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Between change and chaos

Between the promise of change and the threat of chaos lies the wish for an orderly transition. The old order is dying but the new cannot be born. Even before the first flush of victory starts to fade, anxiety grips the forces of change. Suddenly, the road ahead appears complex and uncertain. This crucial moment of hesitation is all that the conservative forces need to justify moderation. Instead of the total obliteration of the crumbling order, the prospect of a peaceful transfer of power is offered.

Egypt today is where the Philippines was in 1986 and 2001, where Tunisia was in January this year, where Indonesia was in 1998 after the resignation of Suharto, where Czechoslovakia was in 1989, where Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland were after the fall of communist rule in Eastern Europe. The question that faced the new leaders was the same everywhere: How do you avert the danger of a civil war while ensuring meaningful change? Or, how do you put a functioning government in place even before the old one collapses?

This was never a problem with the classic revolutionary models, where the struggle itself was supposed to be the anvil on which to forge the new social order. The revolution was to give birth to a unified command from which the leadership of the new government could be drawn.

But the recent political upheavals in the modern world have given us a different reality. At the forefront of these upheavals are amorphous social movements rather than coherent ideological parties. Diverse groups impelled by the broadest ideals form a single flow of protest,

yet they are unified more by what they reject than by what they affirm. There is no protracted war, just a slow build-up of popular discontent. There is no heroic long march, just a decadent and complacent regime that is imploding. The collapse happens quite suddenly, almost without warning -- baring the astonishing fragility of all dictatorial regimes.

Yet – and this is the irony of it all – as the key figure of the old order steps down or flees, the structures he leaves behind do not automatically lose their functionality. They continue to hold society together. As Michel Foucault reminds us, power doesn't merely oppress, it also enables; it makes things possible. The vision of an existing state being smashed to pieces in order to make way for the new seems quixotic if not totally improbable.

The fundamental question in all transitions has always been: How much of the old does one discard, and how much does one keep? It is a question that demands the exercise of the greatest wisdom. The new leaders will do everything to bring the crisis they have triggered to a quick resolution, with the least violence, and with the least expenditure of life and damage to property. But, at the same time, they cannot afford to be seen as merely presiding over a Bonapartism without Bonaparte. They need to show they are the harbingers of the truly new.

Where there is no agreement on what the alternative political order entails, and where no single group can claim dominance over the protest landscape, the safest recourse is a transitional government.

Its only tasks would be to maintain order, preserve the nation's patrimony, prepare a new constitution, and hold elections. Still, this is a complex process, and it has its own dangers. As we have seen from the Philippine experience, a lot depends on the robustness of civil society, and the readiness of the military to defer to its leadership.

It is clear that Egyptian President Mubarak has lost control over the military. The military has, so far, refused to take sides in the ongoing

confrontation between Mubarak and the protest movement. But, this neutral stance becomes increasingly untenable as the street battles turn violent. One can already foresee that the Egyptian army is bound to play a big role in a post-Mubarak government.

What is not clear is whether the soldiers will back up Mubarak's newly-appointed vice-president, Omar Suleiman, a former military intelligence chief, or support a completely new transition team. US President Obama has sent his personal envoy, Frank G. Wisner – former ambassador to Manila and later to Egypt – to persuade Mubarak to step down now. This means handing over power to Vice President Suleiman, a trusted figure in American and Israel circles, under a reconstituted government that would include some leaders of the protest movement but resolutely exclude the Muslim Brotherhood, perhaps the most organized flank of the protest against Mubarak.

But why would Egypt listen to Obama? Repression, worsening poverty, and corruption are the main issues against the Mubarak regime, which has been in power for thirty years. Yet, until the crisis broke out, the US was totally unmindful of the way the country was being run. America only saw Mubarak, as it did Marcos, as a firm and dependable ally. Where Marcos played the role of nemesis of Southeast Asian communism, Mubarak became the icon of secular government in a region in which Islam was emerging as the most potent rallying point in politics.

The Western paranoia over a resurgent Islam blinds the rest of the world to a reality so manifest in every photograph of the protesting crowds in Egypt that one cannot miss it. Take a close look at the faces in these crowds -- they are mostly of young people, men and women, dressed in jeans and armed with cell phones. These are figures of modernity, not of an archaic fundamentalism. These are rebels who have found their target, not fanatics under the spell of a mullah.

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