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Arabs brandishing people power

By Ashish Kumar Sen

Economic grievances, including high levels of unemployment and rampant corruption, have been a key driver of protests erupting across the Arab world in recent weeks.

However, since the ouster of longtime Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on Jan. 14, protesters have grown emboldened by the realization that they have the power to bring about real change.

On Monday, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak dismissed his despised interior minister and appointed a new finance minister in a Cabinet reshuffle that analysts say will do little to save his embattled regime.

In a sign that protesters will accept nothing short of the 82-year-old Mr. Mubarak's ouster, the opposition called for a "march of millions" and a general strike on Tuesday.

"It's too late now," Shadi Hamid, director of research at the Brookings Institution's center in Doha, Qatar, said of Mr. Mubarak's efforts.

"The protesters aren't talking about economics. We're not hearing chants about bread or subsidies," Mr. Hamid said in a phone interview.

Economic grievances were the spark for protests in Tunisia, where Mohammed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old street vendor, set himself of fire in December after an altercation with police.

High levels of unemployment across much of the Arab world have fueled such protests. Many college-educated youths are discovering there are not enough jobs that meet their level of education.

"In many ways being underemployed is worse than being unemployed," said Mr. Hamid. "If you are well educated, you have expectations for a better life."

Richard Murphy, a Middle East Institute scholar who served as assistant secretary of state for Near East and South Asian Affairs in the Reagan administration, said the Mubarak regime has made promises of reform in the past that were unfulfilled or implemented so slowly that they added to the frustration.

The problem is much bigger than just economic grievances, said Arthur Hughes, a Middle East Institute scholar who served as deputy assistant secretary of state for near eastern affairs in the Clinton administration.

"The underlying issue is respect," Mr. Hughes said.

He recounted how on his trips to Egypt he was witness to Egyptians having to beg and bribe government officials to get things such as driver's licenses and marriage certificates.

"In a culture in which personal dignity and respect is so important, this treatment has just ground them down and forced them to take matters into their own hands," Mr. Hughes said.

On Monday, Egypt's new vice president said he had been authorized to begin a dialogue with the opposition on reform, after the military said in a statement that it would not attack peaceful protesters and acknowledged the "legitimate rights of the people."

The statement was a clear sign that the military is prepared to let the protests run their course as long as there is no violence. Many in the military appear to share the people's grievances, especially over the high cost of food.

"The military is now in the position of kingmaker," said Mr. Hamid.

"There is an impasse of sorts, and it may be up to an outside player to tip the balance. That player could be the military or it could also be the United States," he added.

In a bid to calm the protesters, Mr. Mubarak on Monday dismissed Interior Minister Habib el-Adly, who rights groups allege encouraged police abuses and torture. Mahmoud Wagdy, a retired general, was appointed to the post, while Samir Mohammad Radwan replaced Youssef Boutros-Ghali as finance minister.

Since the protests began a week ago, Mr. Mubarak has stocked his Cabinet with senior military officials. The move is widely viewed as a bid to consolidate his control over the military.

He appointed Omar Suleiman, his intelligence chief, as vice president and former air force commander Ahmed Shafiq as prime minister.

Several businessmen who held key economic posts and whose influence was resented by many Egyptians also have been removed. Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit and Defense Minister Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi have retained their posts.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs said reform is "not about appointments, it's about actions."

"I think it is obvious that there's more work to be done," he said.

Mr. Suleiman, who was appointed Egypt's first vice president in nearly 30 years over the weekend, said on state television that he had been authorized to begin a dialogue with the opposition on constitutional and political reforms.

On Sunday, opposition groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, said they would support Mohamed ElBaradei, a former head of the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, in a dialogue with the Mubarak regime.

Meanwhile, Cairo's international airport was a scene of chaos and confusion as thousands of foreigners sought to flee the unrest, and countries around the world scrambled to send in planes to fly their citizens out, the Associated Press reported.

The unrest caused world oil prices to top \$100 a barrel on Monday.

U.S. administrations have for years been pressing the Mubarak regime on reform.

While he was in government, Mr. Hughes and his colleagues would frequently raise this issue with their Egyptian counterparts.

"We would tell them 'Mubarak is sowing seeds for a catastrophe. Why aren't you telling your president this?'" he said. "Instead, the government became more repressive."

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