

The road to the Middle East runs through Cairo

The uprising has swept like a wave across Egypt have sent shudders through the police state of Hosni Mubarak. By the end of the first week, Cairo, Suez and the port of Alexandria, the industrial towns of the Nile Delta, Luxor, Aswan had all seen huge protest movements on the streets. The day of Anger on Friday at the end of January saw the largest demonstrations since the 1977 unrest over cuts in bread subsidies.

Years of pent up anger, just like in Tunisia and Yemen and Jordan, triggered by rising prices, have burst onto the streets. The first day of February saw as many as two million on to the streets determined that Mubarak should go.

The sheer courage and determination of the protestors – unemployed workers, students, engineers, industrial workers, intellectuals, street traders, young people, football fans, old people and many others helping from the sidelines – has forced Mubarak to his knees.

The repression has been vicious. Hospital sources said at least 13 people were killed in Suez and five in Cairo in one day. The death toll now looks close to 200. Thousands have been wounded.

Protestors have been doused in teargas, peppered with rubber bullets, hosed down by water canon, and beaten. Yet they have every time held their ground. The capital had been flooded with so many police that it seemed impossible the columns of protesters could break through to reach the centre. Yet they did.

The police, plain clothes and in uniform, have been revealed as thugs. They are increasingly being replaced by the army in guarding government buildings and other key areas around the capital.

Mubarak has tried to brand the protestors as looters but the movement is focussed on political targets. They set fire to the headquarters of the governing National

Democratic  
attempted to  
and the



party (NDP) and  
occupy the state TV  
foreign ministry.

The spark was the Tunisian uprising. Egyptians suffered under not only a repressive police state but also rocketing inflation. Unlike Tunisia, however, the unions have not been to the fore in organising the protests. The lighted match was the student movement which called the January 25<sup>th</sup> day of anger that flamed into the series of mass protests. The student April 6 movement was one of the organising forces of the January 25<sup>th</sup> day of anger that sparked the series of mass protests.

Elections held in November were condemned by the opposition and human rights groups as fraudulent after they produced a parliament with almost no opposition representation. One demonstrator, a government worker in Cairo, explained to a foreign reporter that people are suffering from basic material wants but also from frustration and a lack of dignity. “People want Hosni Mubarak to go out. We want to eat, we want life, we want to build a home,” he says.

Osama, an engineer, said to the same reporter, “The people do not want the president. Why is he staying? This government is rubbish. They are sucking the blood of the people.” The chants which reverberates across the protests is “peaceful”, “down with Mubarak”, and “go, go” – a chant also used in the Tunisian uprising that overthrew the president earlier this month.

Protestors at first called for economic and political reforms but this escalated to demanding the fall of the regime. As we go to press the April 6 Movement have now called on Egyptians to start a general strike to last until the demands of the people are met. It also said it was attempting to persuade the army to side with the people.

Much has been made in the media about the use of Facebook and Twitter to mobilise people as if this is an entirely new protest movement. Using the internet can be specially useful in a repressive regime. The government blocking the networks proved how worried Mubarak's regime were. But these new media are the new tools of organising whose political effectiveness depends on what they are used for.

Although this uprising started with anger at rising food prices, corruption and repression, other struggles against the regime have been building up. Egyptian society has been seen strikes and a powerful anti war movement mobilised intermittently since 2001.

In 2004 hundreds of thousands protested against the occupations of Iraq and Palestine and to demand an end to Mubarak's regime. The Muslim Brotherhood, which has been the main opposition movement, called these protests mobilised thousands of people onto the streets.

From 2006 to 2008 the textile workers of Mahalla, in the north of the country, struck. The workers faced the conservatism of their union leaders and heavy state repression. They occupied their factories and stood their ground. Their struggle, although the state clamped down on its organisers, showed the strength of a new working class in Egypt. In the protest movement today the Mahalla workers joined the protests in the Nile Delta region. Egypt has a strong and political workers movement and their role will be key to taking the movement forward today.

The uprising against Mubarak's regime in Egypt is hugely significant. We do not yet know what the outcome will be but pressure for a change of regime through a mass popular protest movement on the streets in a country that has been a staunch ally of the US could open a new phase in opposition to the so-called war on terror.

The uprising will also have repercussions for Egypt's support for Israel, its ignoring of the rights of the people in Gaza and its obstruction of the free flow of Palestinians through the Rafah border crossing. The mass movement in Egypt that is part of a new wave against the autocratic regimes in Tunisia, Yemen, Jordan puts revolution and people power on the agenda across the Middle East.

The role of the US in these protests has been hypocritical. Hilary Clinton may gently chide the human rights record in Egypt now, but it has had no such concerns before now. As Wikileaks showed, the Obama regime specifically avoided raising the question of democracy with Mubarak for fear of risking the special partnership with Egypt that Washington enjoyed. The US's strategy both towards bolstering Israel against the Palestinians and the occupation of Afghanistan depended on support from the Arab states, and Egypt in this scenario was key. The US was serious about its support for Egypt: Wikileaks also revealed that Washington gives Cairo \$1.3bn annually in foreign military finance (FMF) for the purchase of US weapons and defence equipment.

International support and solidarity with the Egyptian uprising must be built. Our own government – whose foreign minister Micheal Martin had no qualms about signing a special agreement with Mubarak in 2008 – should sever all diplomatic relations with Egypt while it continues to repress the uprising. The battle that the Egyptian people have started against their own regime could have huge effects – it could scupper the war plans of our western governments, dismantle their control of the Middle East through Israel, and begin to provide hope for Palestinians. It is a revolution that we all have an interest in seeing win.