

Letter from Egypt 2

Sr Mary Ann Pevas OP

Monday, January 31, 2011

Greetings to all.

Rather than repeat what you can learn via the media I will try and fill in with news which I have acquired about the situation in Cairo from talking directly with people living there. This morning I was able to talk with a businessman and his wife, friends who live in Nasr City, a sort of suburb of Cairo and a more upscale area. They are both retired and have been concerned about the politics and economics in Egypt for years, especially its effects on the young and their hopes for the future.

From our conversation today about the violence and the demonstrations I can tell they are happy something is finally forcing change and bringing down their corrupt government. As for all the violence that has taken place, they believe the fires and killings and beatings have been the work of the black clad control police and not the protestors. This seems to be the sentiment of many in Cairo. Whether or not all can be placed at the feet of the police is doubtful, but the police are perceived as trying to blame the protestors because they are angry that their own lives may change because of this. They will be held accountable for their actions and not have free reign over political prisoners and others who have been arrested for speaking out against the current government. Such has been taking place for years but no one has been able to stop it or bring about a change in policies of the police behavior. As I said before, they are noted for being a brutal force in the government. Nadia and her husband are not afraid though. They are proud of those participating in the protests and hope it will all end soon, peacefully and with Mubarek gone. 'It is about time.'

I also spoke with one of the demonstrators. During the day he goes to Tahrir Square where most of the demonstrations take place because it is the center of Cairo and a large open area able to accommodate great numbers of people. Then he returns home and spends the night with men from the neighborhood guarding properties from the roaming criminals looking for opportunities to steal anything of value. Then before dawn he goes home to sleep for a few hours, and buys some food for his family on the way back. Stores are open and they also are guarded by civilians. The police were back on duty today, Monday, but civilians do not trust them so they keep their own patrols. I asked this gentleman to check in on some Catholic Franciscan Sisters I know in Garden City to be sure they have what they need and are safe. I have not been able to contact them in any other way. He assured me he would. I will get a report from him tomorrow. He also

assures me his family is safe and optimistic, but tired.

Finally, I spoke with a couple of the Dominican Fathers in the Priory. The army tanks are surrounding the Priory mainly because of the library which is on their campus. That library is noted throughout the Middle East as a most unusual collection of Islamic and Christian texts which are used by scholars who come from far and wide to do research. Many of you will remember Father Rene who spent time in Racine studying English. Rene is the Director of that library. The rest of the Fathers do research on interreligious dialogue between Islam and Christianity. Their works are widely published.

Today the employees at the Priory and library came back to work and had little difficulty doing so. They and all can go out on the streets and shop for necessities, but petrol (gasoline) is becoming scarce I was told. The Metro, the underground transportation system is operating today and used by many. The army is everywhere and has publicly pledged to protect the protesters and the people. That is a good sign. The army is highly respected and what it supports will succeed. Their shift seems to be away from Mubarek but it is not clear whether or not Mubarek himself has ordered such support. Today the numbers of protestors were fewer but Tuesday will be different.

It seems everyone and their families, men, women, children, even babies will be taking part in the demonstrations in Tahrir Square. Even today women and their children were beginning to trickle out and joining the protesters. Tomorrow they are hoping for one million to join the demonstrations. It will be massive and clear that the protest represents all social classes from the relatively well to do to the very very poor. They are expected to be one in their voice against Mubarek. It will be worth tracking on the media.

On the other hand, it seems Mubarek is hoping to take some of the wind out of the sails of the demonstration tomorrow by swearing in his newly appointed cabinet, which is only a reshuffling of the old, and by having his newly appointed VP give a speech calling for re-elections in those areas where parliamentary results were questionable before. I am sure that will only anger the people even more. In Mubarek's eyes such moves should dispel the unrest. What it does in reality is inflame the unrest even more. He must think the people are stupid or have short memories. They have heard such changes before but nothing changes in the lives of the people. Mubarek must leave before the protesting stops.

I asked each of my friends what specifically they wanted in order to cease protesting. Unanimously, they said 1) Mubarek leaves the country, 2) new and free elections will take place soon and be monitored by international representatives, 3) specific reforms in policies will be promised and planned; for job creation, for more equitable distribution of wealth, help for the very poor who live on nothing. It remains to be seen just 'who' is expected to bring about these changes. Without Mubarek and his close associates, the only organized political force is the Muslim Brotherhood. By the way they are not seen as terrorists in Egypt. They are simply another political group. A number of them sit in the Parliament and were voted in by running as Independents.

The Muslim Brotherhood as an organization is outlawed in Egypt. They are proclaimed as terrorists by Mubarek and that is how he controls political forces' fear of terrorists. From his perspective if you have free and open elections, then Islamists will run and win and bring down the whole country. But the people of Egypt know the Muslim Brotherhood members and policies, and given viable alternative leaders in elections, the people will choose wisely. After going through all this they do not want to trade one oppressive regime for another.

But there is a void of widely known and supported high ranking leadership. They will need time to surface such people. El Baradei is one who is considered a weak leader but not corrupt. The Muslim Brotherhood and others seem to be turning toward him simply because he is a name and face out there among the people. I could see him as an interim President but only until elections can be organized and held. Will the army support him? If the protesters will, I believe the army will follow his command. The real problem with all of this is that it leaves Egypt as a country vulnerable to its enemies. I won't even go there.

I hope this helps. Again, if I can succeed in contacting friends in Cairo tomorrow, I will share what I learn. By the way, most of the violence is taking place in Alexandria and Suez, not in Cairo now. I asked my friends why and was told that those places are where most of the conservative Islamists are located. But the true power of the country is in Cairo. As Cairo goes, so goes Egypt. Cairo is the economic, religious, and political center of the country.

Blessings,

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