



**THE ISLAMIST SPRING:
WHAT MUBARAK GOT RIGHT, WHAT OBAMA GOT WRONG**

By Raymond Stock

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As Egyptians overwhelmingly chose Islamist candidates last week in the first parliamentary ballot since the fall of President Hosni Mubarak—after nine months of disorder and mayhem—a popular caricature published at the opening of his trial last August came to mind. Displaying a particularly Egyptian brand of gallows humor, it showed Mubarak with a noose around his neck and an ironic look on his face: “I understood you,” he says.

This was a wry allusion to a statement made by Mubarak during the protests that led to his ouster by Egypt's military on February 11, to President Barack Obama, as told to ABC's Christiane Amanpour on February 3. Amanpour said that Mubarak informed her that he had warned Obama that “he doesn't understand the Egyptian culture and what would happen if I step down now.”

Mubarak wasn't predicting that he would be hanged if he left office in those circumstances, though that still might happen. Rather, he cautioned that if he gave up the presidency at that time, chaos would follow, and the feared Muslim Brotherhood rise to power. Overwhelmingly, the media and regional experts dismissed his claims as the fear-mongering of a dictator desperately clinging to his job. But since then, events seem to have proved him right and those who mocked him wrong. That may be shocking to some—and hardly amounts to an excuse for many aspects of his rule. Yet it does reveal the actual complexity of what had seemed a simple case of the people bringing down a tyrant. Instead, the demonstrators gave the military a pretext to remove a flawed leader about to install his son, Gamal (who was not one of their own) to succeed him, replacing him with something worse, with even worse likely to come.

For a while, Mubarak tried to hold on by saying that neither he nor his son would stand in the presidential elections then set for September, even offering to transfer some powers to his newly-minted vice president, the head of military intelligence, Omar Suleiman. Though contradictory statements issued from Obama's administration for the next week, by February 10, when Mubarak's own cabinet began to make ambiguous noises about his going, our president was impatient. “Too many Egyptians,” he said in a written statement that night, “remain unconvinced that the government is serious about a genuine transition to democracy.” By the next evening, Mubarak was gone.

G. B. Shaw advised, “There are two tragedies in life. One is to lose your heart's desire. The other is to gain it.” In this case, Obama (and the protesters) gained it—and the result is what Mubarak admonished would follow. Soon, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the group that kicked out Mubarak, invited Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), to return from his forty-year exile in Qatar to address the great victory celebration at Tahrir on February 18. Al-Qaradawi, who has praised Hitler and begged God to let the Jews' next Holocaust be at the hands of the Muslims, is the most popular preacher in the Islamic world, one whom the mainstream media often tout as a moderate—like the organization he inspires. Demanding war against Israel (which the revolution was not supposed to be about), he completely filled Tahrir in a way that dwarfed the previous demonstrations. Meanwhile, Wael Ghonim, the Google executive who became the best-known of the Facebook youth that launched the uprising in January, was turned away when he too tried to address the crowd. The real leaders of the revolution announced themselves that day—but most of the world ignored it.

Late last month the MB and the SCAF, which has run the country since Mubarak's departure, made a deal on the timetable for a turnover to civilian rule, thus confirming the long-obvious fact that they are in close alliance. The SCAF itself, like most of the officer corps, seems to be made up mainly of MB sympathizers. Now that the MB has taken up to thirty-seven percent of the first of three rounds of voting (rotating around the country), and the even-more blatantly hard-line (Salafi) al-Nour party has gained twenty-five percent as well—far better than projected—Egypt is likely soon to be an Islamist state. The more secular liberal revolution envisioned by at least some of the Facebook youth (many of whom were also Islamists) will be a memory.

The newly-empowered MB has never been the moderate force seen by so many people who should know better. Rather, since 1928 it has quietly worked for rule by strict shari'a law, was funded and armed by the Nazis in World War II, and aggressively has spread chapters all over the Arab world. In October 2010, the MB's current Supreme Guide, Mohamed Badie, a veterinarian, openly called (in Arabic) for global jihad against the United States and Israel. (Only one writer in English—Tel Aviv-based Barry Rubin—even noticed.) And many Salafis openly call for the removal of all Egypt's Coptic community—the descendants of the ancient Egyptians, who make up between the ten-to-twenty percent of the total population—by any means necessary.

On November 25, the Ikhwan (as the MB are known in Arabic) held a rally in Cairo, with crowds chanting, "One day we shall kill all the Jews," and calling for jihad to conquer Jerusalem. They were addressed by none other than Shaykh Ahmed el-Tayib, the head of al-Azhar and the highest clerical figure in Sunni Islam. El-Tayib, well-regarded in the West, denounced attempts to "Judaize" Jerusalem and (falsely) claimed that the al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount was currently "under an offensive by the Jews." (And on the previous Friday, when the MB and the Salafis together brought up to one hundred thousand people to Tahrir, a Salafi preacher eulogized Osama bin Laden as a martyr during yet another call for jihad.) Meanwhile, Israel is preparing for a time when it will no longer have relations with Egypt.

