

Hosni Mubarak, US-backed dictator of Egypt for 30 years, dead at 91

Bill Van Auken
26 February 2020

Hosni Mubarak, a former air force commander who ruled Egypt with an iron hand for three decades before his overthrow by a mass popular uprising in 2011, died Tuesday at a Cairo military hospital at the age of 91.

While hated by the masses of Egyptians and disgraced at the end of his life by jail and convictions on corruption charges, he died with his legacy secured in the form of the current military regime of Gen. Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, which is even more repressive than the one that Mubarak himself headed.

The Sisi regime issued a statement proclaiming Mubarak a “military leader and war hero,” while remaining silent on his three decades as head of the Egyptian state. It announced that he would receive a military funeral at an unspecified date.

The most heartfelt condolences for the hated dictator came from Israel’s right-wing government, with which Mubarak’s regime maintained its unilateral “peace” accord at the expense of the Palestinian people. “On behalf of the citizens and government of Israel, I would like to express deep sorrow on the passing of President Hosni Mubarak. President Mubarak, my personal friend, was a leader who led his people to peace and security, to peace with Israel,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement.

Mubarak’s death came just one month after the ninth anniversary of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. The January 25 anniversary saw a blanket of state repression in Cairo, with a heavy police presence in every major square to dissuade anyone from marking the mass popular upheaval that brought Mubarak down. In advance of the anniversary, security forces raided and shut down major restaurants in downtown Cairo, searching customer’s bags and mobile phones. Anyone found with even vaguely political messages or posts on their Facebook pages were arrested and hauled away in police cars. Those refusing to turn over their phones were also arrested.

Since seizing power in a bloody military coup in 2013, overthrowing Egypt’s elected president, Mohammed Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood and massacring over 1,000 of his followers, including women and children, the Sisi regime has imprisoned an estimated 60,000 people, sentenced over 1,000 to death and carried out systematic torture in its prisons.

In March 2017, the regime dictated a ruling by Egypt’s supreme court that overturned Mubarak’s 2012 conviction and life prison sentence in connection with the slaughter of over 800 unarmed demonstrators during the first days of the Egyptian revolution. While he was immediately released, the courts failed to overturn his conviction on corruption charges, no doubt also at the orders of a Sisi regime anxious to divert attention from its own rampant embezzlement and corruption.

Mubarak’s conditions of imprisonment, confined to a hospital where he freely received visits from family and cohorts, contrasted sharply with those of the deposed Muslim Brotherhood President Mursi, who was held for years under conditions tantamount to torture and collapsed dead in the

prisoners’ dock last year while on trial for his life.

The rise of Mubarak was bound up with the evolution of the Arab bourgeois nationalist movement led by Gen. Col. Gamal Abdul Nasser. Born in 1928 to the family of a janitor in a rural village in the Nile Delta province of Monufiya, he went to military school and joined the Egyptian Air Force in 1950. This was two years before the Free Officers Movement, a dissident movement of junior officers drawn from Egypt’s petty bourgeoisie who were veterans of the 1948 war with Israel, was to overthrow the British puppet monarchy of King Farouk in a successful coup d’état. Within 11 months of the coup, the military-controlled regime abolished the monarchy, established the Republic of Egypt and initiated a limited agrarian reform based on the redistribution of lands belonging to the monarchy and sections of the aristocracy.

Nasser became president in 1954, a position he would hold until his death in 1970. He won mass popular support with his nationalization of the Suez Canal, triggering an Israeli, British and French invasion in the Suez crisis of 1956, that ultimately failed thanks in large measure to pressure from Washington against the former colonial powers.

Promoting a program of “Arab socialism” at home and Pan-Arabism and the non-aligned movement abroad, Nasser was able to institute a program of limited economic and social reforms, nationalizing many of the country’s industries and banks. This was thanks to the specific historical conditions of the post-war capitalist economic boom, on the one hand, and the ability of bourgeois nationalist movements to balance between US imperialism and the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy, on the other.

Crucial to the consolidation of his regime was the ruthless suppression of a powerful movement of the Egyptian working class, whose militant leaders were executed or jailed. Among them were many members of the Stalinist Communist Party, whose leadership, basing itself on the Stalinist “two-stage theory” of revolution, worked to subordinate the working class to Nasserism and ultimately liquidated itself into Nasser’s ruling party, known as the Arab Socialist Union.

While other Arab bourgeois nationalist movements sought to emulate Nasserism, the Egyptian president’s efforts at forging a Pan-Arab state ran aground on the conflicting interests of the national bourgeois ruling elites that sought to hold onto the old borders and state structures inherited from colonialism as guarantors of their own power and privilege.

While Nasser retained a mass popular base—his funeral in 1970 was attended by some 5 million people—by the time of his death, Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 war with Israel and the drain of its military intervention in Yemen had taken a toll on both his anti-imperialist standing and his economic nationalism at home, with resources for social reform diverted into war spending, and the economic growth enjoyed during the early 1960s slowing sharply.

Before his death, Nasser had embraced a US-brokered agreement, the so-called Rogers Plan, that called for an end to hostilities with Israel and an Israeli withdrawal from occupied Egyptian territory. The plan was

rejected, however, by Israel, the Palestine Liberation Organization and all Arab states except Jordan. At the same time, within Egypt he relaxed controls on private capitalist enterprises and the state monopoly on foreign trade.

