

The Obama administration and Egypt

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As the Obama administration confronts a growing revolutionary movement in Egypt, its tactics will flow from two overriding and inseparable strategic aims: defending the Egyptian capitalist state and maintaining the country as the linchpin of American imperialist operations in the Mediterranean, North Africa and throughout the Middle East. The working class in Egypt and its allies among the insurgent masses must not permit themselves the slightest illusions in the intentions and plans of President Obama. The president and his advisors in the Pentagon and the CIA are determined to contain, defuse and eventually crush the revolutionary movement.

The events of the past week took the administration by surprise. It did not foresee the mass revolt against Washington's longtime asset, Mubarak. Even as tens of thousands of workers and youth were defying police violence last Tuesday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was vouching for the stability of the regime.

The United States is heavily invested—politically, economically and militarily—in the Mubarak regime. Its reluctance to dispense summarily with the dictator is not an expression of sentimentality. Rather, the United States fears that the too rapid ditching of Mubarak will undermine the confidence of other dictators on the CIA payroll in the reliability of Washington. However, in the final analysis, Mubarak's fate is a secondary matter. Of incomparably greater concern to Washington is the survival of the Egyptian military and security services upon which capitalist rule depends.

At the moment, the Obama administration is concerned that an attempt to use the army to crack down on the protests could lead to the military's collapse. It is not certain that the troops can be relied on to shoot down citizens on the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said and other cities, which might be the only way to save Mubarak.

US policymakers are haunted by the precedent of the

Iranian revolution of 1979. Washington had not prepared a political alternative to the Shah, and the Iranian military cracked beneath the pressure of the revolution. The result was the loss of a critical client state in the Persian Gulf.

The policy being developed in Washington has, in the short term, two aims: to shore up the Egyptian military and intelligence apparatus—hence the appointment of intelligence chief and former general Omar Suleiman as vice president—and to prepare a political alternative to Mubarak if his removal proves necessary. But any replacement sanctioned by Washington will be nothing more than a puppet providing pseudo-democratic window dressing for a new military regime.

One candidate for the job is Mohamed ElBaradei, who is being promoted by the US media. A trusted representative of the Egyptian bourgeoisie, ElBaradei flew to Egypt from his home in Vienna last week for the explicit purpose of heading off a revolutionary overthrow and rescuing the bourgeois regime.

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The Muslim Brotherhood, for its part, has agreed to back ElBaradei as it makes its own bid for patronage from Washington.

In a series of television interviews on Sunday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton clearly indicated the basic outlines of the counterrevolutionary strategy being developed by the White House. She avoided calling for Mubarak's resignation while refusing to commit to his continued rule.

In line with the Obama administration's cynical calls for democratic reform in Egypt, Clinton made the ludicrous statement: "We continue to urge the Egyptian government, *as the United States has for 30 years*, to respond to the legitimate aspirations of the Egyptian people and begin to take concrete steps to implement democratic and economic reform." [Emphasis added].

Of what has this 30-year crusade for democratic reform in Egypt consisted? Plying Mubarak with \$35 billion in aid, overwhelmingly military, and lauding him as a staunch ally in the wars against Iraq, the defense of Israel and the “war on terror.” Not only has the US colluded in the regime’s murder and torture of political opponents, it has used Mubarak’s intelligence agencies and police as torturers-for-hire in Washington’s policy of kidnapping and “rendering” alleged terrorists.

Clinton added, “And we have to make the distinction, as they [the Egyptian army] are attempting to do, between peaceful protesters whose aspirations need to be addressed, and then those who take advantage of such a situation for looting and other criminal activity.”

Here Clinton is already distinguishing between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” forms of protest—the former being those that do not challenge US interests and the latter being those that do. She is laying down the political and pseudo-moral framework for justifying future mass repression.

Washington is aware that whatever government it sponsors will not end the political crisis in Egypt. It is impossible for any capitalist regime to meet a single one of the social or political demands of the masses—for jobs, an end to poverty in the cities and countryside, and the abolition of the brutally repressive police agencies. Nor will a bourgeois regime end Egypt’s alliance with Israel, which has been an essential component of the country’s strategic role in the Middle East since the trip of President Anwar Sadat, Mubarak’s predecessor, to Jerusalem in 1977. The venal Egyptian bourgeoisie is too complete an appendage of American imperialism to carry out such policies.

The Obama administration’s strategy, therefore, is to prepare the military, behind the façade of a phony “reform” administration, for a future brutal crackdown on the working class. One can be certain that behind the scenes, the Pentagon is conducting a detailed inventory of every regiment, brigade and branch of the Egyptian military to determine which forces can be relied upon.

The burning issue confronting the revolution is political leadership. The American ruling class is well aware of this fact. In an interview published Saturday, Jon B. Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington said, “As in

Tunisia, the protests appear to represent a largely leaderless movement with no clear agenda and no way to seize power.”

It is this political vacuum that American imperialism and its clients in the Egyptian ruling class seek to exploit.

The Egyptian working class is gaining confidence and experience. Throughout the country new forms of popular representation, independent of and hostile to the existing state, are beginning to emerge. But the development of the revolutionary forces requires a clear political strategy, based on an understanding of the historical background, international context and class dynamics of the revolutionary movement that is unfolding in Egypt and throughout the Middle East.

At this critical moment, the International Committee of the Fourth International issues this heartfelt appeal to the Egyptian working class and its allies among the students, youth and rural poor: The principles of Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, verified by the historical experiences of the twentieth century, are profoundly relevant to the struggle that is now unfolding. The victory of the revolution and your desire for democratic rights and equality can be achieved only on the basis of a socialist program and the struggle for power. No confidence whatever can be placed in any political representative of the capitalist class and its institutions. Look for allies not among the pseudo-democratic and compromised representatives of the national bourgeoisie, but, rather, among the working class throughout the world. As workers on every continent encounter ever more brutal attacks on their social conditions and democratic rights, they are drawing new inspiration from the revolutionary struggles that have begun in North Africa.

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