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DEATH ON THE NILE; HOW EGYPTIAN TURNED AGAINST EGYPTIAN IN FIGHT FOR CHANGE Dispatch

COLIN FREEMAN In Cairo

PRESIDENT Hosni Mubarak was last night clinging to power after 12 days of pro-democracy demonstrations, despite calls from allies at home and abroad to end his 30-year rule.

As the army began to clear wreckage from Tahrir Square, the focal point of the protests, Ahmed Shafiq, Egypt's prime minister, said stability was returning.

There was confusion as reports at first claimed Mr Mubarak, 82, had resigned as head of his party — a gesture which would not have diminished his presidential powers — then denied he had made even that symbolic move.

Instead he dismissed members of the party's ruling executive, including his son, Gamal. That was welcomed as "a positive step" by the US, while Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State, warned other authoritarian regimes in the region that they faced a "perfect storm" of protest unless they rapidly reformed.

Yesterday protesters who had endured a recent onslaught by Mubarak supporters said they would not leave Tahrir Square until the president quit.

Opposition leaders also refused to open talks with the government on a possible solution to the crisis.

AFTER a career in politics in which he has been jailed, beaten and had his party offices burned down, Ayman Nour is well acquainted with the rough and tumble of life in Egypt's opposition. The haggard, chain-smoking 45 year-old looked largely unfazed last week as he sat glued to his mobile in his Cairo flat, trying to keep tabs on the dozens of party members who have been arrested, beaten up or simply "vanished" in the recent anti-government unrest.

Then, halfway through a snatched interview with The Sunday Telegraph, came a phone call that caused him to puff on his cigarette long and hard.

"That was the leader of another opposition group," he told a worried-looking aide. "He has just heard that there is an order out from the government for me to be assassinated and

that we need to make sure we secure the house."

True, in a land where the word on the "Arab street" has long been more trusted than official pronouncements, it is not unusual for rumours to fly that an embattled government is about to find its way out of trouble by silencing its critics permanently. On this occasion, though, Mr Nour's fears seemed justified — given the carnage going on just a few miles away on the other side of the Nile. In scenes widely condemned as a last-ditch bid by President Hosni Mubarak to cling to power, a pro-regime mob attacked crowds of democracy campaigners gathered in the city's Tahrir Square, sparking a two-day street battle that left at least five dead and thousands injured.

Egypt's image as a touristfriendly bastion of stability also took a beating - in full of view of television cameras, and just a few feet from Cairo's famous museum of antiquities, gangs of club-wielding men were pelting each other with petrol bombs. By Friday, what had started out like Glastonbury seemed more akin to the Somme, with thousands wandering around with bruised faces and bandaged heads.

To be fair, the pro-democracy crowds had given as good as they got, barricading themselves into the square and beating back the government supporters with a hail of torn-up paving slabs. But few had any doubt who had started the worst of the violence - a progovernment "cavalry" charge on horse and camel back. The Sunday Telegraph witnessed the charge at close hand, and watched as some of the riders were pulled from their mounts and beaten.

Yesterday some of the riders denied they were "thugs" and insisted they were "good men" just trying to safeguard their jobs. They said a ruling party official urged them to join what they expected to be a peaceful demonstration, but denied claims he had paid them to attend.

"We were attacked by 10,000 people, a few of us against all of them, yet they say we are crazy," said one, Mahmoud Yusri Yusef, who had set out early in his horse and cart in a group of between 50 and 100. Outside the Mustafa Mahmoud Mosque in Mohandessin, a central suburb of Cairo, fighting broke out between gangs loyal to Mr Mubarak and those who had been protesting for a transition to democracy, and the riders were split up.

A group consisting of 14-year-old Waly Hosni, three other horsemen and a camel-driver found themselves heading over a bridge.

"I didn't know we were heading towards Tahrir Square," said Waly, lying on his bed in his home near the pyramids, a makeshift hovel. His head was bruised and bloodied, a large bandage covering half of his face. "There was a crowd of people stoning us. We didn't have any way out - we were going into the square."

He explained that he had been pulled from his horse and beaten. "They punched me on the ground, and banged my head, and then they tied me to a tree. They said they were going to throw me in the Nile, but a sheikh [imam] came and said I was only a kid."

He was luckier than his colleagues. The other three horsemen have not been seen since

they were dragged away.

Concern is growing that this mini civil war played out so publicly in Tahrir Square last week may yet engulf the rest of the country, exposing deep political, economic and religious divisions which 30 years of iron rule under Mr Mubarak have kept dormant.

For all that the graffiti around the square hail the anti-government protest as a "Facebook Revolution", the crowd that has gathered there over the past 10 days no longer just includes the young, middle-class social-networking activists whom the West might see as potential leaders. Increasingly, they have been joined by tough, bearded young men from Egypt's proscribed Muslim Brotherhood, who may be better at defending themselves, but are rather less interested in turning Egypt into a secular democracy.

Viewing both groups with equal distrust are the far larger numbers of Egyptians who have little interest in politics either way, but who feel the "Facebook Revolutionaries" have unleashed the one thing they fear more than anything - chaos. For them, the looting that has accompanied the current unrest is horribly reminiscent of what went on after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, a land whose subsequent lurch into religious violence they are keen not to follow. "The young people say they want change, but they don't think about to what or whom," said Nader Narguib, whose IT firm has done no business since the disturbances began. "There are all kinds of people who would like to grab power here, like the Muslim Brotherhood. Mubarak might not have been perfect, but he was doing his best."

