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By Marvin Zonis

Are we going to miss Mubarak?

After 30 years of holding down the fort and warding off the enemies of the U.S. in the Middle East, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has pledged he will not seek re-election later this year. And even if he manages to stay on as president, his repressive government appears on the way out — with an assist from the United States.

The White House has reported that Mubarak "reiterated his focus on opposing violence and calling for restraint; supporting universal rights, including the right to peaceful assembly, association and speech; and supporting an orderly transition to a government that is responsive to the aspirations of the Egyptian people."

While that message stops short of an outright call for Mubarak to flee his country — as did Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from Tunisia and the Shah of Iran — it is certainly a call for the burial of Mubarak and his system.

The problem is that "the aspirations of the Egyptian people" are utterly unknown, as is the relation of those "aspirations" to U.S. interests. After three decades of Mubarak's repression, the Egyptian people have been deprived of the opportunity to formulate their interests, to articulate them and to organize politically around them.

What we have in the current demonstrations are inchoate calls for Mubarak's ouster and for "democracy." What those calls represent, more than anything else, is a generalized sense of humiliation the Egyptian people have suffered at Mubarak's hands and their sense that he has acted as an American "puppet." In turn, that humiliation has generated rage and anger.

The humiliation stems from many sources. The percentage of 15- to 24-year-olds who are employed in Egypt is a little more than 20 percent. (Since a third of the Egyptian population of 80-plus million is less than 15 years of age, an awful lot more unemployed youth are on the way.) Moreover, even with the 7 percent annual economic growth of recent years, the overwhelming majority of Egypt's people remain poor, often desperately poor.

Egypt is the world's largest importer of wheat, and many of its people subsist on its subsidized bread. The average family spends more than 40 percent of its total income on food, and the recent global rise in food prices has cut deeply into the well-being of the majority of the people.

It's no surprise that the calls for Mubarak's ouster began in Cairo. It is in Egypt's capital, after all, that the contrasts between the rich and the poor are at their most stark. The privileged Mubarak cronies, the senior military and security officers and the new industrial elites whose fortunes most often come from government licenses and contracts are on display. Their often ostentatious displays of wealth provoked a widespread sense of deprivation that turned into humiliation and rage.

Of course, we have seen what democracy has brought to the outraged peoples in other parts of the Middle East. The moderates who were so active in forcing the shah into exile were forced out only months later by Islamic radicals. In early 2006, Hamas won 76 seats of 132 in the elections for the Palestinian parliament. The U.S. and the European Union ended financial assistance to the Hamas-led government, and in 2007, Hamas took over Gaza and was ousted from its governing position in the West Bank. In Iraq, Moqtada al-Sadr has returned from his three-year exile in Iran to bolster the fortunes of Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. In the process, calls for the ouster of the U.S. have strengthened, as has the position of the Iranian clerics. Most recently, in Lebanon, Hezbollah has managed to oust Prime Minister Saad Hariri, son of the assassinated former prime minister, and form its own government. Hariri claims it was all engineered by Syria, further boosting its role in Lebanon and the region.

The United States is eager to get on the right side of the historical change that now appears to be electrifying the Middle East. But it also must consider immediate U.S. interests. Those include:

- Diminishing the role of Islamic radicalism.
- Instituting genuine democracies.
- Maintaining the peace in the region — even the "cold peace" between Egypt and Israel.
- Maintaining the flow of oil through the Suez Canal and the Sumed pipeline.

No one doubts the difficulties of this balancing act between the future of the Middle East that will witness new sorts of regimes with new commitments and the present with its autocratic and pro-American rulers. But neither does it seem that anyone in Washington is focused on that risky current and immediate U.S. national interests.

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