

As Egypt swoons, Obama faces myriad X factors

by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9 (Xinhua) -- More than two weeks after Egypt's sinking into turmoil, U.S. President Barack Obama faces a number of potential pitfalls and bear traps as he does a tricky balancing act -- calling for an immediate transition toward more democracy while urging calm and order.

Also at issue is what happens next, as a giant question mark looms over the embattled Middle Eastern nation: If Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak steps down in September as he said he would, what kind of government will take over? Or, will he ultimately heed the calls of the opposition and resign immediately?

It is also true that while Obama favors more democratic freedoms for Egypt, Mubarak has been an ally in the U.S. fight against terrorism, and the United States must consider its strategic interests in the region, experts said.

If Mubarak goes, how much or how little will the new government ally itself with Washington against militants?

The Obama administration must plan for these and a myriad of other potential outcomes, even as the U.S. president seems to have been caught off guard by the popular uprising.

"It's a very difficult balance," said Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based think tank, but added that the Obama administration has so far handled the situation with competence.

Mubarak has ruled for nearly three decades and refused to vacate the presidency until September, at which time he said he would not

seek another term. But demonstrators, who have clogged Cairo's Tahrir Square since Jan. 25 to demand more democracy, are not satisfied with that concession, and want the embattled president to go now.

The Obama administration's stance has shifted from being neutral to calling for more democratic freedoms sought by the protestors. Critics say the U.S. president has stopped short of making a principled stand on the issue, and wonder how long the president can maintain his delicate tightrope walk.

In a conference call with reporters on Wednesday, Ben Rhodes, White House deputy national security advisor for strategic communications, said that since the protests began, the Obama administration has sent a "clear message in public and in private that violence and suppression is not the way through this period of protest."

The administration has urged the Mubarak government to show restraint and cautioned the demonstrators not to use violence.

He added that any process going forward must respect the "universal rights" of the Egyptian people, including access to social media such as the Internet and cell phones.

"We support an orderly transition in Egypt that is meaningful, lasting and legitimate. That transition must begin without delay," he said, adding that it must produce immediate progress that Egyptians are demanding.

"Thus far it's clear that while the government has entered into a period of negotiation with the opposition ... what they've put forward is not yet meeting that threshold of change in the eyes of the Egyptian people," he said.

Meanwhile, Wednesday also saw the Mubarak government's rhetoric grow stronger. Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit said in an interview with PBS "News Hour" that he was "infuriated" with the Obama administration for criticizing Egypt's initial response to the unrest.

And last week, Mubarak said he wanted to resign but fretted that "chaos" would ensue if he left immediately.

Some experts note that Mubarak's immediate resignation would trigger snap elections to be held within 60 days. That could also cause headaches for Obama, they argue, as little time is left to set up free and fair elections in an important strategic ally.

IS MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD A THREAT?

The United States in recent weeks has heard much discussion of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Some observers worry that the organization could take advantage of a political environment in which there are no successors to the current government and opt to fill the vacuum.

There are concerns over the group's aim to establish a state ruled by Islamic law, questions over its support for the Middle East peace process and its policy toward Israel and the United States, as well as

ambiguity over its respect for human rights, according to the Council on Foreign Relations.

David Pollock, senior fellow at the Washington Institute, contended that the group is backed by only a small percentage of Egyptians -- roughly 15 to 20 percent -- although it is the most organized entity outside Mubarak's government.

Nevertheless, Mubarak's opponents have shown resilience and are unlikely to compromise on their demands, and that means a likely rejection of the Muslim Brotherhood, some experts said.

WASHINGTON CANNOT DICTATE OUTCOME

Pollock said that despite the White House's focus on the issue, Obama's influence is limited.

The United States can, however, urge Egypt's military and current government to prevent the situation from spiraling out of control and ending in a bloodbath, Pollock said.

"We do have a very high risk, delicate situation here," Pollock said of the unrest, but added that it is unlikely to result in radical changes with which the United States is uncomfortable.