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History shows that where Egypt goes, other countries will follow; Analysis

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WHAT HAPPENS when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object? No one can predict for sure, but anyone who knows Egypt cannot be surprised at what is happening — only why it took so long.

For decades it has been received wisdom in the Arab world that its regimes are too powerful to be confronted by unarmed people. "You are just fighting a mountain," they say in Arabic. "Don't knock your head against it."

So when Tunisia provided a real, live, example of how a revolution can intensify after the security forces resort to mortal force, it came as a big surprise to Arabs. It also overturned years of accepted dogma about the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, bringing the Berlin Wall inside the minds of Arabs crashing down.

Suddenly the Middle East's authoritarian states only look rock-solid until the day they turn into jelly, and revolution seems possible everywhere.

Tunisia was a powerful ignition switch because events there were spontaneous and unexpected. Algeria, Egypt, Jordan and Libya all seemed more likely regimes to go first. Now the tumult has engulfed Egypt, the most populous Arab state and the cornerstone of much Middle Eastern politics — and the domino effect is in full swing. Jordan, Algeria, Syria, Yemen and Morocco are all candidates to experience the same fate.

Yet it is misguided to assume that a democratic tsunami will necessarily sweep the whole of the Middle East: many of the issues that have brought Egypt to the brink may be more easily solved by Arab countries with richer oil reserves.

In neighbouring Libya, for example, the regime has just announced vast spending on public housing in an attempt to buy off disquiet.

But there is nothing more President Hosni Mubarak can say or do to convince the people that he deserves to stay in power. He has run out of carrots — though not quite of sticks — and seems to be preparing to go down with his ship while his cronies cash in their soft

currency and flee.

His project of installing his favourite son, Gamal, or another apparatchik, as the next leader is dead in the water. How the younger Mubarak may feel about this is difficult to gauge, but I suspect he is probably breathing a sigh of relief at the prospect of a life of luxury in exile rather than inheriting the mess that his father has left.

Since the president still has everything to lose he can't be expected to quit without a fight and so the revolution will take a few more days or weeks (it took three weeks in Tunisia). The tens of thousands of people on the streets so far might count for something in other countries, but by Egyptian standards this is just a long bread queue. When the Egyptian public really steps out you can't see the streets any more.

But the repercussions for the rest of the Middle East are not confined to the powerful signal the Egyptian uprising is sending to Arabs elsewhere.

Crucial to the long-term consequences for the region will be the nature of whatever government eventually wins control of Egypt. The most positive next step would be if someone known and respected was to become acting president for a few months before free multi-party elections were held. This would go a long way to solve some, but by no means all, of Egypt's immediate problems.

Mohammed ElBaradei could be the man for the job, or another figure with similar stature such as Amr Moussa, the Arab League Secretary.

No other Egyptian political figure has ever looked like a convincing or realistic alternative to Mubarak, but that is to be expected in a tyranny: Mubarak did not seem convincing under Sadat, nor Sadat when Nasser was alive.

But such a rosy outcome is by no means guaranteed.

Algerian-style civil war, a new Saddam Hussein or a Yemenistyle Maoist regime are all remote possibilities and there is a real chance that someone in the army could take advantage of the situation by launching a military coup. What's more, despite their remarkably low-key role in the revolution to date, the Muslim Brotherhood could be voted into power in an election. Egypt under the control of the ideological twin of Hamas in the Occupied Palestinian Territories would horrify many in the West but delight the Islamist movements bubbling away beneath the surface of other Arab states.

The likelihood that no future Egyptian ruler will be as friendly to America as Mubarak is a deeply unsettling prospect for Israel, whose trust in the Egyptian government has allowed it to free up resources that otherwise might have been spent monitoring Egypt and the Gaza border.

Though Egypt is no longer as relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian situation as it once was, regime change in such an important country would change the dynamics of the region in dramatic and unforeseeable ways. Though less influential than it was 30 years ago, Egypt still has more than double the population of any other Arab country and is looked to by Arabs around the world. Where Egypt goes, history shows that other countries soon follow.

Almost every major Arab political movement of the past 100 years started in Egypt, from the Muslim Brotherhood, launched in the city of Ismailia in the 1920s, to Egyptian Islamic Jihad, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who became Osama bin Laden's chief ideologist and the "brains" behind al-Qaeda.

If Mubarak is removed tidily and replaced by something better, it could have a benign effect on many other countries in the region. But if the revolution turns out badly then dictators around the world will be able to point to Egypt as a warning as what happens when you are foolish enough to rock the boat.

Hugh Miles is an author and journalist specialising in Egypt. He wrote *Playing Cards in Cairo*. "Algerian-style civil war, a new Saddam or a military coup are all possible

