Mubarak resignation staggers Obama administration

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Obama administration officials reacted to yesterday's ouster of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak with hypocritical declarations of solidarity with the democratic aspirations of the Egyptian masses. Their comments barely disguised, however, the alarm they felt at the downfall of a dictator the US government has backed for 31 years.

In a perfunctory six-minute address, after which he took no questions, President Obama declared the United States to be a "friend and partner to Egypt." He praised the "moral force of nonviolence" as the principle underlying the protests, saying it "bent the arc of history toward justice once more."

Obama's pompous attempt to portray Washington as sympathetic to the Egyptian masses is the height of hypocrisy. The US government made its support for Mubarak quite clear in the midst of the wave of massive strikes and protests that ultimately forced him from power.

When Mubarak gave his February 1 speech defying popular demands that he leave office, Obama made a 30-minute phone call to the Egyptian president, after which Obama reiterated the "partnership" between the US and Egypt and called for a "transition" to democracy. At the same time, former US ambassador to Egypt Frank Wisner traveled to Cairo to sound out the leadership of the Mubarak regime.

The US promoted Mubarak's aide, Vice President Omar Suleiman—the spy chief who worked with US intelligence agencies to torture detainees sent to Egypt for interrogation by the US "rendition" program—while backing a continued role for Mubarak. Just one week ago, Wisner told the Munich Security Conference, "President Mubarak remains utterly critical in the days ahead as we sort our way toward the future." He insisted that Mubarak "stay in office in order to steer those changes through."

There was also more tangible evidence of where Washington's sympathies lay. Egyptian protestors found that tear gas and concussion grenades fired at them by police were stamped "Made in the USA." This was part of the broader US policy of funding Mubarak's army and police forces to the hilt, to the tune of $1.3 billion per year, over a period of decades.

Obama's invocation of the principle of nonviolence is likewise empty and false. The Egyptian government paid it no heed, killing hundreds and torturing or "disappearing" thousands of protestors. The protestors were also compelled to discard it, to defend themselves in street battles from police and pro-Mubarak thugs armed with knives, Molotov cocktails, studded clubs, and other weapons.

If the Obama administration has gone along with the removal of Mubarak, it is doubtless because it agreed with the Egyptian generals' assessment: they could not organize an effective suppression of the millions of people opposing Mubarak with Egypt's conscript army. Instead, they decided to pin their hopes on a new cabal of generals in Cairo.

This does not signify, however, any change of Washington's policy of using all means necessary to secure US imperialism's interests in Egypt. Egypt controls the critical Suez Canal waterway, is a fast-growing cheap-labor industrial power, maintains a

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critical peace treaty with Israel, and occupies a central political and cultural role in the Arab world. In the eyes of Washington, the services Mubarak offered to American imperialism far outweighed his crimes against his people.

Washington is now seized with fear that a future government in Egypt might not be as amenable to the interests of US imperialism, as the population of the country is overwhelmingly opposed to the US policy of repression and control of the Middle East. Indeed, the Brookings Institute think-tank recently published an article by Daniel L. Byman, titled “Democracy in Egypt: What are the Risks to the United States?”

Byman wrote: “Mubarak, after all, was a friend—a brutal, corrupt, and despotic friend, but a friend nonetheless. His regime was as pro-American as is conceivable for Egypt. Any replacement government that reflected the will of the Egyptian people would keep far more distance from Washington.”

Byman called Israel the “stickiest issue” in terms of US relations with a new Egyptian regime.

Obama’s departing press secretary, Robert Gibbs, took up Byman’s concerns in his final press conference. As if unable to stop himself from addressing Egypt as a colonial country, he informed the Egyptian people: “It is important that the next government of Egypt recognize the accords that have been signed with Israel.”

While Gibbs declared that “I don’t think that we have to fear democracy,” his answers indicated otherwise. Asked if he supported calls for democracy in Saudi Arabia and Jordan—two US-backed monarchies that brutally repress their populations—Gibbs demurred: “It’s not our role to make that kind of statement.”

US Vice President Joseph Biden made a crude attempt to turn the revolutionary events in Egypt into grist for the US imperialist propaganda campaign against Iran. “The government of Iran should allow the Iranian people the same universal right to peacefully assemble, demonstrate, and communicate in Tehran that the people are exercising in Cairo,” he declared. This was a shameless attempt to erase the fact that this “universal right” was seized by the Egyptian people at the cost of hundreds killed and thousands of protestors “disappeared” or wounded by an Egyptian regime that he and his administration supported.

Just a week ago, Biden declared in an interview that Mubarak was his “friend” and insisted that he should not step down.

Such comments underscore the cynicism with which US officials treat the invocation of “democracy”—as yet another component of their foreign policy toolkit, along with cluster bombs and rendition.

As the Obama administration's reaction to events in Egypt shows, the moment a genuine revolutionary movement of the working class emerges in Iran—challenging the regime from the left and not the right—the US administration will take an entirely different attitude.

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