

Letter from Egypt 3 - Cairo Update

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February 2, 2011

Today is a sad day for Egyptians. I spoke with a few of my young friends this morning and they are speaking of fear, and trying to decide whether or not they want to choose to die by returning to Tahrir Square to continue protesting. How did this come about?

These anti-government protests began 8 days ago. The first two days were accompanied with violent responses between the protesters and the 'control' police. Government buildings and police stations were burned. Then the police disappeared from the streets throughout Cairo and the city was left without protection. Suddenly jail inmates escaped, or were set free. The jails are the responsibility of the police. The military moved into Tahrir Square and order was restored there. The military would not allow any police to enter the Square. Peace reigned while the protesters kept returning to the Square and exercised their right to peacefully protest during the week. Each day the numbers grew. Yesterday it is estimated that a million persons participated in the demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square. There were young people, men and women, families joining together to voice their hope for change.

At the end of the day yesterday, Tuesday, President Mubarek appeared on the Egyptian National State News and gave his response to the anti-government protesters. They had demanded that he resign, give up his power which they had experienced as oppressive and debilitating, and allow the country to have free and fair elections for a new government. They made these demands because in their lifetime they lived under 30 years of emergency rule in Egypt. During that time the Mubarek government had often made promises of more freedoms and fair elections, but each time elections were held, the people lost more of their freedoms, and opposition leaders were rendered voiceless. The people have watched Mubarek's government steal the resources of the country for their own personal gain and do nothing to serve the needs of the citizens of Egypt. The protesters demanded an end to this rampant corruption and violent suppression of opposition voices. They had had enough.

In his speech Mubarek basically said that he would not enter the September Presidential elections, that he would have his 'police' restore order to the country, and the same police would investigate the perpetrators of the destruction and violence which took place in the first two days of the demonstrations, and that he would continue to carry out his responsibilities as President until the elections were completed in the Fall. That is 8 months from now. He would not leave his power. Instead he would keep it and use it to restore 'stability' to Egypt, the place of his birth and the place where he would die.

The response by the protesters in Tahrir Square seeking freedom and justice in Egypt was immediate. Those in the Square took off their shoes and shouted even more forcefully that Mubarek must 'go now'. To them it seemed Mubarek heard nothing of

their reasons for protesting. By the end of the day yesterday pro-Mubarek protesters appeared and clashed with the peaceful protesters in Alexandria. Today pro-Mubarek supporters appeared in Tahrir Square in Cairo. The demonstrations were no longer peaceful. The newcomers brought with them fire bombs, and a violent reaction. The result was bloodshed, inflamed anger, fear, death, and many hurt. Today as of this writing it was reported that one person was killed and hundreds were wounded, most seriously.

I am not surprised. Egypt as a country has many resources the most important of which is its people, and especially its young people. Egypt has educated its young people but has gone no further to provide what a society is expected to provide: jobs, and avenues for a better future. Over the last week those same young people found their voice to express their hopes for a better future for themselves and their families with their bodies in protests together. They came together from all social classes and different religions. Today Egypt erupted into violence instead of debating about how to make needed changes and provide security along with jobs, and freedom of speech, and just government. When a standing power operates with oppression and unjust means, there are winners and losers. In Egypt the Mubarek government has created 'winners' who would lose a lot if that government fell. The police would no longer be able to suppress opposition voices. The powers that steal the resources of the country for their own gain would lose their wealth and ability to squander without accountability. The poor who make themselves readily available to be paid to act on behalf of the government would lose their 'value' to a new regime. How would they feed their families? These winners cannot just stand by and let their lives crumble around them. The anti-government protesters threatened the security of these people. They did not like what they were seeing in Tahrir Square. All they would have needed was a little nudge by anyone to call them forth to do what they have always done when opposition gets too strong - squash that opposition. And that is what is happening in Egypt. The Mubarek government has trained its 'winners' well. And, who knows, they may have been called upon to protect their way of life from change which has so many unknowns.

But this story is not over. The anti-government protesters seek change. They are the losers if the Mubarek regime continues. They have no future. They have a momentum in their favor over the last week but now they must make a decision. Continuing to fight for a free and just government in Egypt will entail bloodshed and death. How many and who will be willing to give their unfulfilled lives now so others may have better lives in the Egypt of the future? That is a question each protester must answer before Friday where the next massive protest is anticipated. God help us all.

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