



## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT JUDGMENT DAYS



In 1983, the great writer of Cairo, Naguib Mahfouz, published "Before the Throne," a novella in which Egyptian rulers over five millennia, from King Menes to Anwar Sadat, stand before the Court of Osiris, and answer for their deeds. The divinities Osiris, Isis, and Horus assess the record of triumph and brutality and determine who is worthy of immortality. Mahfouz failed to include the last of the pharaohs: Muhammad Hosni Sayyid Mubarak.

Last week, it was not the gods but the people of Egypt who stood in judgment of Mubarak, and, from Suez to Ismailia, their verdict was deafening. "Irhal! Irhal!" the crowds on Cairo's Tahrir Square chanted: "Leave! Leave!" Decades of bottled-up resentment came unstoppably. Egyptians, secular and religious, poor and middle-class, flowed into the public square to express their outrage after years of voiceless suffering; they protested injustice, the endlessly documented incidents of torture and corruption, the general stagna-

tion and disappointment of their lives.

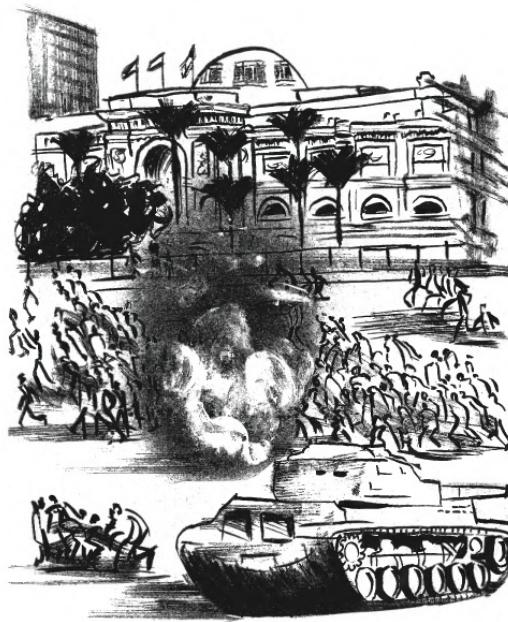
Mubarak had hoped to achieve immortality by installing his son Gamal on the throne, but now such schemes were impossible, and the old man, his chest sunken, his hair dyed an inky black, stayed in the palace and watched, on television, his effigy dangling from a traffic light. Osiris, Isis, and Horus were silent, but the Egyptian masses had spoken.

Two regimes have dominated Egypt in the past two centuries: the monarchical dynasty of Muhammad Ali, who rose from the post-Napoleonic chaos in 1805; and the Free Officers Movement, led, in

1952, by Gamal Abdel Nasser. Mubarak, after prodding from the White House and its emissary, announced on the evening of February 1st that he would retire following the September elections, but few among those gathered in Tahrir Square were satisfied. The next afternoon, marauding Mubarak "supporters"—paid thugs on horseback and camelback, wielding iron rods, razors, and whips—stormed Tahrir Square. Clearly, Mubarak had not yet reconciled himself to his eclipse and, as we went to press, there was no ruling out the possibility that he believed himself capable of dodging fate. He could orchestrate more civil unrest, presumably to step in and end it, then declare himself the singular and indispensable champion of stability.

"Even without a resolution, this is a great day of joy," Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the founder of the Arab Organization for Human Rights, said on the train to New York from Washington, where he had briefed various Administration officials. Ibrahim spent three years in jail under Mubarak's reign, despite having been the faculty adviser for Mubarak's wife, Suzanne, when she was pursuing a master's degree in sociology at the American University, in Cairo. "She was studying poverty in the Egyptian slums," Ibrahim said, laughing. "But power isolates you from reality. I think

ILLUSTRATION BY TOM BACHTEL





*"Remember when these were all yoga centers?"*

SIPRESS

that, like her husband, she became cut off, she forgot what she saw in her field work among the people of Egypt."

As Mubarak raged and played at conflagration, the other gendarmes and royals of the Middle East made their own hedges against an unforgiving future. In Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh declared that he would neither run for reelection nor install his son in office. In Jordan, King Abdullah fired his Cabinet and met with the opposition. The emirs and princes of the Gulf states seemed confident that they could continue to secure their popularity with oil money, but what pressure would the spectacle of Cairo exert in Damascus, Tripoli, Rabat, and even Tehran, where a democratic movement had shown itself so vividly after the rigged ballot of 2009?

