

A MaozNews Bulletin

In the wake of unrest in Egypt and the Muslim Arab world

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US Initiatives

At a daily news briefing on Tuesday, Feb. 8, White House Spokesman Robert Gibbs criticized Egyptian vice President Omar Suleiman for saying his country was not ready for a democracy, calling his comments "unhelpful." Asked about Suleiman's comment, made in an interview with ABC, that Egypt lacks the necessary "culture of democracy" for the changes demanded by protesters, such as freedom of speech and the right to organize opposition parties, Gibbs said the words went contrary to what was happening on the streets of Cairo and elsewhere in Egypt. "Vice President Suleiman made some particularly unhelpful comments about Egypt not being ready for democracy," Gibbs said, adding, "I don't think that in any way squares with what those seeking greater opportunity and freedom think is a timetable for progress." Apparently, Mr. Gibbs knows more about Egypt than Omar Suleiman.

At the same time, US Vice President Joe Biden reached out to his Egyptian counterpart on Tuesday with a phone call during which he reiterated U.S. support for an orderly transition of power in Egypt. He also called for the immediate lifting of Egypt's longstanding emergency law and reiterated the U.S. stance that any future Egyptian government "be determined by the Egyptian people."

A senior US administration official told CNN on condition of not being identified that the Egyptian government was "doing the kinds of things that need to be done, but they have to now deliver and Biden outlined some specific things that will demonstrate that they're delivering." The essential question, according to the official, was whether Egyptian leaders were "truly willing to cede power to somebody else. Are they truly going to deliver change or are they trying to put a veneer on this process and finesse the next few months without actually delivering change?" the official added. "There's a sense that the government can wait out the protesters. But then what? We're confident the protesters are not going away."

The present US Administration believes that democracy is a commodity that can (and should) be marketed worldwide. Modern-day Russia is no more of a democracy than Chechnya, although both held one-man one-vote elections. Whence comes the arrogance that allows a foreign President, however powerful, to intervene in the internal affairs of another nation?!

Egyptian Political Realities

At the present, there seems to be no viable Egyptian alternative to President Mubarak or the mechanisms which he controls. The demonstrators in Tahrir Square are following the age-old demand for vengeance, fortified by years of Arab desert wanderings. Beyond the removal of President Mubarak, they have no program and offer no viable alternative. Should Mubarak abdicate, Egypt will descend into chaos.

The lack of an alternative leadership is apparent from the plethora of conflicting remarks made by public figures, journalists and representatives in the name of the demonstrators. A hastily assembled group was set up – apart from any democratic process – which includes several public figures, including Prof. Ahmed Zewail, a Nobel Prize laureate living in Los Angeles, Amr Moussa, the Secretary General of the Arab League, and the Copt billionaire Naguib Sawiris. Last week they published a "road map" for reforming the system of government on a gradual basis while holding negotiations with Omar Suleiman, Mubarak's Vice President. But when some of the representatives of the youth movements, who are active in the demonstrations, were asked whether they endorsed the talks, they replied that the group does not represent them and that no one consulted them.

The Muslim Brotherhood has said it is willing negotiate with Suleiman, if their prior conditions are met. But the demonstrators insist that the Brotherhood does not represent them either. The Kifaya movement considers itself as the leader of the protests and insist on having a say in whatever arrangement is finally achieved.

The opposition activist Ayman Nour, who lost the last presidential elections, insists that he is the alternative leader, but that view is not held by the official opposition parties such as Al-Wafd and Al-Tagamo, which are negotiating with Suleiman. The two parties represent only a fraction of voters and are not viewed as worthy alternatives.

Meanwhile, American support of the protests is costing the protestors their moral legitimacy in the eyes of the Egyptian and wider Arab public.

Mubarak is prepared to enact reforms opening up the democratic process, but his proposed concessions have not been met with acceptance. The demonstrators seem to prefer Mubarak's head to the reforms for which they are clamoring. He insists that any changes be conducted in an orderly and constitutional manner, in recognition of the fact that that extensive

transformation requires a process in which the people are equipped to take their fate into their own hands. He has insisted on remaining in power through the end of his term in September instead of ceding to demands for his immediate ouster by the protesters and opposition figures. Suleiman also says Mubarak must remain in power until the next election for the transition to be orderly.

Egyptian Demographics, Education and Economy

Unlike most Arab States, that were carved out of what was then Arabia following the First World War, Egypt has had a long history. It has been a united political entity for over 5,000 years, a period which naturally lends itself to heightened national identity. Lebanon is divided between finely-balanced Muslims (most of whom are Shiites), Christians (most of whom are Maronites) and Druze. Syria is ruled by a determined but miniscule Alawi minority. Eighty percent of Jordan's population is of Palestinian origin. But Egypt has a 90% Muslim-Egyptian majority.

Ninety eight percent of Egypt's population inhabits 2% of its land, along the Nile, in Cairo and Alexandria; on the banks of the Nile; in the Nile delta and along the Suez Canal. These are among the world's most densely populated regions, containing an average of over 3,820 persons per square mile (1,540 per sq. km.), as compared to about 200 persons per sq. mi. for the country as a whole. Most of the land is stark desert.

In 1950, Egypt's population was 22 million. In 2,000 it was 66 million. It is 83 million today and expected to be over 100 million in 2030. At least 85% of the population is under 30, many of whom are educated but unemployed. The median age is 24. Just over 30% of the population are subsistence farmers and another 37% are low-skill workers.

Public debt equals 80.9% of the GDP. Some 40% of the population live on under \$2 a day, half of which scratch a living of under \$1 a day while the Egyptian economy, affected by the world's economic slow-down, was reduced from 7% in 2008 to 4/9% in 2009 and only slightly picked up to 5.2% in 2010. This makes even the slightest rise in the cost of food a matter of threatened existence. Yet food prices are rising all over the world. Russia has ceased exporting wheat, Australia's wheat exports have been greatly reduced and USA farmers are moving from wheat farming to crops from which bio-fuel may be derived.

In 2010 (final figures are not yet available), Egypt was estimated to have imported goods to the value of 46.5 Billion Dollars and to have imported less than half that amount. The difference is made up by Foreign aid, mainly from the USA and the International Monetary Fund. Egypt's main exports are natural gas, textile, clothing and cotton, medical and petrochemical products, citrus, rice ,dried onion, cement, steel, and

ceramics. It has no significant industry, a sparse scientific community and no significant industrial export apart from textiles and clothing. Added value is, therefore, very low.

Most Egyptians are Muslim, but they are Egyptian first. The Muslim Brotherhood, established in Egypt in 1928, has been a persecuted but significant and well organized minority. It was the Brotherhood that organized and carried out the assassination of President Anwar Sa'adat because he had signed a peace treaty with Israel.

Literacy in Egypt is at 71% (the US State Department estimates it to be 58%), 83% of the male population and 59% of the female. Primary school education is at 100% and most complete their primary education (8 years). The figure of over 15-year olds who can read and write is at 71.4%. Secondary level of schooling is at 77% of all eligible students. Thirty percent enroll for tertiary education but only half of that number achieve a BA or a BSc. The overwhelming majority does not read so much as a single book per decade.

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