

A letter from the Cedar Revolution to the Nile Revolution

By Chibli Mallat

First Person

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With scenes of Cossack-like Mubarak supporters on horse- and camel-back whipping unarmed, nonviolent demonstrators, the repeated appeal for a gentle change of regime at the top is proving insufficient. From my experience with the Lebanese Cedar Revolution, and the history of popular revolutions in the modern age, one does not persuade dictators to step down. One forces them down by moving on them, and by insisting as they falter that they should be put to trial.

We failed to do so with our small-time dictator, Emile Lahoud, whose forced extension in power with Syrian support back in September 2004 led to scores of people killed within weeks. The first victim was Marwan Hamadeh, an opponent to the coerced extension, who was the target of a bomb that killed his driver and maimed him and his aide for life on Oct. 1. There was no investigation, no arrest; instead we were served callous rhetoric from the pro-Lahoud officials, including a prosecutor who threatened to put the victim, Marwan Hamadeh, on trial. And on Feb. 14, 2005, 22 innocent people were blown up with Rafik Hariri, who was carrying the oppositional torch against Lahoud's bid to remain in power for life. That was the spark of the Cedar Revolution. We did what the brave Egyptians stated on Jan. 25, with one crucial difference: despite half of the active population demonstrating in Beirut on March 14, 2005, and again on Feb. 14, 2006, we failed to unseat Lahoud, and so lost our ways in the Byzantine alleys of Lebanese politics. It has been all downhill since.

The Nile Revolution has internalized our failure, and the key demand was made on day one of the demonstrations: the dictator must leave. With Friday's inconclusive "Day of Departure" our colleagues in Egypt should hark the Cedar Revolution: Mubarak will not step down, he must be removed.

So the Cedar Revolution's message to the brave, nonviolent colleagues under the whips of the Mubarak Cossacks is that their anger, which the world of decent peoples share, must be directed more purposefully: Mubarak will deceive, waver, even grovel as he did by suggesting he is too old to flee, and will exhaust all possible tricks, which he actually used in March 2005. One episode deserves to be recalled. Our colleagues of the Kefaya movement were demonstrating in Cairo's Tahrir square because they were galvanized by our much larger demonstrations in Beirut's Hurriyya square. Then, Mubarak offered to open up presidential elections under the pressure of our combined marches. We know what happened: the only candidate allowed to stand, Ayman Nour, ended up in prison.

Mubarak is at it again, and believes that time is on his side, hiding behind the presidential elections planned for September, and on obscure articles of the Egyptian Constitution that would not allow him to leave and pass on the torch “peacefully.” His bluff needs to be called, and the message against his stubbornness in the midst of the chaos and violence is one to be anchored in the thread of repression associated with his presidency: from the thousands of people tortured and humiliated, to turning a blind eye to the massacres in prison and the release of common criminals in large numbers last week, to last week’s unleashed and unpunished Cossacks. This calls for judicial accountability.

So the lesson of our failed experience in Lebanon is dual: No longer “Down with Mubarak,” but a call for his trial in Egypt by the distinguished judges who stood up against him time and again over the past three decades. No longer “Mubarak out”: demonstrations must not be circumscribed to Tahrir. Next week, demonstrators all over Egypt must converge on his palace in Cairo, officially “the people’s palace,” which they must reclaim as theirs. A similar move tipped the Revolution in France in October 1789, when the King was brought in from Versailles by the revolutionaries. Conversely, our failure to march on the Lahoud palace in Baabda allowed him and the Syrian ruler to defeat the Cedar Revolution.

So it is time for the Nile Revolution to be dynamic where the Cedar Revolution wasn’t. We failed to march on Baabda, the Nile Revolution must peacefully march on Mubarak’s palace. And it is time to call for his trial under international standards for the crime against humanity that his reign has meant, and continues to mean for Egyptians, including the Cossacks episode, and the 300 people, at least, who were killed in just one week.

At all times, the nonviolent character of the Nile Revolution must be religiously preserved. This is something the Cedar Revolution can be proud to have kept as beacon and model for the peoples of the Middle East’s yearning for change.

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