
Africa

Egypt's Mubarak target of upheaval

by Thierry Lalevée

The riots which erupted in Cairo on Feb. 25, and in the upper Egypt cities of Assiut, Sohag, and Isma'iliyah on the Suez Canal, did not represent a spontaneous social revolt, but the first phase of a well-orchestrated plot aimed at the overthrow of the regime of President Hosni Mubarak. Leading the riots in Cairo were some 8,000 conscripts of police anti-riot security units. In other cities, and specifically in Assiut, the riots involved similar police conscripts and Islamic fundamentalist elements, and continued sporadically for several days.

The alleged cause were rumors that the conscripts would have their military service extended from three to four years, along with a monthly pay-cut. Both measures were denounced as mere rumors by Information Minister Sawfat Sharif on Feb. 26.

As hours passed, however, it became obvious that these riots were no spontaneous outburst. The first riots erupted in Cairo the night of Feb. 25. Some 8,000 conscripts left the police garrison in the quarter of Gizah, close to the Pyramids, and attacked and torched three tourist hotels. A large number of rioters then went into downtown Cairo, while others went to the village of Turah close to Helwan and attacked the main jail, freeing most of its prisoners. Beside a couple of British drug smugglers, the jail primarily contained hardcore terrorists from the Islamic fundamentalist groups, al Jihad and Tawfikir wal Higrā—both of which were involved in Anwar Sadat's assassination in September 1981, and subsequent actions against the Mubarak regime.

Simultaneously, riots erupted in other parts of the capital, around the airport, cutting the main road to Alexandria, and in other Egyptian cities.

Evidence of a well-orchestrated plot has since emerged. First, "spontaneous" riots do not erupt simultaneously in many different cities. This implied that, at the very least, a special network within the police had planned the operation in advance. Second, according to Sawfat Sharif, many of the conscripts, when arrested, were found with amounts of money four to five times their wages. What kind of organization could afford such payments? Third, how did the conscripts come so quickly into possession of so many weapons? Fourth,

there is the matter of the clearly pre-planned attack against Turah jail.

After a two-hour cabinet meeting, President Mubarak declared on Feb. 25 that many questions cannot be answered yet. He warned that there would be no leniency for those responsible for so much damage in Cairo and elsewhere. He also hinted at the involvement of foreign forces, but either he could not, or chose not, to say more.

As soon as news of the riots spread, both Radio Damascus and Radio Tripoli heralded the rioters as "national heroes." The Syrian broadcasts characterized the riots as in solidarity with "Arab National Hero and Martyr Abu Khater"—the military conscript who shot six Israelis in the Sinai last October and committed suicide in jail after being condemned to life imprisonment. His cause was immediately taken up by the countries of the rejectionist front, as well as Islamic fundamentalist organizations within Egypt which staged demonstration denouncing Mubarak for "murder."

To whose benefit?

Egypt, under the same sort of International Monetary Fund program that has been wrecking the Philippines and other nations, is in a catastrophic economic situation. That economic crisis has both fed discontent, and is now to be the pretext for a well organized social upheaval.

At the end of January, the *Financial Times* ran a lengthy analysis warning of coming social unrest and predicting that the "Army will not accept such unrest and will have to step in." On Feb. 27, the regional *Mainz Allgemeine Zeitung* of West Germany announced on its front page that the riots were a plot by "Defense Minister Abu Ghazalah to stage a military takeover." Similar assessments were circulating in Cairo on Feb. 26. Many had wondered why the army took so long to react to the riots.

However, the almost unanimous reaction of political layers in Cairo, and elsewhere in North Africa, was that Mubarak is "receiving the Marcos treatment"—a statement based on facts. Inside Egypt, the U.S. ambassador until a month ago was Nicholas Veliotis, assisted by political officer Henry Precht—the former director of the Iran desk of the State Department under Jimmy Carter; they have been openly courting Mubarak's opponents, from Marxists to Islamic fundamentalists.

The State Department has pressured the Egyptian government, time and again, to implement the entirety of the IMF austerity program—which, when briefly implemented in 1977, provoked nationwide riots.

Investigation of the riots must begin with the U.S. State Department policy toward Egypt and its personnel in Egypt. Then, the implications may become clear of articles which appeared in the *Financial Times* of London and the *Wall Street Journal* of New York on Feb. 27, attacking the "uninspiring leadership of President Mubarak."