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U.S. Chickens Come Home to Roost in Egypt

Prof. Marjorie Cohn

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Barack Obama, like his predecessors, has supported Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to the tune of \$1.3 billion annually, mostly in military aid. In return, Egypt minds U.S. interests in the Middle East, notably providing a buffer between Israel and the rest of the Arab world. Egypt collaborates with Israel to isolate Gaza with a punishing blockade, to the consternation of Arabs throughout the Middle East. The United States could not have fought its wars in Iraq without Egypt's logistical support.

Now with a revolution against Mubarak by two million Egyptians, all bets are off about who will replace him and whether the successor government will be friendly to the United States.

Mubarak's "whole system is corrupt," said Hesham Korayem, an Egyptian who taught at City University of New York and provides frequent commentary on Egyptian and Saudi television. He told me there is virtually no middle class in Egypt, only the extremely rich (about 20 to 25 percent of the population) and the extremely poor (75 percent). The parliament has no input into what Mubarak does with the money the United States gives him, \$300 million of which comes to the dictator in cash each year.

Torture is commonplace in Egypt, according to Korayem. Indeed, Omar Suleiman, Egypt's intelligence chief whom Mubarak just named Vice-President, was the lynchpin for Egyptian torture when the CIA sent prisoners to Egypt in its extraordinary rendition program. Stephen Grey noted in Ghost Plane, "[I]n secret, men like Omar Suleiman, the country's most powerful

spy and secret politician, did our work, the sort of work that Western countries have no appetite to do ourselves.”

In her chapter in the newly published book, “The United States and Torture: Interrogation, Incarceration, and Abuse,” Jane Mayer cites Egypt as the most common destination for suspects rendered by the United States. “The largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid after Israel,” Mayer writes, “Egypt was a key strategic ally, and its secret police force, the Mukhabarat, had a reputation for brutality.” She describes the rendering of Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi to Egypt, where he was tortured and made a false confession that Colin Powell cited as he importuned the Security Council to approve the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Al-Libi later recanted his confession.

The State Department’s 2002 report on Egypt noted that detainees were “stripped and blindfolded; suspended from a ceiling or doorframe with feet just touching the floor; beaten with fists, metal rods, or other objects; doused with hot or cold water; flogged on the back; burned with cigarettes; and subjected to electrical shocks. Some victims . . . [were] forced to strip and threatened with rape.”

In 2005, the United Nations Committee Against Torture found that “Egypt resorted to consistent and widespread use of torture against detainees” and “the risk of such treatment was particularly high in the case of detainees held for political and security reasons.”

About a year ago, an Italian judge convicted 22 CIA operatives and a U.S. Air Force colonel of arranging the kidnapping of a Muslim cleric in Milan in 2003, then flying him to Egypt where he was tortured. Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr told Human Rights Watch he was “hung up like a slaughtered sheep and given electrical shocks” in Egypt. “I was brutally tortured and I could hear the screams of others who were tortured too,” he added.

A former CIA agent observed, “If you want a serious interrogation, you send a prisoner to Jordan. If you want them to be tortured, you send them to Syria. If you want someone to disappear – never to see them again – you send them to Egypt.”

So what will happen next in Egypt?

Suleiman, who is intensely loyal to Mubarak, will not be an acceptable successor to the Egyptian people. Some fear the Muslim Brotherhood, which supports Hamas, will take power once Mubarak is forced out. But “[t]hough it is the largest opposition group, it by no means enjoys overwhelming support, and its leaders are for the most part moderate and responsible,” Scott MacLeod, Time magazine’s Middle East correspondent from 1995 to 2010, wrote in the Los Angeles Times. Korayem concurs. He says the Brotherhood, which has formally renounced terrorism and violence, is more educated and peaceful now. The Brotherhood provides social and economic programs that augment public services in Egypt.

Indeed, the Brotherhood supports Mohamed ElBaradei to negotiate with the Egyptian government. ElBaradei, the former U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency chief and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, recently returned to Egypt to stand with the protesters. He told Fareed Zakaria that the Brotherhood favors a secular state, and “has nothing to do with the Iranian

movement, has nothing to do with extremism as we have seen it in Afghanistan and other places.”

The Obama administration has been slow to acknowledge that Mubarak is on his way out. Vice President Joe Biden, still in denial, said on the PBS News Hour, “I would not refer to him as a dictator.” ElBaradei criticized Obama for supporting Mubarak in the face of the popular revolt in Egypt. “You are losing credibility by the day,” he told CBS News. “On one hand you’re talking about democracy, rule of law and human rights, and on the other hand you are lending support to a dictator that continues to oppress his people.”

Korayem sees the United States’ uncritical support for Israel as key to the problems in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East. If the United States acted as an honest broker, even “slightly fair to the Palestinians,” that would go a long way to solving the difficulties, he said. But, according to Gareth Porter, “The main function of the U.S. client state relationship with Egypt was to allow Israel to avoid coming to terms with Palestinian demands.” Chris Hedges adds, “The failure of the United States to halt the slow-motion ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by Israel has consequences. The failure to acknowledge the collective humiliation and anger felt by most Arabs because of the presence of U.S. troops on Muslim soil . . . has consequences.”

We are seeing those consequences in the streets of Egypt and the likelihood of similar developments in Jordan, Yemen, and other Middle Eastern countries. Until the U.S. government stops uncritically supporting tyrants, torturers, and oppressors, we can expect the people to rise up and overthrow them.