

19 February 2011

Egypt army's 'helped oust' President Mubarak

By Magdi Abdelhadi: BBC News, Cairo



The army made it clear early on it was not going to fire on protesters

The full picture of the exact role played by the Egyptian army in forcing President Hosni Mubarak to step down has yet to emerge fully.

The moment the president deployed the army on 28 January to deal with the growing protest movement, it became obvious to everyone that the soldiers would hold the key to his survival.

A source close to the president's office told the BBC that, at some points in the protests, the army showed signs of impatience with the president's handling of the crisis.

"Mr Mubarak was in a very bad shape for the last three or four days of his rule. He was losing his command of things, he was not meeting many of his advisers and the military were getting very uncomfortable," the source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told the BBC.

"They were suggesting to him in a very polite way that it was in everyone's interest he step down."

Escalation game

The military may have been "suggesting politely" to Mr Mubarak that he should step down. But on the ground in Tahrir Square, the centre of the protest movement, the military, or at least parts of it, appear to have been telling the young protesters something else.

Shady al-Ghazali Harb, a young surgeon and one of the organisers of the protests, said they were getting messages from sources within the army that Mr Mubarak was on the brink.

"Mr Mubarak wanted to be remembered as the man who brought stability to his country in a turbulent region"

"We had some sources from within the army saying that it was close," Dr Harb told the BBC. And the protesters saw this as a sign that if they were to escalate their action further, Mr Mubarak would be forced out.

The protest movement did escalate - demonstrators proceeded to surround the state television headquarters, and march on the presidential palace.

The pressure was too great.

And my source, who has contacts within the presidency, told me that it was the man at the very top of the army, Defence Minister Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, who delivered the final blow.

"My understanding is that Tantawi went and met with the president. He told him: 'Mr President, I think the time has come for you to make a patriotic decision. You've served this country for 30 years and the time has come for you to ask the vice-president to announce that you are stepping down.'"

After nearly three weeks of relentless street protests, he had lost the support of the army, which had been the backbone of government in Egypt for decades.

Mr Mubarak wanted to be remembered as the man who brought stability to his country in a turbulent region.

Now he will be remembered as the first head of state to be ousted by his people in Egypt's exceptionally long history.