Like many, Mr Nader was appalled by last weekend's scenes, in which anti-government demonstrators chased the police from the streets and burned down dozens of police stations. It might have been a symbolic victory against a force much-despised for its brutality, but the ensuing security vacuum was far worse.

Mass jailbreaks from at least five prisons saw tens of thousands of criminals spill on to the streets, and on street corners across Cairo, men armed with guns and sticks now run vigilante patrols in a bid to combat looters. Such a febrile, lawless atmosphere has also allowed either side to vent their differences violently.

A translator working for The Telegraph was attacked by a man in the street last week simply on suspicion of being a "Facebook Revolution" supporter, just one of many tit-for-tat beatings. And a country that makes much of its living from overseas tourism is now suspicious of foreigners, who are accused of fomenting the antigovernment unrest.

Travelling to and from The Sunday Telegraph's hotel last week meant running the gauntlet of gangs of glowering government supporters, some of whom attacked reporters.

Fears about the destabilising effect of the protests are not confined to those who prefer the status quo. Among those watching anxiously is Shafik Gabr, Egypt's leading industrialist, who agrees that Mr Mubarak should have signalled his intentions to depart years ago, but fears the movement to oust him is now being hijacked.

"The demonstrations were peaceful to start off with and, unfortunately, the government did

not address the issues then," said Mr Gabr, whose \$1billion ARTOC group has interests in property, steel, publishing and energy. "We are in a situation where I do not recognise my own country."

Mr Gabr was speaking after being forced to fly back to Cairo early from the world economic summit in Davos to organise citizens' patrols in his neighbourhood.

"Some residents had knocks on the door from people telling them that they had 15 minutes to leave, so that their homes could be ransacked," he said. "There are 150,000 people in that neighbourhood, and they are all scared out of their minds."

What really frightened him, though, was not the chaos itself, but the sneaking sense that organised hands were behind it. "You don't torch 29 police stations at the same time, break into cells, take guns, police uniforms, police cars, all over Egypt, without organisation," he said. "I see that there are intellectuals and genuine people at the start of the protests, but I also see the hand of the Muslim Brotherhood since then. Vested interests are at play." True, Mr Mubarak's government has long been accused of exaggerating the threat from Islamic fundamentalism to justify his rule, and in any event, opinion is divided over whether that is genuinely what the Brotherhood represent - its members see themselves as religiously conservative rather than extremist. The problem is that in recent years they have proved far better organised than any of Egypt's secular opposition, and in any free and fair elections could gain an estimated 20 per cent of the vote, making them the largest single voice in any post-Mubarak political landscape. That could embolden them to push for Islamic restrictions on dress and lifestyle, pitching them into direct conflict with the secular and Christian sections of society.

"They are a highly organised group and have been wanting to gain power for a long time," said Diaa Rashwan, a prominent Egyptian expert on Islamic groups. "At this point, they are mobilising all their assets."

Others point out that Iraq too was largely secular until Saddam's fall, after which the insecurity allowed the most extreme brands of Islamism to gain a foothold. As a contributor to one jihadist website crowed last week, "a benefit of this is the loss of the striking iron fist from the security services of the government".

Religion, though, is not the only potential flashpoint among Egypt's 80million citizens. For every affluent Cairo resident gathered in Tahrir Square, there are far more who scrape by in poverty in the vast Soviet-style slums around the city. Squatting incongruously amid them are the garish palaces of the wealthy, many of them regime insiders who have thrived on corruption in public life. Small wonder, many say, that looting began so quickly.

"The government has looked mainly after the interests of its apparatchiks and cronies, and as a result there is a huge gap between rich and poor," said Ali Abdelwahab, 45, a British-publicschool-educated doctor who divided his time last week between treating wounded protesters and manning a neighbourhood watch with a cricket bat. "The people who have been demonstrating in recent weeks want a better life for all Egyptians - including

those who have been attacking them. But the government has traditionally pitted every side of Egyptian society against each other in a policy of divide and rule."

Those who defend Mr Mubarak for at least providing stability are looking at the problem the wrong way around, Dr Abdelwahab argues. "Other countries have made far greater progress in tackling poverty. But what the government has always liked is a mess they can control. Culture, sophistication and worldliness are not in the regime's interests."

So does any hope remain for a peaceful transition of power? Mr Mubarak professes to be as dismayed as anyone by the mayhem in Tahrir Square, saying on Thursday: "I do not want to see Egyptians fighting each other."

Diplomatic sources have claimed he "exploded" with anger when Omar Suleiman, the former spymaster who has now been appointed as vice-president, sounded him out on proposals for curbing his powers ahead of September's elections, when he has agreed to retire.

The military, which, as in so many dysfunctional governments, is the only institution that commands much respect, also seems reluctant to get involved.

"Deep down, the army is fed up with Mubarak, and also this insecurity, but they do not want to have a leading role in the future of Egypt themselves," said Brigadier Saieed Khadr, a former colonel in the Presidential Guard. "They want a civil society, and will only take action if there is really disastrous chaos."

Yet even if further bloodshed can be avoided until September's polls, not everyone is sure it will segue to a peaceful future. For in a country with no real history of democratic politics, the distinction between benign people-power and simple mob rule may take some time to learn.

"We're a nation of 85 million," said Mr Gabr. "So if someone can mobilise two million people, will the next [government] have to step down as well?"

Additional reporting by Richard Spencer in Cairo, Philip Sherwell in New York and Hugh Miles in Dubai "Concern is growing that the mini civil war played out in Tahrir Square may engulf the country "The young people say they want change, but they don't think about to what or whom

