

# BULLETIN

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## Egyptian Developments and their International Implications

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*The revolutionary events in Egypt may bring about systemic changes towards democracy in the country. Given the scale of the protests, President Hosni Mubarak will very likely leave the office soon, thus opening a critical period to determine the future path: either reforms or the survival of an autocratic state apparatus, coupled with a strong position of the army. The best solution for Egypt and for the international community would be a "round table", with the participation of a broader socio-political representation, involving the ruling forces and the opposition, among them Islamists.*

**Underlying Causes, Course and Importance of the Protests.** The mass demonstrations in Egypt reflect a mixture of political, social and economic factors: 30 years of authoritarian, military-backed rule of Mubarak and his National Democratic Party (NDP), a long-standing record of persecution of political and unaffiliated opposition, widespread corruption, police brutality, low wages and living standards (12% inflation, high food prices) and a 10% unemployment rate, affecting in particular the young population. The protests intensified after the success of revolutionary changes in Tunisia and the downfall of President Ben Ali. The direct consequences of the demonstrations and upheavals include the state of emergency, more than a hundred deaths, arrests running into several thousand, vandalism, prisoner escapes, transport and food-supply problems. Following the evacuation of foreign nationals, the country's tourism industry, representing 11% of the economy, stands to lose as well.

The protesters are not politically organized; they come from various social backgrounds and their demonstrations are spontaneous and secular in character. Leaflets signed by most opposition parties (Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Ghad, Kefaya, etc.) contain calls for peaceful protest, respect for public property, mosques and churches, so as not give the government a pretext to use force and suppress the demonstrations. In recent days the former director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, has become the spokesman for the opposition, even if he is not universally backed by all Egyptians. The strongest opposition party is the officially banned Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist organization whose popularity was used by Mubarak as a pretext to go on with an undemocratic system of governance.

Yielding to pressure, the president introduced stopgap institutional changes, appointing Vice President Omar Suleiman and a new cabinet led by Ahmad Shafiq, and also announcing an economic reform package. The army, which guarantees the continuation of Mubarak's rule and public order, is not uniform. Its influential top brass, whence come the president, the vice-president and the prime minister, want the regime to survive, but the loyalty of the poorly paid rank and file are anything but assured.

The most populous Arab state (83m), the Arab League leader and the United States' major non-NATO ally, Egypt is the mainstay of the Middle Eastern alignment of forces. The Suez Canal handles 15% of the global seaborne traffic, including shipments of energy sources to the EU and the US. If it is closed transit routes would have to be longer by 10,000 km, thus driving up energy prices and hitting the world economy.

**International Reaction.** The international community is facing a tough challenge of responding to the Egyptian developments in a way that avoids interfering in the country's internal affairs, while at the same time offering support to peaceful settlement of the crisis. Meanwhile, Catherine Ashton,

the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and leaders of EU member states confined themselves to criticizing the violence used by the Egyptian authorities towards protesters. The restrained European reaction seems warranted, and it is unlikely to change. The EU summit of 31 January, taking up the situation in Egypt, is unlikely to produce any major solution, and the flow of EU aid to Egypt, planned at €0.5bn for the next two years, is expected to be kept.

The United States is Egypt's biggest donor, and President Mubarak (with the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord of 1979) is a major pillar of US Middle East policy. But Egyptian society has been showing signs of disappointment with Obama's policy (as reflected in ratings falling from 37% in 2009 to 19% in 2010, according to a Gallup poll), and Mubarak is seen as too much docile towards the US and Israel. Therefore, the US administration's initial approach was one of caution, failing to meet the protesters' demands and adding to the risk of the US position's being condemned by the Egyptian public. A major change came on 30 January, after Obama's talks with the leaders of Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom, during which the US president backed "orderly transition." The US thus sent a signal to the demonstrators (that it will not defend Mubarak at any price) and to the army (that there is no intention to suspend aid, which approaches €1.5bn a year).

The reaction of Western democracies is constrained by fears of a possible takeover by the Muslim Brotherhood — reflecting the terrorist methods which the Brotherhood used in the past, its links to organizations (such as Hamas) which the EU and the US consider terrorist, the religious nature of the Brotherhood's demands and its demonization by the Egyptian government. But since the 1970s, there have been no signs of the Muslim Brotherhood's involvement in terrorist attacks, while politically, by avoiding radical action, it developed a *modus vivendi* with the authorities. Given the public support it enjoys (at tens of percent), the Brotherhood's role will inevitably increase with any systemic change towards democracy in Egypt. But it was not the Islamists who initiated the current wave of protests. Aware of their organization's negative image in the West, they actually dragged feet with supporting the demonstrators and even then showed caution, by declaring their expectation of democratic elections and promising to accept the authorities so chosen. For the European Union and the United States, such declarations offer a rare opportunity to incorporate moderate Islamists into the process of democratic change in a society whose current demands are largely secular and pro-democratic. Therefore, even if the Brotherhood wins a hypothetical parliamentary election, the new authorities will be naturally constrained by the public mood domestically and by the attitude of the international community.

**Conclusions.** There can be no doubt that no reforms will be instituted immediately and that they will not solve the problems underlying the protests. What is therefore needed to ease the public tensions is a symbolic change — and very likely it will come with the departure of President Mubarak. A critical period will then follow, in which the nature of reforms will be determined by the behavior of the army and the readiness for dialogue on the part of all political and social forces. During that period, the role of the EU and the US in easing tensions will be the most important. Later on, the best scenario would be for an Egyptian "round table" to be held, involving a wide political and social representation, including the NDP, the Muslim Brotherhood, other opposition parties and social groups (such as e.g. the April 6 Movement). The presence of Omar Suleiman (the current vice president, who is relatively strong and popular domestically and internationally), Mohamed ElBaradei, and opposition party leaders would greatly boost chances for the formation of such a group of national dialogue. A national unity government, so formed, could stay in the caretaker role until the presidential election, scheduled for September 2011. That the government would very likely — in line with EU and US interests — go on with the main lines of the state's foreign policy. A less probable black scenario would provide for a protracted strife between the state apparatus and the demonstrators, or even a revolutionary change leading to a government which breaks the alliance with the US.

Israel has been watching the Egyptian developments with concern, but the bilateral peace accord does not seem to be in danger — even if the new authorities might, in response to public expectations, modify the country's policy towards the Gaza Strip. More reasons for concern can be seen on the part of other autocratic Arab regimes: Yemen, Libya, Algeria, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. This is because the events in Egypt (and in Tunisia), by helping the Arabs to realize the power of mass protest, may create a matrix for systemic changes throughout the Arab world.