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Afghans can only watch in envy as Egypt revolts

By Charles M. Sennott

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U.S. hypocrisy as Kabul plunges into political turmoil and Egypt revolts

Kabul: This city is a basin that traps pollution. And in the bleak, winter months the smog hangs in the air, thick and oppressive. The gray pall seems a perfect backdrop for a country teetering somewhere between cynicism and despair over the political machinations of President Hamid Karzai and a constitutional crisis that has recently been set in motion. As Karzai reconvenes the country's new parliament, which was elected amid allegations of rampant voter fraud, coverage of it on Afghan television has been framed by a scroll of news headlines updating viewers on the events happening in Egypt. The growing demonstrations calling for the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, along with the tear gas and the rubber bullets tearing across the streets of Cairo, seem a long way off from the political turmoil of the Afghan parliament. But for some political observers doing the long math, there is a connection – the two events reveal some stunning hypocrisies in American foreign policy. Here in Afghanistan, as in Iraq, the United States has dug in its military in the longest campaign in American history with at least part of its goal to help Afghanistan establish a functioning democracy. In Egypt, however, the United States has willfully propped up the brutal, autocratic regime of Mubarak, which has lasted, so far, for nearly 30 years. It's hard not to feel a deep cynicism about all those Jeffersonian ideals of a shining city on a hill when the popular uprising in Egypt makes it clear that the United States has supported regimes like Mubarak's for far too long. The people of Egypt, taking the lead from the popular uprising that unseated another U.S.-backed dictator in Tunisia, are finally fed up with all the

police brutality, the corruption and the compromises and are calling for change. Afghans, meanwhile, are left watching Egypt from afar, pondering what their political future might possibly hold as Karzai becomes increasingly autocratic and the U.S. military, in the name of democracy, digs in for a 10th year of fighting the Taliban. "Karzai is trying to suppress a problem rather than solve it, and that in the end makes the problem worse," said Mohammad Nasib, managing director of WADAN, an Afghan non-governmental organization that promotes grass roots democracy. And when an autocrat sweeps problems under the rug for too long, the situation becomes volatile and, as Nasib pointed out, "We can all see the evidence of that now in Egypt." There is a growing perception here that Karzai is gaming his own hand-picked judiciary in an attempt to stack the parliament in his favor. After the attorney general issued a report earlier this month documenting the millions of dollars that went to buying votes, a special judicial commission is still weighing the evidence and pondering a request for a recount. Analysts said the stunning hypocrisy in this matter is that Karzai, whose own election was considered fraudulent by observers, is trying to forge a better parliament by encouraging the court to contest the election of certain members of parliament in the opposition while avoiding scrutiny on allegations of fraud directed against him. Meanwhile, with a keen sense that possession is nine-tenths of the law, Karzai has allowed the incoming parliament to take their seats. And he has pushed forward with a vote for the body's leadership, which is likely to ensconce one of his loyalists and help him consolidate power. The final vote on the key position of the speaker of the lower house was delayed Sunday on a technicality and it was unclear when they would take a final vote. To many, the events here represent a constitutional crisis in the making. Even members of Karzai's own government, such as Karim Baz, the deputy minister for parliamentary affairs, said they were concerned. "We are facing a great challenge right now and we have to respect the pillars of the government, the executive, the judiciary and the legislative," Baz, a respected moderate on the political scene, said in an interview. "We have to hold them together or we are going to face a crisis." The political crisis has been punctuated by a spate of bombings, including one at an up-scale grocery store frequented by Westerners that killed as many as 14 people last week. Among those killed were an entire family -- a doctor and his wife, who was a human rights activist, and their four small children -- from one of Kabul's more prominent and progressive clans. Three foreigners were also killed. And the following day, the deputy governor of Kandahar was killed in a bombing. The Taliban claimed credit for both attacks. The governor of the province of Kabul, Zabihullah Mojaddidy, said, "There are very serious problems we are facing every day and these days the confidence in our own government is one of them." "But the finger is pointed too often at just the president," said Mojaddidy, who was appointed by Karzai. "I think we should recognize that the opposition is too self-focused, corrupt and divisive along ethnic lines. There are many reasons and many factors that contribute to this feeling, this cynicism." While we talked, a television flickered in the corner with the news cutting between the parliamentary vote and updates on the breaking news in Egypt. Then the television abruptly clicked off and the lights went out, a daily example of the disruption of power that plagues Kabul. A generator kicked on and coughed in the background as we continued our conversation beneath a single dim bulb. "We watch the news in Cairo and see the demonstrations on the street and realize that is a way of expressing discontent that we can not afford right now. Here, that could mean a return to war," said Mojaddidy, a structural engineer by profession, who along with his father and his brothers was a leader in the insurgency against the Soviet Union. "So we have a parliament that is talking, bribing, fighting for their own self interests, but all of that is still better than shooting at each other." Across town at the Etisalat Internet Cafe, Dr.

Salim Fazly, 28, a general practitioner, was checking his Facebook page and sipping green tea. “I think it’s good that the Arab world and the whole rest of the world is watching,” said Fazli. “We Afghans have already chosen our relationship with democracy. But I think we watch these street protests, thinking that they are a good example for anyone in Afghanistan who might try to become a dictator here.”