

Obama backs Mubarak's bid to retain power

Peter Symonds
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The battle lines in Egypt are being drawn. On the one side, huge protests in Cairo and other cities, estimated at more than a million, demanded that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and his regime immediately go. On the other, Mubarak thumbed his nose at the demonstrators and announced his intention to serve out his term of office until presidential elections due in September.

Shortly after Mubarak's speech, US President Barack Obama endorsed his Egyptian ally's plan to cling to office until September. In a brief White House address, Obama, who had just spoken to Mubarak for 30 minutes, reiterated the longstanding "partnership" between the United States and Egypt, spoke of the need for an immediate and orderly "transition" to democratic reform, and pointedly refused to back the popular demand for Mubarak to step down.

Obama's aim is all too clear: to keep Mubarak in office for as long as possible while fashioning a regime to prop up bourgeois rule and uphold the strategic and economic interests of US imperialism in the region. This inevitably means relying on the military to suppress popular opposition.

Obama's determination to back Mubarak exposes the rank hypocrisy of his declarations of support for "democracy" and the rights of the Egyptian people. Washington has relied on the Egyptian dictator as a cornerstone of American policy throughout the Middle East for the past three decades, tacitly sanctioning his regime's repression and even using its torturers for the US rendition program.

The US position stands in direct opposition to the sentiments of the Egyptian people, who turned out in their hundreds of thousands on Tuesday to call for an

immediate end to the present regime. In Cairo's Tahrir Square, demonstrators chanted: "He [Mubarak] goes, we are not going" and "Revolution! Revolution until victory!" Protestors carried signs simply declaring: "Game over," "Checkmate" and "Get out". A 19-year-old student told Bloomberg: "We want the whole regime to change, starting from Hosni Mubarak. We don't accept [Vice President] Omar Suleiman or anyone else."

Earlier in the day, protesters streamed into Cairo from other areas despite efforts to block travel to the city by halting train and bus services, and setting up roadblocks. Large protests were held as well in other major cities, including Suez and Alexandria, where tens of thousands participated.

Reports were vague about the impact of the call for an indefinite general strike, but many shops and businesses were closed. Cargo operations at the ports of Alexandria and Damietta were at a standstill. "Customs officials are not there. There is nobody to operate the cranes. You could say the country has effectively shut down," Dan Delany, a Lloyd's of London agent, told Reuters.

Expectations were high among the protesters. News agencies reported a festive atmosphere. But the mood quickly changed to disbelief and denunciation following Mubarak's speech. The CNN correspondent on the spot in Tahrir Square declared that she had never seen the crowd so angry. Some declared the speech an insult. Others waved their shoes in the air to show extreme disapproval. Large crowds remained in the square in defiance of the night-time curfew.

Mubarak's speech contained a definite threat. While declaring that the young people who had initiated the

protests had legitimate grievances, the president added that the opposition movement had been “exploited” by political groups that wanted to destroy the constitution and others who engaged in looting. After announcing that he would stand aside in September, Mubarak declared that it was his responsibility in the coming months to “establish stability” and alluded to measures to deal with those involved in criminal acts.

Mubarak and the Obama administration are clearly counting on the military to contain and ultimately suppress the mass opposition to the dictator’s continued rule. To date, the army has declared that it will not use force to silence “legitimate” demands for reform. But as one US official told Associated Press, the military leadership is allowing protestors to “wear themselves out”. Behind the scenes, the generals are making their preparations for repression when they judge that the time is right.

In his comments yesterday, Obama hypocritically declared that it was not “the role of any other country to determine Egypt’s leaders”. Yet US officials were frantically engaged in discussions throughout the day to do precisely that. While US special envoy Frank Wisner spoke to leading figures in the Mubarak government, Defence Secretary Robert Gates was sounding out the military hierarchy in a phone conversation with his Egyptian counterpart, Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi.

Obama’s short speech was the outcome of these deliberations. The White House has decided to throw its weight behind the present regime, rather than turn to an untested coalition of opposition parties headed by Mohammed ElBaradei.

While Obama called for the “transition” process to begin now and to include opposition figures, any involvement will be on Washington’s terms. In effect, the US has rejected the proposals of the opposition National Association for Change for an emergency transitional government, which would include Vice President Suleiman and army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Sami Annan, to oversee constitutional change and new parliamentary elections.

In response to Mubarak’s speech, ElBaradei declared that the regime had lost its legitimacy, adding that only the president’s resignation would bring stability. At the same time, however, he held a phone conversation with the US ambassador to Egypt, Margaret Scobey. Other opposition leaders have begun talks with Vice President Suleiman, according to *Al Arabiya*, despite previous declarations that Mubarak had to first go.

Far from representing the interests of working people, these opposition groups are functioning as vital safety valves to dissipate the anti-Mubarak uprising.

The movement is facing serious dangers. None of the demands of those protesting on the streets for basic democratic rights and decent living standards can be met by any section of the Egyptian bourgeoisie—either Mubarak and his cronies or the various opposition figures and parties that now posture as “democrats”. The working class can fight for its interests only by mobilising independently and drawing to its side sections of young people and the urban and rural poor in the revolutionary struggle for a workers’ government and socialist policies.



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