This is where we are now, but what were the choices back in February? Though aging, corrupt, and increasingly out of touch, Mubarak had defeated the Islamist uprising of the 1990s, had kept the unpopular peace with Israel (however coldly) for thirty years, and had launched economic reforms which made the economy grow at six percent the year before he lost power. Following the natural euphoria then, there has been surging crime, endless strikes and demonstrations, vastly increased attacks on Christians, the sacking of the Israeli embassy in September, devastated tourism (down forty-two percent last quarter from the same time in 2010), and a rapidly sinking economy.

Many have blamed Mubarak for crushing any secular alternative to the religious militants. But in fact, after Sadat let them out of prison to combat his leftist opponents in the 1970s, there has never been a genuine rival to the Islamists, whose message has far more resonance in a society that has been profoundly religious since before the First Dynasty (2950 BC). If Mubarak had left the liberals alone, they would have remained voices in the wilderness, most of them crying out for dead-end leftist economic solutions and foreign policies identical to the M.B.'s. That the largest group of liberal parties, al-Kutla al-Misriya (The Egyptian Bloc), garnered only fourteen percent of the vote in this round, which was held in the two cities—Cairo and Alexandria—where most of their supporters are found, should have come as no surprise. The liberals are now so desperate that one of the leading bloggers, called The Big Pharaoh, recently declared that they will secede to form their own republic in the (tellingly upscale) Cairo suburb of Heliopolis. Though he was joking, the reality is that he and those like him will have no space of their own in the entirely different new Egypt from the one of which they boasted in February.

Though it might not have been easy to get the Tahrirists to accept the idea, it clearly would have been wiser to have let Mubarak have his more orderly transition to the next presidential election, perhaps with new parliamentary polls early next year. This would have allowed everyone a chance to organize for them properly (and not just the already-prepared MB). It also would have avoided the naked military dictatorship that ensued, run by Islamist-leaning officers (as is obvious in many of their actions), and the ordeal that all Egyptians have since endured. And it just might have prevented the tragedy of the Islamist victory.

Unfortunately, as only a few far-sighted commentators said at the time, Mubarak's abrupt departure, hastened by his trusted "friend" and ally, President Obama, virtually guaranteed the present unpleasantness. Moreover, a smoother interim would have led to a more democratic future as well as a stronger economy, the ostensible reason for the January 25th Revolution.

Elsewhere, Islamists have won the recent elections in both Tunisia and Morocco. In Libya, the Transitional National Council, whose forces defeated and lynched Mu`ammar al-Qaddafi last month, already has declared the country a shari'a law state, while the head of their largest contingent of fighters, Abdel-Hakim Belhadj, is a well-known commander from al-Qa'ida, whose flag has now flown over the heart of Benghazi. In Yemen, the mélange of opposition forces also includes al-Qa'ida and Shi'ite militants backed by Iran, as well as the MB. In Syria—like Tunisia under the ancien regime, a nominally secular state—the MB and other Islamists form the majority of the leadership put together under neighboring (also Islamist) Turkey's guidance. (Meanwhile, the Assad government's patron, Iran, via its proxy, Hizbollah, now rules formerly friendly Lebanon, while America takes no meaningful action to stop Tehran's headlong progress to acquire nuclear arms.)

On the whole, American policy applauds these evident expressions of the popular will, dismissing the radicals' role (and even their very ideology) as harmless or even beneficial. Obama's favorite foreign leader is said to be Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's Islamist prime minister, whose chief foreign cause is the defense of Hamas. Yet once Islamists gain power, even by democratic means, they are unlikely to relinquish it willingly in future, as we have seen in Gaza, Afghanistan and Iran, while no nation in the world has more incarcerated journalists than Turkey. After all, they really believe that their legitimacy comes not from the people, but from God.

Now the Islamists have won the biggest prize of all: Egypt, the largest and most important Arab country and one of the most influential in Africa as well as the Islamic world. As Hosni Mubarak—a leader to whom America long looked for insight into Middle East affairs—might put it, “Welcome to the Islamist Spring!” He would be entitled to add, “I told you so,” as well. With his deadliest enemies about to become the new masters of Egypt, that caricature of Mubarak's head in the noose may cease to be just a joke. And thanks to our annual two-billion-dollars-plus in aid, we even might be supplying the rope from which our long-time friend could swing.

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