Nasser was succeeded by another former member of the Free Officers Movement, Anwar Sadat, who sharply accelerated the rightward turn of the Egyptian government while maintaining its dictatorial control. Sadat shed Nasserism's socialist pretensions, opened up the country to foreign capital and slashed subsidies, triggering widespread food riots in 1977. He created the conditions for the rapid enrichment and corruption of government-connected layers of the Egyptian elite along with ever-widening social inequality.

He also broke close ties with the Soviet Union, turning decisively toward alignment with US imperialism. This was to culminate in the signing of the 1978 Camp David Accords, which represented not a "Middle East peace" agreement, but rather the rapprochement between the Egyptian bourgeois government and both Tel Aviv and Washington, at the expense of the Palestinian people.

It was during this right-wing turn under Sadat that Mubarak rose rapidly from chief of staff of the air force to commander of the air force and deputy minister of defense in 1972, and then to vice president in 1975.

He became head of state in October 1981, after Islamist military personnel hostile to the Camp David deal broke off from a parade to shoot Sadat to death as he sat in the reviewing stand alongside Mubarak, who emerged relatively unscathed.

Mubarak continued and accelerated Sadat's rightward turn, cementing a close alliance with Washington, which granted Egypt \$1.2 billion in annual aid, second only to Israel. He implemented International Monetary Fund "structural adjustment" programs, scrapping state monopolies, slashing subsidies, cutting corporate taxes and expanding the private sector. The social consequences for the working class were devastating, even as corruption flourished and the ruling elite accumulated ever greater wealth. To maintain this social order, Mubarak ruled through a harshly repressive dictatorship.

There is an undeniable continuity between the dictatorial repression of the working class under Nasser, carried out in the name of Arab socialism and nationalism, and the methods utilized under both Sadat and Mubarak—and now Sisi—as the Egyptian military and the bourgeois class interests that it defends moved firmly into the orbit of US imperialism. The fate of Nasserism paralleled that of bourgeois nationalist movements and so-called independent paths of economic development throughout the former colonial world.

Significantly, in a "chronology" of Mubarak's life published by the government-controlled Ahramonline, there are no entries between 1950, when he joined the air force, and 1982, when as president he marked the recovery from Israel of Egyptian control over the Sinai Peninsula. Clearly, the entire history from the rise Nasser to the completion of Cairo's rapprochement with US imperialism remains too explosive for the Egyptian bourgeoisie to even mention.

Deepening social inequality and hostility to a regime that ruled through police-state killings, imprisonment and torture, while enriching top officials, including the Mubaraks themselves, finally erupted in the mass uprising of 2011 which saw millions take to the streets all over Egypt.

While international attention was focused on the dramatic clashes in Tahrir Square, the decisive role in bringing down Mubarak was played by the Egyptian working class, which carried out a wave of strikes and occupations at factories all across Egypt, the culmination of a long period of strikes and protests by workers against social cuts, privatizations and the looting of state assets by the criminal and corrupt ruling elite.

The successful overthrow by the working class of a US-backed dictatorship that had ruled Egypt for 30 years had immense international significance, heralding a new period of global revolutionary struggle.

From the outset of the Egyptian revolution, however, the basic problem was and continues to be the absence of a revolutionary political leadership in the working class.

The day before Mubarak was forced from power, the chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board, David North, warned in a Perspective column that "the greatest danger confronting Egyptian workers is that, after providing the essential social force to wrest power from the hands of an aging dictator, nothing of political substance will change except the names and faces of some of the leading personnel."

The Perspective continued: "In other words, the capitalist state will remain intact. Political power and control over economic life will remain in the hands of the Egyptian capitalists, backed by the military, and their imperialist overlords in Europe and North America. Promises of democracy and social reform will be repudiated at the first opportunity, and a new regime of savage repression will be instituted.

"These dangers are not exaggerated. The entire history of revolutionary struggle in the twentieth century proves that the struggle for democracy and for the liberation of countries oppressed by imperialism can be achieved, as Leon Trotsky insisted in his theory of permanent revolution, only by the conquest of power by the working class on the basis of an internationalist and socialist program."

This assessment has been tragically confirmed by the developments that followed the mass uprising of 2011. The burning question posed by this revolutionary upheaval was that of establishing the political independence of the working class from all of the various bourgeois forces vying to succeed Mubarak, combating every illusion in the "progressive" potential of the military officers who rushed to assume control, bourgeois "liberal" parties and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The diametrically opposite role was played by the petty-bourgeois pseudo left in Egypt, represented by the so-called Revolutionary Socialists (RS), which reflected the interests of affluent sections of the upper-middle class, and whose reactionary and sinister politics dovetailed with those of the US State Department.

Initially claiming that the military junta that replaced Mubarak would grant reforms, the RS then sought to channel the continuing opposition of the working class behind the Muslim Brotherhood, claiming that its electoral victory in 2012 represented a "victory for the revolution." When working class opposition again developed against Mursi and his Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013, the RS lauded the pro-military Tamarod campaign as "a road to complete the revolution," thereby helping to pave the way to the July 2013 military coup (which the RS initially welcomed as a "second revolution") and the rise of General Sisi's regime of counterrevolutionary terror.

With the emergence of a new wave of mass revolutionary struggles in the Middle East and across the planet, the vital lessons of the mass struggles that brought an end to the dictatorship of Mubarak are more vital than ever. The fundamental question remains that of building a revolutionary party based upon an uncompromising struggle for the political independence of the working class and the program of permanent revolution. Such parties must be built as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Egypt and across the Middle East.



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