

Please Shut up and Listen

By Philip L. Marcus

The overwhelming TV live from Cairo with its confrontation and sometimes-frightening violence hid a more subtle negotiation process going on. The Mubarak administration bargained for its own life with the nascent democratic movement, doing so on the public stage. That process has a lesson for us that some of the parties ignored and that might have doomed the pro-democracy side, or may still lead to an Islamist state in Egypt.

The lesson is simple. Instead of trumpeting your own demands incessantly, stop talking and listen to what the other side is saying, and even proposing. Mubarak said he wanted to stay on until the September election, but in passing he made clear why. *He wants to die on Egyptian soil.* He said so in an interview, thus being part of the civic conversation.

While for many the past 15 or 20 years have been of awful deprivation, in his own mind he was a great savior of Egypt after the Sadat assassination that prevented chaos, somewhat as LBJ prevented chaos when JFK was killed in 1963. But LBJ's one elected term brought him great hatred from some, and he decided not to stand for re-election in 1968. He retired then to Texas. Surely that is where he wanted to live out his days.

The anti-Mubarak forces demanded he leave the country. There was no chance he was going to do that. He would rather have died in a presidential palace, stoned to death. But Egypt is large. There is a nice seaside town, Sharm el-Sheikh, to which he could be allowed to retire with dignity, go swimming or boating and write a memoir. (Reports are that is where he went in the end.) The protesters should have listened to him near the beginning and begun a dialog. It would have saved probably a week or more of stress, economic disruption, violence and hundreds of deaths.

Still, they were mostly screaming too loudly to hear that. Except the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, which is organized enough to have suggested a sit-down meeting. They are a minority, but their organization could give them an upper hand in the government that emerges. Therefore, the rump group of well-meaning freedom protestors—whose revolution by the way I strongly support—lost an early opportunity to start a useful dialog. Listen to your enemies instead of shouting them down.

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