

The New
REPUBLIC

Published on *The New Republic* (<http://www.tnr.com>)

A Note of Warning and Encouragement for Egyptians

From an Iranian writer who lived through the 1979 Revolution.

Abbas Milani January 30, 2011 | 1:04 pm



After days of unrest, after declaring martial law in some of the country's main cities, the authoritarian leader gave a much anticipated television speech. His tone was repentant. He promised change and reform. The people wanted democracy and he promised to bend to their wishes.

For a long time, the United States had been advising him to open his political system—but had been seen publicly as his chief supporter. The U.S. president had given lofty and elegant speeches defending democracy and human rights, assuring the people of the Middle East that the United States supported their democratic demands. But both the leader and his American supporters were caught off-guard by the size of the demonstrations. American officials began trying to walk a dangerous tight-rope: offering support for the beleaguered leader but also establishing ties and credibility with the opposition.

When the leader tried to use the force of his military to calm the situation, the United States issued ambiguous statements, indicating support for the leader's desire to establish law and order on the one hand while at the same time insisting that the march of democracy must continue, and that the use of force could not be a solution to the country's problems. Benefiting from the subsequent chaos, radical Islamists, posing as democrats, used the chance to seize power and deracinate the democratic movement in favor of tradition and theocracy.

The country I am speaking of is not Egypt in 2011 but Iran in 1979. The leader is the Shah, not Hosni Mubarak. Yet, as this history makes clear, the parallels between then and now are numerous. And they offer some key lessons for Americans and Egyptians alike.

For U.S. policymakers, the Iranian Revolution illustrates the perils of vacillating between defending an old regime and establishing ties with new democrats. President Obama must use all of his persuasive power to demand that Hosni Mubarak immediately declare that he will not seek reelection. The Egyptian dictator must be persuaded to appoint a caretaker government that will handle the daily affairs of the state, headed by a moderate member of the opposition like Mohammed ElBaradei. This might be the last chance to arrange an orderly transition to democracy, one wherein anti-democratic forces in any guise—religious, military, secular, or theocratic—cannot derail the democratic process.

For Egyptians, the history of the Iranian Revolution should serve as a warning. In 1978, Ayatollah Khomeini hid his true intentions—namely the creation of a despotic rule of the clerics—behind the mantle of democracy. More than once he promised that not a single cleric would hold a position of power in the future government. But once in power, he created the current clerical despotism. And when, in June 2009, three million people took to the streets of Tehran to protest decades of oppression, they were brutally suppressed.

With this history in mind, Egyptian democrats must not be fooled by the radical Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood. If and when Mubarak falls, they simply cannot allow the most radical and brutal forces to win in the ensuing chaos. If these forces are allowed to claim power using the rhetoric of democracy, Egyptians will find themselves decades from now needing another uprising, which is precisely the current situation of the Iranian people.

The propaganda machine for the clerical regime in Tehran has been gloating about the similarities between the events of Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran and developments in Egypt now. It shamelessly claims that today's uprising in Egypt is but an aftershock of the revolution in Iran. The Egyptian people must prove them wrong.

And not just for the sake of Egypt. For over a century, Egypt, like Iran, has been a bellwether state for the entire region. The arrival of freedom to Egypt would therefore put the Iranian mullahs on the defensive. Far from a repeat of 1979, the Egyptian uprising might begin to seem like a close cousin of 2009—a true democratic revolt. This would give confidence to democrats across the Middle East. It would suggest that the tectonic plates in the region really are shifting away from despotism and dogma, toward democracy and reason. Inshallah!

Abbas Milani is a contributing editor for The New Republic and the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford, where he is the co-director of the Iran Democracy Project. His latest book is The Shah.

Source URL: <http://www.tnr.com/article/world/82450/egypt-riots-iranian-revolution-1979>