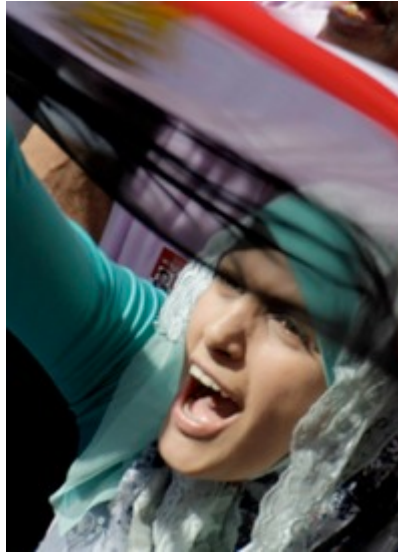




Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on April 4, 2011

Ongoing Repression in Egypt and Its Lessons for America

Take Egypt, for instance. Although 30-year dictator Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign in February after a popular uprising against his rule, the armed forces that took over the government in his wake are hardly models of Western liberalism. In fact, according to an April 2 *Washington Post* report, “human rights and legal activists” say “the country’s security agencies have been weakened, but the military has continued many of its repressive practices and a hated emergency law that allows random arrests is still in place.” This stands in sharp contrast to the early days of the rebellion, when the people hailed the army as their saviors, chanting, “The army and the people are one.”



What happened? Mona Seif, a human-rights activist, told the *Post*, “The army has a big part of it still loyal to the old regime. They have economic interests in the old system. They won’t let go of that easily.” The report continues:

Last month, Seif said, she was demonstrating with her mother in central Cairo. Soldiers broke up the protest, and she watched as they hauled off a man and beat him. She confronted them, demanding his release. They let him go, his face bleeding. Later that day, she said, he was arrested again and sentenced in a three-minute military tribunal proceeding to five years in prison for assaulting an officer on duty and breaking curfew, despite being picked up hours before the curfew.

Seif began to look into the case and, with the help of lawyers at the center, learned that at least 5,000 people have been arrested and tried in military courts since Mubarak dismissed his government and sent the armed forces into the streets Jan. 28.

“Suddenly this case I witnessed opened a whole window into this awful world that no one knows about it and no one wants to talk about,” Seif said. “Everyone was talking about the military as our saviors.”

As Seif mentioned, however, the military, as part of the government, naturally thinks more of keeping its hold on power than of liberating the Egyptian people. Thus, writes the *Post*,

The feared police went underground during the uprising’s early days, but segments of the military began taking on their role. Soldiers beat up and detained demonstrators and charged them in military tribunals with carrying sticks or knives, breaking curfew or using Molotov cocktails, said activists, lawyers and released detainees. Sentences ranged from three months to life in prison. At least 25 minors are among those convicted, activists and lawyers said.

Far from shepherding Egypt to democracy, activists say, the military is governing according to decrees similar to those relied on by Mubarak.

Efforts have been mounted to help some people.... But many poor and obscure people appear lost in a



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system with no viable appeals process or provision for public defense.

"The courts should only be used for soldiers, not citizens," said Adel Ramadan, a lawyer with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. "The military supreme court prefers to ensure security at the expense of justice."

Will the Egyptian uprising lead to liberty or simply to the exchange of one pharaoh for another? What about other Middle Eastern rebellions? Only time will tell.

However, there are some lessons here for Americans.

First, overweening executive power and excessive deference to the military are dangerous. In the post-9/11 era, U.S. Presidents have begun governing in a rather dictatorial manner through executive orders, signing statements, and [blunt declarations](#) that Congress has no power over the executive branch in matters of national security. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have both claimed the authority to imprison or even assassinate anyone, anywhere in the world, if the President believes that person is a threat to national security. Military prisons and courts have, to a large degree, replaced civilian ones in cases of alleged terrorism. Poor and obscure people such as those held at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp do indeed get lost in the system with little hope of release. Even in those rare instances when courts acquit these suspects, Presidents [claim](#) the authority to shuffle them back off to prison again.

As the Egyptian situation shows, such tools, even if instituted with the best of intentions (as perhaps is the case here in the United States), can easily be turned on the very people they were allegedly instituted to protect; and the military, too often the object of near worship by Americans (especially on the Right), will be only too happy to wield those tools mercilessly in an attempt to quell popular revolts. As one Egyptian protestor who had been arrested and tortured by the army told the *Post*, "I expected this to happen from thugs, not the military." It is not hard to imagine a similar remark from a patriotic American if the U.S. military were ever called upon to put down a nascent rebellion here.

Second, the U.S. government was wise not to involve itself (at least publicly) in the Egyptian unrest. Had our government made a show of aiding the military when it was considered to be on the side of the people, its subsequent suppression of the rebellion would then be laid at Uncle Sam's feet, fanning the flames of anti-Americanism already burning from three decades of U.S. aid to the Mubarak regime.

Moreover, this shows why Obama's decision to intervene in the Libyan uprising could have very negative consequences. The administration claims not to know much about the rebels it is helping, raising serious questions about why it is intervening in the first place. As [Sen. Rand Paul \(R-Ky.\) put it](#):

The problem with sending U.S. military to help rebels in Libya or anywhere else is that we are taking sides in a conflict and on behalf of a people whom we know nothing about.

When, or if, there is regime change in Libya, what kind of leadership, exactly, will replace Gadhafi? Who are the Libyan rebels exactly? The *Daily Telegraph* newspaper in London reported over the weekend that some Libyan rebel leaders now claim they have members of al-Qaida within their ranks and are glad to have them. Why do we have American soldiers, our best and bravest, helping people in Libya who may be the very same people we ask our military to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq?

Should the rebels succeed in ousting Col. Moammar Gadhafi and turn out to be every bit as repressive as he is, their American allies will get much of the blame. Does the United States really need more Muslim enemies? For that matter, should it be helping its already avowed enemies in al-Qaeda into



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power?

Americans who care about their own liberties should demand that their government mind its own business, both by staying out of other countries' affairs and by abiding by the Constitution's limits on its own power. The alternative is continual threats to their lives and liberties from both foreign terrorism and domestic government.

Photo of Egyptian protest: AP Images

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