Israel ideology created too much friction, the Bush administration in Washington pressed for his removal, and he became head of the Arab League. From there, he has accelerated the "soft power" war against Israel and taken the "cold peace" into the deep freeze. The Arab League funded the notorious Goldstone report, which, in alliance with Human Rights Watch and similar groups, produced the false accusations of Israeli war crimes in the Gaza war.

A coalition between secular nationalists and Islamists would focus on rebuilding Egypt's strength in the region, and hostility toward Israel would be the least common denominator between them. To consolidate his leadership and turn public attention away from continued corruption and economic failure, Moussa's confrontational approach can be expected to grow. And the billions of dollars worth of modern American weapons (instead of much-needed economic development) would become a major source of instability. This was Nasser's strategy, and Moussa sees himself as the heir apparent.

A more nationalist and assertive Egyptian leadership does not inevitably mean renewed violence. Nasser lost every war with Israel, and Moussa remembers this history. Egypt's current military rulers also have no interest in seeing their eastern border in Sinai with Gaza taken over by Hamas and used as a base for Al Qaeda attacks.

But the Muslim Brotherhood has close links with Hamas, and in response, Israel may have to increase the emphasis on its deterrence capability and visibility with respect to Egypt.

Perhaps this is an overly pessimistic scenario, and we can continue to imagine an Egypt where democracy and freedom gain a serious foothold. But it would also be foolish to ignore the rules that govern political power, particularly in the Middle East.

[Close Window](#)