The historic moments of peaceful popular demonstrations, of oppressed peoples emerging as one from their private realms of silence and fear, are thrilling. And some, like the uprising in Prague, in November, 1989, have thrilling conclusions—a pacific transition from autocracy to liberal democracy. But Tahrir Square is not Wenceslas Square, in Prague, nor is it Tiananmen Square, in Beijing, or Revolution Square, in Moscow. The Egyptians, for all their bravery, do not possess the advantages of the Czechs of a generation ago. Liberated from the Soviet grip, the Czechs could rely on the legacy of not-so-distant free-

doms, the moral leadership of Václav Havel, and many other particulars that augured well for them. Circumstances were not as auspicious in Romania, China, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Opening acts can be ecstatic and deceptive. The Russian prospect, in August, 1991, which began with the collapse of a K.G.B.-led coup, soon encountered its own historical legacies, including the lingering hold of the security services and the corruptions of an oil economy. Modern Russia is far better off than it was in the teeth of the Communist era, but it is not the state that so many had hoped for two decades ago.

In the past century, Egypt has been the stage for many ideologies: liberal nationalism, "Arab socialism," Islamism, Pan-Arabism. Anyone who has spent time in Cairo talking with the political opposition knows how fractured and repressed it has been. The city is thick with human-rights lawyers, political activists, and intellectuals who have been blacklisted, jailed, and tortured—and yet pockets of civil society have persisted.

No one can predict with confidence what might develop after Mubarak—if, in fact, his regime falls. (The new Vice-President, Omar Suleiman, is no democrat, and no less cunning than his patron.) One anxiety, particularly in the United States and in Israel, is that the Muslim Brotherhood, despite its lateness to the revolution, will find a way to power, drop any pretense of coöperation with secular lib-

eral factions, and initiate a range of troubling policies, including an insistence on Islamic law and the abrogation of the long-standing peace treaty with Israel. Last Thursday, Mubarak played on this anxiety, telling ABC that all the disorder was the fault of the Muslim Brothers. Which was utterly false. Leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood are quite capable of slipping into conspiracy theories about 9/11, but they are not remotely as aggressive or as theocratic as their brethren abroad. During the Iraq War, I called on the Brotherhood at its small, ramshackle offices in Cairo, and one of its leaders, Essam al-Eryam, sought to reassure Western readers. "There will be democracy here, sooner or later," he said. "It requires patience, and we are more patient because we are, as an organization, seventy-six years old. You have already seen some countries—Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iran—describe themselves as Islamic regimes. There's a diversity of models, even among the Sunni and the Shia. Egypt can present a model that is more just and tolerant." And there al-Eryam was right: supporters of political Islam sit peacefully in parliaments from Turkey to Indonesia.

In diplomacy, the tension between moral and strategic considerations is always acute and often shaming—rarely more so than in the American relationship with Egypt. For decades, Mubarak was able to resist American pressure to reform by insisting that he alone was the bulwark against a theocratic, anti-Western, anti-Israeli regime. In November, 2003, eight months after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq began, George W. Bush seemed to break with years of realist orthodoxy, saying, "Are the peoples of the Middle East somehow beyond the reach of liberty? Are millions of men and women and children condemned by history or culture to live in despotism? Are they alone never to know freedom and never even to have a choice in the matter?" Meanwhile, Bush was pressing the Egyptians not so much to democratize their politics as to rent their torture chambers. This was the policy, begun under President Clinton, of "extraordinary rendition." Bush backed off his "Freedom Agenda" entirely when elections in Egypt, in 2005, brought a sizable contingent of Muslim Brothers into the parlia-

ment, and, a year later, Hamas displaced the Palestinian Authority in Gaza. Bush never returned to his attacks on tolerating “oppression for the sake of stability.”

Barack Obama, who came to office not least because of his opposition to the war in Iraq, went to Cairo in 2009 intent on assuring the Muslim world of a new kind of policy: engagement without hegemony. “I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq,” he said. “So let me be clear: no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other.” But, he added:

That does not lessen my commitment . . . to governments that reflect the will of the people. Each nation gives life to this principle in its own way, grounded in the traditions of its own people. America does not presume to know what is best for everyone, just as we would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election. But I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn’t steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. Those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere.

