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A Wounded Father Figure

President Hosni Mubarak's latest appeal to the Egyptian people fell on deaf ears in Tahrir Square, but it may appeal to a segment of the population who want to let him retire with dignity.

BY ASHRAF KHALIL | FEBRUARY 1, 2011



CAIRO — The chants of "down with the regime" started up again about 30 seconds after President Hosni Mubarak had wrapped up his speech on Tuesday night, where he announced that he would leave the world stage and forgo running for a sixth term this fall. For the thousands of protesters spending the night in Tahrir Square -- who watched the speech live projected on a huge makeshift screen -- the message couldn't have been clearer. Mubarak's latest fallback concession would not be acceptable.

"It's a political game; he's buying time," said Khaled Maghrabi, 46, an executive at a drug company who had taken to the streets on Friday. All through the square on a chilly night, protesters showed no signs of abandoning their historic protest campaign or turning down the pressure on the 82-year-old president. In the past week, Mubarak has dissolved the cabinet, appointed his first-ever vice president, and reached out urgently for dialogue with the opposition. But each new half-concession has only served to motivate and enrage the protesters further.

Mubarak's speech, his second address to the nation since the waves of civil unrest started last week, was a performance worth of extended study. He remained defiant, but came off as a little wounded, and basically admitted that he had lost the country. He presented it as a decision to "finish my work in the service of the nation" and head into well-earned retirement. He dwelled at length on the "chaos" and "looting" that took place after police forces melted away on Friday and promised prosecution for those involved. At one point, he spoke of himself in the third person: "Hosni Mubarak ... is proud of all the long years he spent in the service of the nation."

But despite the defiance on display in Tahrir, Mubarak's latest proposal might just gain some traction with a certain segment of the population. Many apolitical Egyptians are showing signs of fatigue at the massive disruption of daily life. The Internet is still blocked, banks and the stock market are closed, the trains to Cairo aren't running, most work has been suspended, and stores in some areas are running low on supplies.

Mubarak seems to be playing a long game -- entrenching and stretching out the standoff, keeping the country disrupted while blaming the protesters for the

disruption. In the coming days, he can count on his still formidable media machine to paint him as a beloved father figure whose efforts are unappreciated and who deserves, at least, to leave the stage with dignity.

A longer standoff will also give him time to rally support from other Arab governments. That support would likely be robust and sincere since nearly every Arab government -- except maybe those in Lebanon and Iraq -- should be very worried about what happened here this week. It took a solid month to place Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in jeopardy. Mubarak, even if he survives this, has been placed into open crisis in less than a week. Jordan's King Abdullah has already dissolved his government in a panicky attempt to assuage protesters angry about its economic policies and ordered immediate reform as a proactive step.

But there's a deeply personal element to Mubarak's latest appeal to his people, one that could very well resonate with ordinary Egyptians and rob the protesters of at least some of their popular support. A genuine war hero, Mubarak actually is viewed as a father figure by many Egyptians, who often forgive his faults and blame his underlings for endemic problems like corruption and police brutality. Even those who are happy to see him go might not see the need to have him humiliated.

It remains to be seen just how many Egyptians will accept Mubarak's latest terms. Either way, the protesters remaining in Tahrir, who are calling for another massive turnout on Friday, have no intention of granting Mubarak an extended farewell tour.

"After the death of 300 martyrs this week, I can't accept having him for one minute more," Maghrabi said, as he prepared to spend yet another night among the masses in Tahrir.

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Chris Hondros/Getty Images

Ashraf Khalil is a Cairo-based journalist who has covered the Middle East since 1997.

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REPORT ABUSE

PULLER58

7:47 AM ET

February 2, 2011

Mubarak the father figure?

There might be some in Egypt that will buy into that, but I suspect not enough to do him much good.

NICOLAS19

9:29 AM ET

February 2, 2011

no wonder they didn't accept the "offer"

The people are on the streets because he failed. Yet all he offers is a promise not to run in an election he wouldn't win anyway - if it wasn't rigged, that is. The people of Egypt want him out now because of his failed policies and his reaction is to borrow more time to continue those failed policies. He intends to change them? 30 years wasn't enough?

Mubarak is playing a dangerous game that he might even win. By appealing to the hearts of the people - the nostalgia, the cult of personality - he's asking for favors no sane man would grant him. "Retire in peace" - oh, he can retire alright, but nobody said that he shall be president that time. Imagine Obama saying: "I need to be President once again for the sake of my peace of mind". It would be outrageous. Mubarak basically says the same thing. If I were a journalist I would write articles about how crooked this father-analogy is, and how it is used to justify absolutely ridiculous demands. In fact, I would completely refrain from giving a title of "wounded father figure" to a dictator.

