



## Practical thoughts on an unpleasant situation

By John Robson  
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So what should our policy be toward Egypt? I don't mean what attitude should we adopt, nor what our opinion should be of events there, except insofar as intelligent understanding is a crucial preliminary to action. I mean what practical measures should we take?

I ask you not as individuals who neither can nor should attempt to meddle privately in world affairs. My question is what we, as citizens of Canada, should want and urge our government to do in furtherance of its primary duty of protecting us from foreign threats.

For that we do need to develop opinions on these questions: What outcomes might plausibly result from the turmoil in Egypt? Which of them are dangerous to us and how? And what can we reasonably do to mitigate these various dangers?

The first step is for everybody to abandon the notion that striking a suitably righteous pose is anything but perilous pomposity in such matters. For instance Tuesday's National Post editorial beginning "On Sunday, Michael Ignatieff said that 'Canada has to say very, very clearly that there needs to be a peaceful transition to free and fair elections (in Egypt). The Egyptian authorities need to be under no illusions what we think about this.' The Liberal leader is entirely correct, and we urge Prime Minister Stephen Harper to follow his advice." Or Wednesday's Globe and Mail editorial lecturing the Egyptian populace that "Opposition groups should now be willing to enter into conversations with the government; they should no longer insist upon Mr. Mubarak's immediate resignation as a precondition."

What manner of drivel is this? Does anyone suppose the corrupt, brutal regime in Egypt perched precariously atop an Islamist volcano, the protesters trying to dislodge it, or the small middle class trembling that they might succeed, give a hoot what Canada says? We need deeds, not words, an idea people in democracies find difficult to understand.

In Parliament on Monday NDP foreign affairs critic Paul Dewar thundered "The Conservatives' response has been tepid and disappointing. This is a moment for us to use our influence on the world stage and exert pressure on the Egyptian regime to respect

democratic rights." Meaning what? Send the Airborne Regiment into Cairo? Blockade Suez?

No, wag our finger even harder: "Canadians are speaking out loudly in support of human rights and democratic freedoms. Why is the government not doing the same?" But the world does not need, or hear, narcissistic Canadian prose in moments of crisis. And thinking it does is a way of avoiding clear thinking about hard truths.

Start with the fact that various groups in Egypt are playing an ugly game for keeps and it is highly probable that somebody nasty will win because Egypt's political culture is not hospitable to representative democracy of the sort we enjoy. I wish it were otherwise, but large segments of the Egyptian population do not trust one another and, sadly, such mutual mistrust becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Hosni Mubarak's government was a classic squalid tyranny, suppressing chaos at the cost of sucking all vitality from public life. Unfortunately the regime, and its foreign backers, believed the alternative was a popular movement that looked democratic at first but was intellectually and institutionally incoherent and would swiftly spiral downward into Islamist frenzy. We're about to find out if they were right.

If my attitude matters I'm against that. But at the risk of incurring Paul Dewar's disappointment, I have no plan for preventing it and no hope of developing one so I'd better think about how to react if it does. Pretending nothing bad can happen is about the craziest approach anyone could suggest.

It is therefore being adopted. Barack Obama is doing his level best to imitate Jimmy Carter's disastrous reaction to the Iranian revolution. But backing a dictator while he's strong, then assuring everyone you wanted him to be nice once he loses his grip, simply conveys to friend and foe alike a toxic impression of dishonest weakness. Meanwhile, attempts by western politicians to deny the menacing nature of the Muslim Brotherhood recall Carter's UN ambassador Andrew Young saying in February 1979 "Khomeini will be somewhat of a saint when we get over the panic."

The Brotherhood dreams of jihad and death to Jews and wants Egypt to develop nuclear weapons. What do we do if they win? Send more editorials? Or work with our allies to develop a plan for retaliating if Egypt becomes a base for terror or hurls itself with murderous fury at Israel while Hezbollah, Syria and maybe even Jordan join in? If that happens, do we send troops? Do we have any to send? Should we get some? What else can we do to help America and possibly the British intervene?

These are unpleasant thoughts about an unpleasant situation. But they're also practical, and we need that.

John Robson's column appears on Fridays.

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