

The real Egyptian revolution is yet to come

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Around the world, people are enthusiastically greeting the "Egyptian Revolution"—the astonishing victory won by the historic 18-day People Power Uprising. As events move more rapidly than anyone can anticipate, not only has Mubarak been deposed, his corrupt parliament has been dismissed and new elections promised within six months. People's ecstasy in the aftermath of these great victories belies the fact that Mubarak's authoritarian system remains intact—nay, strengthened—by the ascension of Suleiman and the military to supreme power in Cairo. While the world hails the Egyptian “revolution”, a more sober assessment of recent events would question the accuracy of that label, at least for now.

If we look at other countries for comparison (and there are many recent examples of People Power Uprisings suddenly ending the reign of long-standing authoritarian regimes), I am especially struck by parallels with Korea's 1987 June Uprising, when for 19 consecutive days, hundreds of thousands of people illegally went into the streets and battled tens of thousands of riot police to a standstill. On June 29, the military dictatorship finally capitulated to the opposition's demands to hold direct presidential elections, thereby ending 26 years of military rule.

As in Egypt on 11 February 2011, the man who made the announcement in Seoul on 29 June 1987 was none other than the dictatorship's No 2 leader. Roh Tae-woo went on to become the country's new president after elections marked by both a bitter split between rival progressive candidates and widespread allegations of ballot tampering. People's high expectations and optimism after the military was forced to grant elections turned into bitter disappointment. Throughout the country, new massive mobilizations were organized, during which more than a dozen young people committed suicide to spur forward the movement for change.

Like Suleiman, Roh was a long-time US asset with ties to a list of nefarious deeds. In 1996, Roh and his predecessor Chun Doo-hwan were convicted of high crimes, sent to prison, and ultimately ordered to return hundreds of millions of dollars they had illegally garnered. (Roh eventually returned around USD 300 million; Chun deceitfully pleaded poverty and, although thereby dishonored, he absconded with even more than that amount of Korea's wealth.)

Roh was never linked to any direct act of sadism, but Suleiman is known to have personally participated in the torture of CIA rendered terrorist suspects. As “the CIA's Man in Cairo”, he helped design and implement the American rendition program through which dozens of suspected terrorists were kidnapped, imprisoned and tortured. Suleiman took a personal hand in the torture of Australian citizen Mamdouh Habib. In his memoirs, Habib recounted one torture session of electric shocks, broken fingers and being hung from meat hooks that culminated in being slapped so hard that his blindfold flew off—revealing Suleiman as the purveyor of the violence.

While Habib was innocent, another rendered suspect, Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi, confessed to participation in training anti-US fighters and famously asserted under torture that ties existed between al-Queda and Saddam's government in Iraq. That lie became one of Colin Powell's most significant assertions to the UN Security Council when the US convinced much of the world to attack Iraq. When al-Libi later recanted and threatened to expose his lie, he “committed suicide” in a Libyan prison—coincidentally at the same time as Suleiman made his first ever visit to Tripoli.

For his extraordinary efforts on behalf of the US, Suleiman found his fortunes rising. Thanks to WikiLeaks, we know today that almost three years ago, the US was prepared to elevate him to the top slot in Egypt. According to a US diplomatic cable of May 14, 2007, entitled “Presidential Succession in Egypt,” Suleiman was to be named vicepresident (as occurred on 29 January 2011).

The chief of the Egyptian armed forces, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, like Suleiman and Mubarak, is a regime insider with long ties to the Pentagon. One US Embassy cable released by WikiLeaks noted that, “Tantawi has opposed both economic and political reforms that he perceives as eroding central government power.” While Suleiman and Tantawi are clearly cut from the same cloth as Mubarak, my objection is not simply to these men but to the system they embody. For a genuine revolution to take place, Suleiman and his kind must be driven from power—even punished for their crimes—not elevated to the highest levels of government.

What the masses of Egyptians want is freedom from dictatorship and foreign domination. They want the right to participate in their own government and to do so freely, with a free press, and in a society where civil liberties are guaranteed. They want an end to the country's poverty and to take back the mountain of wealth stolen by the super-rich.

As it seems that Korea's democratization might hold possible lessons for Egypt, so might the Philippines in 1986. Less than a year after the first “People Power Revolution” sent long-time dictator Ferdinand Marcos into exile, Corazon Aquino's new government shot to death 21 landless farmers who marched in Manila to demand she keep her promises for land reform. The Philippines today is plagued by increasing hunger, and more than three million children are underweight and underheight. In 1973, students in Thailand overthrew a hated military dictatorship after 77 people were gunned down in the streets of Bangkok. After a two-year hiatus, one of the most free periods in the history of Thailand, the military bloodily reimposed dictatorship and killed dozens of students. In Nepal in 1990, fifty days of popular protests during which 62 citizens were killed won a constitutional monarchy, but within a few years, the royal family again seized absolute power. A 19-day People Power Uprising in 2006 ended the monarchy altogether, but only after 21 more unarmed civilians had been killed by the forces of order.

No one can anticipate the outcome of what has been set in motion in Egypt, but historical antecedents may provide insight into possible outcomes. Will the blood of the 300 murdered citizens in Egypt, like the hundreds of martyrs of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, water the tree of liberty? Or will their sacrifice grease the wheels as US banks and global corporations rush to replace “crony capitalism” with ever more profitable arenas for wealthy investors?

Young activists in Cairo remain camped in Tahrir Square—for now at least—where they have already had to stand up to the army's attempt to clear them out. Remaining steadfast, they are calling for substantive reforms—for a new system and democracy worthy of the name. Even with Mubarak gone, so long as his military commanders and chief of intelligence remain in power, nothing like a revolution can be said to have transpired in Egypt.

For that to be said, rather than celebrating their victory from high positions of power, Suleiman and his buddies should themselves be guests in the very prisons where they were previously hosts. The full turning of the wheel of justice—a revolution in the true sense of the word—demands nothing less. The

sites where Suleiman tortured Habib and al-Lidi should become public museums open to ordinary Egyptians to sadly recount the country's decades of suffering under the US-backed dictatorship of Mubarak. Instead, unless the movement continues to propel the country forward, Suleiman's torture chambers may be destined to be used against young activists whose only crime is to insist upon making reality what is today claimed by nearly everyone—a revolution in Egypt.

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