WEPUMP

9:46 AM ET

February 2, 2011

He has to go with some Dignity

I am a Canadian here with Egyption wife and children and I am sad at Elbaradi he is an Idiot that just fell into a Trap the trap of the crowds even the 6 April movment knew enough was enough after that speach El bardis is finnished now he is just western noise

The President knows he screwed up but he does have 30 years plus all his military time in the service of the Republic yes I use this word as that is what this is He will go now at least I pray he is allowed to keep some sense of dignity as Egypt needs this unlike Tunis I would not want to see an Egyptian man flying around looking for a new home

Mr Maberak knows he is done and he will do the right thing as he said He will pull the pin this year and retire before he goes we will see Habib jailed for the lack of control during the riots and pulling the whipped police forces of the streets like he did causing most of this distress

Mr ahmed ezze steel arrested for corruption and price fixing and nepotism and hopefully the oil minister as well (leave that open for later discussion)

But what we saw on TV was not Egypt at its finest moment yet people came together and voiced there opinions this is new here so it was also I am thinking thier finest monent Time will tell on that one

But Egyptions have to allow this man to retire with some dignity and help set up the start of a real Democracy they all want

EATBEES

11:05 AM ET

February 2, 2011

A Criminal Regime

I guess we can see who sees Mubarak as a father figure now that the peaceful demonstrators of Tahrir Square are at this moment being violently attacked by an organized mob of Mubarak supporters, armed with whips and metal bars and so forth, severely injuring an eight-year-old boy among many others, hunting down journalists, beating up Anderson Cooper, and turning what had just yesterday a festive scene of solidarity among all walks of life into bedlam and chaos. Among the attackers seized by the demonstrators were found IDs of Mubarak's security forces, out of uniform but under orders. Those who still love Mubarak as a father figure at this point are either suffering from Stockholm syndrome (sympathy for the abuser) or they are the abusers themselves, attempting a last stand. This will only ignite rage and make the endgame that much harder. When the dust clears and justice is served, Mubarak should be held to account for these crimes against his people.

MARTY24

12:02 PM ET

February 7, 2011

Thinking straight on Egypt

The numbers we have been given for the size of the various protests in Egypt need to be understood against the population of Egypt and of Cairo. Cairo may have 20 million people, and perhaps 100 thousand have attended the demonstrations to remove Mubarak. This is one half of a percent of Cairo's population and a far smaller fraction of the population of Egypt. Do they represent the rest of the people? How would we know? If we don't know, how can anyone, including Barack Obama (would he step down as president if a similar fraction of the American people demanded that he do so?) legitimately say the people want Mubarak out?

I am not suggesting that Mubarak isn't a dictator or that he has provided efficient and clean government, but the principles of democracy require that he be allowed to retain power if he remains the preference of a majority of the population. It is a serious problem that no-one really knows what the Egyptian people as a whole think about this situation. Democracy can produce a bad government; what makes democracy better than other forms of government is that the people have the right to vote out such a government.

The implication of these thoughts is that Egypt needs a care-taker government tasked only with setting up free and fair elections far enough in the future to enable different interest groups to organize for a campaign. Every group within Egyptian society should be eligible to participate on an equal footing, from the Muslim Brotherhood to the Copts. The only requirements should be 1) that each group that wishes to contest the election should commit to conducting their campaign fairly, 2) that they will accept the results of the election, and 3) that whoever wins commits to not excluding any of the groups from future political and civic participation in the nation.

BARBARA SZ.

The people of Egypt want him

2:38 PM ET
March 1, 2011

The people of Egypt want him out now because of his failed policies and his reaction is to borrow more time to continue those failed policies. He intends to change them? 30 years wasn't enough? Mubarak is playing a dangerous game sazky that he might even win. By appealing to the hearts of the people - the nostalgia, the cult of personality - he's asking for favors no sane man would grant him. "Retire in peace" - oh, he can retire alright, but nobody said that he shall be president that time. Imagine Obama saying: "I need to be President once again for the sake of my peace of mind". It would be outrageous. Mubarak basically says the same thing. How would we know? If we don't know, how can anyone, including sazky Barack Obama (would he step down as president if a similar fraction of the American people demanded that he do so?) legitimately say the people want Mubarak out? I am not suggesting that Mubarak isn't a dictator or that he has provided efficient and clean government, but the principles of democracy require that he be allowed to retain power if he remains the preference of a majority of the sazky population. It is a serious problem that no-one really knows what the Egyptian people as a whole think about this situation. Democracy can produce a bad government; what makes democracy better than other forms of government is that the people have the right to vote out such a government.

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