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## The Eros effect comes to Cairo

By George Katsiaficas

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Two months ago, the thought that Hosni Mubarak would be compelled to end his Pharaonic rule over the Egyptians would have been regarded as ludicrous - or wishful thinking.



Egyptian anti-government demonstrators perform the Friday noon prayer during protests in Cairo's landmark Tahrir Square on February 11, 2011,

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Yet, today, Mubarak's departure is only a matter of time. Whether he leaves tomorrow or in September, he and his son, the heir apparent, have already been consigned to history.

The chain reaction of events set off by the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, a vegetable vendor in Tunisia, quickly sent that country's long entrenched dictator into exile (along with his powerful wife and as much of the country's wealth as she could stuff into a plane).

This and at least eight other self-immolations in Algeria, Mauritania and Egypt caused a powerful grassroots response, prompting Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in power for more than three decades, to promise to leave office.

Jordan's King Abdullah, fearing for his country's stability after thousands marched in Amman, appointed a new Cabinet.

Suddenly, throughout the Arab world, dictators are trembling and governments rushing to implement reforms. In this moment of optimism, powerful forces are trying to limit the movement's potential impact.

In the corridors of power in Cairo and Washington, officials are debating the use of murderous force to quell the unrest, while ruling elites are simultaneously attempting to channel the energy of the people in the streets in the right direction (at least for the elites).

By merely changes the faces of the rulers - but not transforming the system that empowers the wealthy to rule - they hope to make the existing system more efficient, and more profitable for investors and corporations.

Although these uprisings seem to be an Arab phenomenon, awakening the people overnight, there are precedents.

In 1989, we saw something similar in Eastern Europe, when, without warning, the Communist regimes collapsed.

Prior to that, a concatenation of revolts swept East Asia, beginning with the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea and spreading like wildfire to the Philippines, Burma, Tibet, China, Taiwan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Thailand.

In six short years from 1986, dictators in Manila, Seoul, Dhaka and Bangkok were disgraced and sent into exile, some eventually being imprisoned for years.

While grassroots power of the people has finally arrived in the Arab world, to limit comprehension of the phenomenon sweeping the region to its own parochial history would constitute a misreading of recent history, as well as a limitation of the movement's potential.

Rapid and unanticipated political change is increasingly a fact of life in the 21st century. In the past 50 years, high-tech media have united the planet as never before, and people have come to realise the power of synchronous popular action to overturn governments.

By occupying public space without anyone telling them to do so, people have launched revolts that have spread from one city to another and from country to country.

The first such instance of this occurred in 1968 in Czechoslovakia. I closely studied that era and was stunned to notice the spontaneous spread of revolutionary aspirations in a chain reaction of occupations of public space.

Millions of ordinary people who acted in a unified fashion, intuitively believing that they could change the direction of their society, suddenly entered into history.

I pinpointed something called the 'Eros effect', moments in history when universal interests become simultaneously generalised, as the dominant values of society are negated and long-entrenched rulers are forced from office.

While the stories in the mainstream media today mainly involve the machinations of Obama and Mubarak or the positioning of spokesmen like Clinton and Suleiman, the real story is the transformation of people from passive recipients of dictatorial commands to active creators of momentum for change.

The writing is on the wall. The multitude in Cairo have appropriated the lessons of Bangkok's Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts, of Manila's Yellow Confetti (who toppled Marcos) and of the Chinese who occupied Tiananmen Square (but failed to accomplish their goals).

It would be nothing new if the US were to sacrifice yet another of its pet dictators on the altar of 'progress'.

What is newsworthy now is that people power has been embraced by the Arab masses. Whether or not the protests in Cairo succeed, the emergence of a proactive population is the key to escaping the rut of absolute rule.

The real question posed by protesters is not who is in power but the form of power itself. The ultimate goal of people power is the institutionalisation of popular forms of decision-making, which involves taking power from the elite and reconstituting it into grassroots forms.

This radical potential of the movement is precisely why the political elite of today's curry to implement the appearance of change - not system transformation, but only the rotation of personalities at the apex of power. It matters little whether Mubarak or his Head of Intelligence Omar Suleiman runs the country.

The young activists in Cairo have made Mubarak's ouster their starting point, but they know well that freedom does not simply mean replacing him with someone else.

What they need is a wholly new form of justice, recovery of the people's wealth that has been so scandalously appropriated by the rich, and the punishment of those responsible for decades of torture and dictatorship. And that's to say nothing of the recent slaughter of dozens of unarmed citizens in the streets.

It remains unclear who will emerge victorious in Egypt, whether people protesting peacefully will hold sway and move society to a higher level of democratisation.

Another possible outcome, which would appeal to Obama, who wants to preserve the status quo minus Mubarak, would be the possibility of missing the current opportunity for substantive democratic change.

*Katsiaficas, whose mother was born in Cairo, is a professor of humanities at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. He is currently completing Asia's Unknown Uprisings, a study of recent people power uprisings. He contributed this article to The Gazette.*

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