

Obama's cold-blooded defense of Egyptian regime

Bill Van Auken
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The Obama administration's cynical and reactionary policy toward Egypt won telling praise Monday from the right-wing *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat. Entitled "Obama the realist," Douthat's column ostensibly defended Obama from right-wing criticism.

"On nearly every anti-terror front, from detainee policy to drone strikes, the Obama administration has been...maintaining or even expanding the powers that George W. Bush claimed in the aftermath of 9/11," the column states.

While noting that the administration's "entire approach to international affairs looks like a continuation of the Condoleezza Rice-Robert Gates phase of the Bush administration," Douthat adds approvingly that "Obama's response to the Egyptian crisis has crystallized his entire foreign policy vision."

Dismissing criticism from the likes of Fox News, he adds: "It's clear that the administration's real goal has been to dispense with Mubarak while keeping the dictator's military subordinates very much in charge. If the Obama White House has its way, any opening to democracy will be carefully stage-managed by an insider like Omar Suleiman, the former general and Egyptian intelligence chief who's best known in Washington for his cooperation with the C.I.A.'s rendition program. This isn't softheaded peacenik dithering. It's cold-blooded realpolitik."

These observations are substantially correct. What is to account for the Obama administration's policy?

The upheavals that have gripped Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and smaller cities and towns in this ancient nation of 80 million are not part of some color-coded "revolution," coordinated between Washington and privileged social layers to oust a regime that is out of sync with US policy and interests.

On the contrary, the Egyptian uprising has been dominated by the working class and its demands for an end to the mass unemployment, pervasive poverty and grotesque levels of social inequality that are the defining features of present day Egypt. It has deeply shaken one of Washington's most valued and long-standing client states in the geo-strategically critical region of the Middle East.

Some in the media have described the Obama administration as bumbling in relation to the Egyptian events, its policy supposedly characterized by "mixed messages" and an appearance of being "at sea."

The administration went from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's description of the Mubarak regime as stable and Vice President Joe Biden's praise for the dictator to, just days later, Obama's declarations of solidarity with the demonstrators and calls for an immediate and "orderly transition," which was widely interpreted in the media as a call for Mubarak's resignation. This was followed by a declaration on the part of the White House spokesman that the time for this transition was "yesterday."

Then, over the weekend, came the public statement by Frank Wisner, the former ambassador to Cairo tapped by the Obama administration to serve as its envoy to Mubarak.

Speaking at a security conference in Munich, Wisner declared, "President Mubarak remains utterly critical in the days ahead as we sort our way toward the future." He added that the dictator "must stay in office in order to steer those changes through."

The State Department immediately responded that Wisner was speaking in a personal capacity and had not cleared his remarks first with the US government. While mortified that Wisner had the audacity to say publicly what the administration—behind all its phony

rhetoric about democracy—is actually doing, no one disputed the content of Wisner’s statement. White House spokesman Robert Gibbs found a somewhat more elegant way to echo Wisner’s view, declaring that the issue was one of “process not personality.”

Unifying the various fluctuations in the administration’s statements are the basic interests of the US financial elite and its state apparatus, committed to maintaining Egypt as a key bulwark of repression and reaction throughout the Middle East.

The administration’s choice of Wisner for an envoy was no mistake. He is a man who embodies the deep concern of US imperialism in the fate of the Mubarak regime. Wisner went from being a US ambassador to a key player in the Democratic Party-linked lobbying firm, Patton Boggs, which counts Mubarak and the Egyptian regime among its premier clients.

Among the services rendered by the firm is ironing out any wrinkles in the \$1.3 billion in US military aid that is dispensed to the Egyptian regime annually. These massive sums are not funneled solely into the pockets of the Egyptian military brass and Mubarak’s multibillion-dollar bank accounts. Of the \$60 billion in total US aid supplied since Mubarak came to power 30 years ago, half has been doled out to major US military contractors, who depend upon the aid package—second only to the one delivered to Israel—for a substantial share of their profits.

Thus, the aerospace giant Lockheed-Martin won a \$213 million contract last year to supply the Egyptian air force with 20 F-16 fighter jets. Raytheon was awarded \$26 million to provide Egypt with stinger missiles. Boeing got \$22.5 million last year to produce Apache helicopters for the Egyptian Army. The list of contractors, both household names and those familiar only within the military industrial complex, goes on and on.

The aim of the Obama administration in Egypt is of a piece with the profit interests of these giant US-based corporations. It is determined to keep in power a regime that remains dominated by the Egyptian military and subservient to the interests of the US and Israel.

To that end, it has directed its attention increasingly to the man Mubarak recently appointed as his vice president, Omar Suleiman, the longtime chief of military intelligence. Suleiman earned Washington’s trust by lending his services as an experienced torturer

to the “extraordinary rendition” program inaugurated by the CIA under the Clinton administration and vastly expanded under Bush.

Hillary Clinton made it clear during her trip to Munich over the weekend that the administration is backing Suleiman as the steward of the “orderly transition.” She voiced concerns over a report—later proven to be bogus—of an attempt to assassinate Suleiman and over claims that an oil pipeline in the Sinai was bombed. The implications were clear: Egypt’s “democratic transition” requires the strong hand of a secret police chief with no qualms when it comes to killing and torture.

The cold-blooded realpolitik praised in the *New York Times* will inevitably mean the shedding of real blood in the streets of Cairo and other Egyptian cities as workers and young people resist this US-backed attempt to maintain a corrupt and oppressive regime.

That such policies are openly defended in the pages of the *Times* and broadly throughout the media and the political establishment speaks not just to the criminal and reactionary character of US foreign policy. It is symptomatic of the absence of any constituency for democratic rights within the US ruling elite itself.

Sitting on top of a country which, in terms of the Gini coefficient, the standard measure of income distribution, is significantly more unequal than Egypt itself, the billionaire pharaohs of Wall Street instinctively hate the mass revolutionary uprising of the Egyptian workers, fearing that conditions of mass unemployment, growing poverty, social inequality and a government that is completely indifferent to the interests and demands of the people will unleash similar upheavals in the US itself.

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