

Ottawa reacts to resignation

BY MARK KENNEDY AND TOBI COHEN, POSTMEDIA NEWS FEBRUARY 12, 2011

Prime Minister Stephen Harper says the next Egyptian government should embrace democracy and foster peace in the Middle East, commenting just hours after Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stepped down following 18 days of historic protests in the streets of Cairo.

The Canadian government had been closely monitoring developments in the Arab country -particularly in the wake of Mubarak's Thursday evening speech in which he refused to give up the presidency. On Friday morning, Harper was travelling in Newfoundland and Labrador when he became aware of unconfirmed rumours that Mubarak had left Cairo, resigning.

Appearing at a news conference just minutes before the rumours were publicly confirmed, the prime minister strongly outlined Canada's expectations for the Egyptian leaders who replace Mubarak.

He reiterated that the future of Egypt "is for Egyptians to decide" but he stressed that Canada looks to see a "transition" to democracy in Egypt.

"We want to see free and fair elections. We want to see the rule of law and stability. We want to see respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities, including the rights of religious minorities."

Harper's remarks come amid predictions from some experts that Mubarak's resignation could leave a dangerous political void in Egypt, with no guarantee the next government will be a non-sectarian democratic regime.

Harper also said Friday that Canada wants the Egyptian government to continue to "respect peace treaties and seek peace in the Middle East."

"A transition is taking place in Egypt," Harper said. "There is no going back.

"I think the old expression -'They're not going to put the toothpaste back in the tube on this one.' Our strong recommendations to those in power would be to lead change, to get in front of it, be part of it, and make a bright future happen for the people of Egypt."

Later in the day, Harper released a written statement which said Canada respected Mubarak's decision to step down "in order to promote peace and stability." The prime minister reiterated that Canada "encourages all parties to move forward with a peaceful, meaningful, credible and orderly democratic reform process towards new leadership."

Furthermore, in stressing the need for "stability," Harper identified Israel as a nation that is part of the peace process.

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff congratulated the Egyptian people for their "persistence and courage" and expressed hope that democracy would prevail.

"The momentum of change in Egypt has been undeniable, and by stepping down, Hosni Mubarak has responded to this desire for democracy and openness," he said in a statement. "We share the optimism of the Egyptian people that there will be a peaceful and stable transition towards free and fair elections, and that a peaceful government committed to the human rights of its citizens and neighbours will emerge."

In a statement, New Democratic Party Leader Jack Layton also congratulated Egyptians for their victory, lamented the lives lost during the revolution and commended protesters for their non-violent resolve.

"They are an inspiration and people the world over are celebrating this stunning achievement," he said.

"New Democrats have stood behind the peaceful protesters and expressed our admiration for their courage and discipline. The people of Egypt stood up for rights and freedoms that we believe are universal."

Layton called upon the Canadian government to now use all its "diplomatic means" to ensure a legitimate transition to democracy that's "acceptable to the Egyptian people."

The cautious optimism felt on Parliament Hill was echoed by other stakeholders, including Egyptians here in Canada and members of the Jewish community, who've been watching the developments in Egypt closely, given the impact they might have on the country's peace accord with Israel.

Adel Iskander, president of the Egyptian Canadian Friendship Association, suggested the 55,000 people of Egyptian origin in Canada have been glued to their television sets and racking up large phone bills keeping in touch with friends and family back home.

"It's great news. It's a new era that Egypt is going in," he said. "People have achieved a great success to get rid of the old regime."

Exuberant Montrealers of Egyptian origin flooded onto the steps of the highrise that houses the city's Egyptian consulate Friday afternoon to celebrate Mubarak's departure.

"Finally, we've been able to accomplish victory and justice," said, Nazli El Hussein, who skipped an acoustics and lighting class at Concordia University.

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