

Egypt's pro-democracy movement: The struggle continues

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Despite the natural subsidence of dramatic demonstrations on the streets of Cairo and other Egyptian cities, as many protesters return to jobs and catch their breath, there is little question that the pro-democracy struggle in Egypt has achieved lasting momentum, barring unexpected repression. As with other kinds of civil struggles, a movement using nonviolent resistance can ebb and flow. There may have to be tactical retreats, times for regrouping or resetting of strategy, or a focus on negotiations with the regime before broader operations that capture the world's attention resume.

Those who were expecting a quick victory are no doubt disappointed, but successful People Power movements of recent decades have usually been protracted struggles. It took nearly a decade between the first strikes in the Gdansk shipyards and the fall of Communism in Poland; Chile's democratic struggle against the Pinochet regime took three years between the first major protests and the regime's acquiescence to holding the referendum which forced the dictator from power.

Most successful unarmed insurrections against authoritarian regimes take a much shorter time, but they usually take weeks or months rather than days. As of this writing, the Egyptian protests have only been going for two weeks. It took ten weeks of struggle in East Germany during the fall of 1989 before the Berlin Wall came down. It took three months before the first student demonstrations in Mali and the downfall of the [Traore dictatorship](#) in 1991. Indeed, the pro-democracy movement in Tunisia which many credit as having inspired the Egyptian uprising took nearly a month, and they are still struggling to ensure that the end of the Ben Ali regime will also lead to real democracy.

Despite the failure of the protests in Egypt thus far to dislodge the hated Mubarak regime or force the president's resignation, there have been some notable victories.

Millions of Egyptians, in direct defiance of emergency laws banning public demonstrations, have taken part in pro-democracy protests. A remarkable cross-section of Egyptian society was visible in these demonstrations in Cairo and other cities across the country: young and old, Muslim and Christian, men and women, poor and middle class, secular and religious. Despite waves of attacks by plainclothes police and paid squads of young toughs, clearly unleashed by the regime – and comparable to the notorious [Basiji in Iran](#) or Mugabe's [green bombers](#) in Zimbabwe – which the regime hoped would disperse the protesters and cower them into submission, the pro-democracy activists in Tahrir Square have held fast. Moreover, there have been key defections among

prominent journalists and intellectuals who were previously willing to parrot the government's line or keep quiet – for example, the president of the Arab League joined the protests at one point. The movement has also provided cover and legitimacy for opposition political figures who would have otherwise been jailed or ignored.

Equally importantly, the movement has forced the United States and other western governments to end their unconditional support for the regime and press for Mubarak to step down. These shifts illustrate that, despite the longstanding sense of fatalism among Arabs that Washington and London will ignore what happens on the 'Arab street,' it has proven itself capable of disrupting expectations in Washington and London.

Specifically, the demonstrators have forced Mubarak to renounce plans for re-election or to have his son run in his place, making him a lame duck. Their exposure of the ruling party's corruption has led leading figures to formally resign from the party, including Mubarak and his son. They have forced the government into negotiations with representatives from the opposition.

Above all, events of the past couple of weeks have changed Egyptian society. German anthropologist [Samuli Schielke](#), who was present at the demonstrations, observed that the sense of unity and power experienced by the protesters in Tahrir Square and elsewhere is necessarily transient. Negotiations, party politics, tactical decisions and other processes that will inevitably arise during the course of a democratic transition are going to be messy and not produce the incredible energy of coming together in the popular contestation of public space and saying "no!" However, he observes, "thanks to its utopian nature, it is also indestructible. Once it has been realised, it cannot be wiped out of people's minds again. It will be an experience that, with different colourings and from different perspectives, will mark an entire generation."

Similarly, after covering both the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, British journalist Peter Beaumont emphasized the significance of this [shift in attitude](#): "A threshold of fear has been crossed. For what has happened in both countries is that the structures of a police state have been challenged and found, to the surprise of many, to be weaker than imagined." He goes on to note that regardless of how soon Mubarak is forced to leave, "a transition of power is already under way" - not as a result of formal negotiations or diplomatic efforts by the United States or the European Union, but from the people effectively seizing power for themselves. The bold actions by what were once relatively small bands of activists "have been embraced by a wider population no longer afraid to speak or to assemble."

For years, the Mubarak regime has offered short-term fixes and various small concessions which have failed to pull up the roots of the country's problems. A combination of paternalism and repression by the regime had fostered an atmosphere of apathy and cynicism. Now, however, a whole new generation has been empowered and the regime, with its feet to the fire, realizes more significant changes are necessary if they are going to survive. Yet each new concession demonstrates the regime's relative weakness and the movement's growing power, thereby emboldening the activists to press forward with their demands for an authentic democratic transition.

The movement will have to think strategically as to how it might be able to achieve victory. A [recent article](#) on these pages by Maciej Bartkowski and Lester Kurtz compares the Solidarity movement in Poland, which was able to force the Communist regime to negotiate a series of compromises which eventually led to multi-party democratic elections in which the Communists were defeated, with the youthful pro-democracy activists on Tiananmen Square during that same period whose all-or-nothing demands failed to budge the regime and resulted in a massacre and the crushing of the movement. Sometimes a movement will have to be temporarily satisfied with a series of relatively minor concessions, declare a partial victory as a testament of their power and

the vulnerability of the regime to pressure, then regroup for another round of public resistance and demands, and continue this process until the government has given away so much they no longer effectively rule. What makes this more feasible in the Egyptian case than perhaps in other movements that have so far been unsuccessful, as in Iran, is that the Egyptian Army has plainly been unwilling to engage in general repression. This seems to have created a viable political space for the movement, where effectively none existed before except through the internet and organizing out of sight of the authorities.

It is also important to recognize that successful unarmed insurrections against dictatorships have usually engaged in a multiplicity of tactics other than the mass demonstrations and multi-day sit-ins. For example, the movement could take advantage of the government's economic vulnerabilities. Already, as a result of the de facto 12-day general strike and other disruptions, including the exodus of foreign tourists and the regime's decision to shut down the Internet for a period, the country lost well over \$3 billion in revenue. The desperate xenophobic campaign by the regime – including Mubarak's thugs attacking foreign journalists, human rights workers and others – has undoubtedly scared away not only tourists but inhibited business visitors.

Other potential tactics by the opposition, such as periodic work stoppages and slowdowns, one-day general strikes, tax resistance, selective international sanctions targeted at the regime and its supporters, or a boycott of particular industries or institutions controlled by the government, armed forces, ruling party or pro-Mubarak families, would squeeze further the regime's ability to demonstrate that it has any meaningful control of events going forward.

It is critical that, whatever tactics are employed, there needs to be long-range strategic planning, a logical sequencing of tactics, and an awareness that – as in any campaign – one needs to take advantage of one's strengths and target the opponent's weaknesses.

The dramatic events of recent weeks have illustrated that for democracy to come to the Arab world, it will come not from foreign intervention or sanctimonious statements from Washington, but from Arab peoples themselves. Even if a government has a monopoly of military force and even if a government has the support of the world's one remaining superpower, it is still ultimately powerless if the people refuse to recognize its legitimacy and withdraw their cooperation from business and life as usual. Mubarak and his enablers have lost their long primacy in Egyptian affairs and it is doubtful that either he or his vice-president Omar Suleiman, the notorious former head of military intelligence, will be able to regain it. Supplanting the regime with a legitimate government that emerges from free and fair elections will be no easy task. But the most important steps, the dissolution of the status quo and the empowerment of the people, have already been accomplished.