

**THIS WORLD of OURS**

By Bob Harwood

**Egypt At The Epicenter**



Egypt was at the epicenter of a seismic shift in the earth's geopolitical structure. The first tremors were felt in Tunisia a week earlier as a long- standing despot was ousted in a matter of hours by angry citizens. This triggered an uprising in Egypt, breathtaking in its suddenness,

scale, non-violence and in its success. Untold thousands gathered daily in Cairo's Tahrir Square calling for Mubarak, a despotic ruler of more than three decades, to step down now!

Tech savvy youths in a country where the median age is 24 used Facebook and Twitter to coordinate each stage. As demonstrations persisted the powerful military remained neutral, expressed understanding of citizens' concerns. The people were not motivated by extremism but protesting low wages, high unemployment, soaring food prices, and rampant corruption. As protests spread Mubarak finally did step down February 11 just 18 days after the revolt began. Euphoria erupted.

Pride was restored to the nation. Protestors scaled back and spaced out peaceful demonstrations but demanded early signs of tangible reforms to a more democratic society. The military dissolved Parliament, invoked military law and urged people to return to work pledging that a constitutional amendment plebiscite and elections be held within months.

Shock waves were felt throughout the region. Egypt was a strategic ally of Israel. Would the new Egypt be secular or fundamentalist? Was Israel's oppression and impoverishment of Palestinians akin to Mubarak's oppression of Egyptians? Were Israeli secularists, and there are many, applauding while Netanyahu's right wing-partners worried?

Was an elected but extremist Hamas at odds with Abbas and more moderate Palestinians? Iran's brutal theocracy hoped an ally would emerge but feared the worst. Hereditary oil sheikdoms watched nervously lest they be caught up in a domino effect by masses no longer willing to endure obscene economic contrasts between rulers and the ruled. In the days following, protests erupted in Algiers, Yemen, Bahrain, and in Iran where thousands of protestors were again met with force when they thronged the streets reinvigorated by Egypt's success. People power had found its voice.

Shock waves were also felt on distant shores as nations around the world, caught flatfooted by the suddenness of it all, worried about the impact on long-standing alliances and interests, scrambled to adjust responses day by day. Was America's support of despots in pursuit of security and economic interests at odds with its self-image as a champion of democracy? What of its reliance on mid east oil, on the Suez Canal as a major waterway, on military bases and alliances in the region? Might what is happening in the Arab world be extrapolated to a host of issues in and beyond our own national borders that we must ponder in the months and years ahead. Are gross inequalities and oppression a primary cause of terrorism? Might one man's

terrorist be another's Freedom Fighter?

Is it more righteous to slay by *collateral damage* from the skies than in hand to hand combat? Has the West's support of tyrants and use of the military option actually fueled terrorism and at times directed it their way? Has our broader understanding of Islam been distorted by equating it with extremism? Should we move beyond a fragile dependence on Mid East Oil to less dependence on oil altogether to save a threatened planet? Will soaring food prices fuel more uprisings be desperate people?

If not addressed will gross contrasts between poor, underpaid or unemployed people and huge bonuses to those who brought on the recession lead to social unrest within our own borders? At what point do some of our own democracies degenerate into plutocracy, the rule of the wealthy?

I see many challenges and opportunities, domestic and global, in the aftermath of Egypt.