The unsayable thing in contemporary domestic politics is that American influence in the world is neither limitless nor pure. But Obama grasps this, and sometimes the result of his politics of modesty has been disheartening. On issues of human rights—everywhere from Russia to China, from Iran to Zimbabwe—he has been, in public at least, conspicuously cautious. He has favored instead a double game of tempered public rhetoric and concerted diplomacy, and this has, at times, thwarted the desire for a clarion American voice.

It has also created among some a false impression that Obama has been too recessive in the Egyptian crisis, even though the President, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the veteran diplomat Frank Wisner, and Admiral Mikeullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, all pressed Mubarak and his aides for a more rapid transition. But the United States has long ceased to be a puppet-master among the Arab states, if it ever was. The U.S., however, still has enormous influence over the most democratic country in the region. Israel’s occupation

of Palestinian lands is hardly the only issue of moral, political, and strategic importance in the region—the dispute was barely a slogan on the streets of Tunis or Cairo—but there is no doubt that its swift and fair resolution, after forty-four years, is necessary not only to satisfy the demands of justice but to insure a future for Israel as a democracy. The Netanyahu government’s refusal to come to terms with the Palestinians, and its insistence on settlement building, have steadily undermined both the security and the essence of the state, which was founded as a refuge from dispossession. Israel has grave and legitimate concerns about Hamas and Hezbollah on its borders, to say nothing of the intentions of Tehran, but its prospects will not be enhanced by an adherence to the status quo. That was true before the uprising in Cairo, and will remain true after it. Judgment—whether rendered by gods or by people—can be postponed but not forestalled.

—David Remnick

### CLASS REUNION CHINA HANDS



Henry Kissinger was one of several dignitaries invited by the Metropolitan Opera’s general manager, Peter Gelb, to the final dress rehearsal, last week, of “Nixon in China,” the opera by John Adams that reenacts the historic state visit that Richard Nixon made in 1972 and once described as “the week that changed the world.” Kissinger was too busy to attend, being preoccupied with writing up his own version of that event, in a new book that he is planning to call “On China.” On the telephone the other day, he explained that the book examines the interaction between the United States and China from the revolution of 1949 to the present. As for the opera, he said he had heard that he is unflatteringly represented in his role as Nixon’s national-security adviser, a part that is sung by a bass baritone. A friend of his who had seen the opera when it was first performed, in 1987, had suggested that its creators were having “fun” at his expense, but, Kissinger said,

“this friend might have underestimated my level of tolerance.”

Many of Kissinger’s colleagues from the Nixon Administration did accept Gelb’s invitation to the rehearsal and to a Chinese feast that followed, at Shun Lee West. Among them were Winston Lord, who in 1972 was Kissinger’s special assistant, and who sat in Mao Ze-dong’s library during Nixon’s first meeting with the chairman; Nicholas Platt, then a deputy director in the State Department; and Ronald Walker, a special assistant to President Nixon. Gelb also invited journalists who were on the trip, including Dan Rather and Bernard Kalb, of CBS; Helen Thomas, of U.P.I.; Av Westin, of ABC; and Max Frankel, of the *Times*, whose coverage of the trip earned him a Pulitzer Prize.

Seated among the diners, and listening to their mostly polite comments about the production, were the opera’s composer and conductor, John Adams; the director, Peter Sellars; and the set designer, Adrianne Lobel. Winston Lord, a trim, gray-haired man of seventy-three, who was the most knowledgeable person present on the subject of the visit, had many things to say.

“Over all, I admired the opera, with the important exception of the gratuitous and ugly portrayal of Kissinger,” he said, and then proceeded to read from notes he had made during the rehearsal:

“The first act dramatized the central elements of the Nixon visit. The arrival and famous handshake stirred forty-year-old emotions in me. The Nixon-Mao meeting captured the verbal approach and body language of both protagonists—Nixon, earnest and awkward, and Mao projecting will power. The President wanted to talk about issues; the chairman kept the dialogue at the philosophical level. The libretto was superb in expressing Mao’s elusive brushstrokes, filled with allusions and metaphors that were either subtle policy statements or senile detours.

“The second act,” he continued, “dealt with Mrs. Nixon’s sightseeing excursions and recalled the Potemkin-village dimension of the visit. Throughout the opera, she is the one totally sympathetic character.”

Lord’s wife, the Shanghai-born author Bette Bao Lord, was seated next to him at one of five round tables piled with plates of smoked carp, Cantonese roast pork,