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3Qs: Sullivan urges United States to side with Arab people, not dictators



January 31, 2011

Professor Denis Sullivan, director of Northeastern University's Middle East Center for Peace, Culture and Development, has worked, studied and lived in Egypt over many decades, regularly leading student trips to the country. He discusses the ongoing wave of anti-government protest in Egypt, following the revolt that overthrew the government of nearby Tunisia.

The world saw the Tunisian government fall based on what appeared to be a populist uprising. What's the chance this

sort of thing could happen successfully elsewhere in the Arab world?

Tunisia was merely an appetizer, compared to the full banquet of Egyptian revolt, if not revolution. Egyptians have suffered 30 years of an authoritarian, disrespected, ineffective government under Hosni Mubarak. On top of that, they suffer economic despair and hopelessness: unemployment (in vast numbers), rising food prices and other inflationary pushes, plus human rights abuses and corruption.

Of course Egypt is not Tunisia — in fact, it's far more significant a country and may even have deeper-seated frustrations. Indeed, Egypt is the largest and perhaps most significant Arab country, given its population (80 million as opposed to around 10 million in Tunisia); geo-strategic location, the bridge between Africa and Southwest Asia and contiguous to both Israel and Gaza; and its historic role as a central player in regional politics.

What should be the role of the United States in the face of this kind of unrest?

The United States should cut Mubarak loose. His days are done. He is history. If President Obama does not call on him to resign now, we will lose the Egyptian people and it will take years to win them back.

Some in the West have argued that repressive Arab governments use Israel and the United States as bogeymen to keep their populations from focusing on a lack of economic and civic freedoms. Is that so, and would Tunisian-style uprisings result in changed attitudes toward the West?

These are two different issues. Yes, repressive Arab states use Israel and the United States as diversions from real issues of economic mismanagement and repressive regimes. And Israel and the United States are giving these Arab states a lot of ammunition, as their policies have indeed been against the interests of Arab states generally (the principal issue still being Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands and US support of Israeli intransigence in the peace process). Popular uprisings against Arab regimes may or may not result in changed attitudes toward the West depending primarily on whether the West supports those "people's revolts". If the United States continues to support those demonstrations and uprisings, "the Arab street" and Arab demonstrators will respond in kind — appreciative of any support from the United States. And if the United States is seen as supporting Arab dictatorships, as has been our policy and practice for decades, those Arab demonstrators will have another target of their resistance.

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