

An Unfinished Revolution

Shadi Hamid

On 25 January 2011, the first day of Egypt's uprising, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton affirmed: "our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable."¹ Eighteen days later, Egypt had a revolution, which concluded when the Egyptian military forced President Hosni Mubarak to step down from his position. After this remarkable turn of events, the Egyptian regime was simultaneously thought to be both more ruthless and more unified. After several years of impressive economic growth, the regime had the support of a powerful emerging business elite. It also had the United States as its primary benefactor. None of that was enough.

On the night of the revolution, I was in Tahrir Square. The crowd erupted in cheers, chanting, "You're Egyptian! Raise your head up high!" when they heard the announcement. The Muslim Brotherhood youth activist Abdelrahman Ayyash sent me a short, simple text message: "We did it." And they had. For Egypt's new revolutionaries—many of them young and some of them still in college—the revolution is far from complete though. In some ways, the transition phase will prove just as critical as the revolution itself.

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New Roles. Despite its “revolution,” Egypt is not currently led by revolutionaries. It is led by the military, under the auspices of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Far from a pro-democracy organization, Egypt’s armed forces have been the backbone of the Mubarak regime for a very long time. Mubarak, after all, was a member of the Egyptian military and they dutifully supported his rule for three decades. Thus, it was ironic that throughout the eighteen days of protest, “the people and the army hand in hand,” became a popular chant among the protesters. Some of

Tahrir Square.

For many civilians, 9 March was a turning point, bringing back painful memories of the old regime. That day, soldiers and plainly clothed thugs armed with pipes and electric cables stormed the square and detained nearly two hundred people, and then took them to be tortured in a makeshift prison at the Egyptian Museum. Because the military operates above the law in a transitional void, Egyptians have few resources to challenge such abuses. In the new Egypt, the military and the revolutionaries quickly found that they wanted two different things. The former wished to preserve stability at all

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this was certainly tactical on the part of the protesters—a way to create a sense of solidarity and, hopefully, to bring the military to their side. With the military defying orders to shoot into crowds, it seemed to work.

In the early months of the revolution, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces acted in an ad-hoc manner, communicating with Egyptians through cryptic communiqués and failing to consult civil society before making major decisions. A considerable amount of backdoor negotiating was taking place, but no one quite knew how, when, or who was involved. Moreover, the military was not averse to using force in order to disperse protesters in

costs, while the latter desired to push forward aggressively with democratization.

The army has been thrust into a new and challenging position. It was asked to take charge of an unwieldy, crumbling country and to govern it—a task for which none of its commanders was prepared. Meanwhile, the military faced constant pressure from Egypt’s protest movements, which continued to bring out large crowds. There was a new “protest ethic” in Egypt; if there is a problem, gather tens of thousands and occupy your country’s main square. Do not leave until you get what you want.

But the insistence on street presence obscures the larger challenges of Egypt’s transition. The revolution was led by

young Egyptians. Their goal was simple: to oust Mubarak from office. Now they face the challenge of translating a relatively amorphous, spontaneous movement into a new regime that is both organized and sustainable.

One of the youth coalitions in question, a movement known as "April 6," drew inspiration, tactics, as well as the clenched fist design for its logo, from Otpor ("resistance"), the youth movement that brought down Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic. If Otpor's subsequent history is any indication, youth movements established to oppose autocratic regimes fare considerably better before, rather than after their revolutions. Eventually, after some internal dissent, Otpor established itself as a political party ahead of the 2003 parliamentary elections but only managed to win a mere 1.6 percent of the total vote. Otpor's first problem was coming up with a distinctive mission or ideology. They knew what they were against—repression and corruption—but what exactly were they for?

These are the same challenges that Egypt's young (and old) revolutionaries will need to grapple with. All of the country's various groupings, from the Muslim Brotherhood to various leftist and liberal parties, found themselves in an entirely unprecedented situation on the morning after Mubarak's resignation. Egypt's fractious opposition spent little time thinking seriously about what it would do in power. The prospect of governing seemed too remote. While in opposition to an autocratic regime, vague political programs calling for little more than political freedoms and democratic reform were more than enough. But if Egypt becomes a democ-

racy, these groups and parties will need to decide what sort of democracy they would like to see develop. Rebuilding Egyptian politics means having a conversation about institutions, why they matter, and how they put an indelible footprint on the future practice of politics.

Rebuilding Egyptian Politics.

Successful revolutions often lead to dashed expectations and disillusion. Democratic transitions are notoriously messy, unpredictable, and uncertain. The essential challenge for revolutions is building or rebuilding a new political regime—one with its own distinctive rules and institutions. This, even in the best of circumstances, is no easy task, as Egypt's revolutionaries are discovering. The choices before them are not clear-cut. Most of the youth movements as well as prospective presidential candidates Mohamed El Baradei and Amr Moussa support extending the transition period from six months to at least one year, but under the auspices of a mixed military-civilian rule. Established political groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and remnants of the ruling National Democratic Party argue that Egypt is ready to move quickly to civilian rule and to elect a new parliament and president. Each side, not surprisingly, is arguing in its own interests. Well-organized groups with existing networks of support and funding would benefit from early elections, allowing them to eclipse the country's newly emerging political forces. After

aggressively lobbying for a “yes” vote, such groups claimed victory in the 19 March referendum, which ratified constitutional amendments that pave the way for a shorter transition period leading up to parliamentary and presidential elections.

What happens within the interim phase will have lasting effects. The Egyptian military, even if it makes a quick return to the barracks, has the power to shape and influence outcomes that determine the allocation of resources and opportunity structures for newly legalized groups and parties. Once institutions are introduced and solidified, it becomes more challenging to change them. As Frances Hagopian comments, “political arrangements, once in place, condition future political behavior and possibilities.”²

ingly religious. Islamist groups, despite government harassment, enjoy relatively reliable funding streams; as mass membership organizations, they bring in millions in annual dues. Many operate as states-within-states, with a wide-ranging institutional infrastructure that includes mosques, schools, hospitals, clinics, banks, businesses, daycare centers, and even Boy Scout troops. Liberals and leftists, on the other hand, have little more than themselves.

Just a few months before the revolution, analysts were writing off the Muslim Brotherhood. The group had struggled to respond to the regime’s mounting repression, which included seizing financial assets, routine arrests, and a constitutional amendment effectively banning Islamist political activity. As senior Brotherhood figure Esam al-Erian acknowledged in 2008, “if things

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Such considerations are particularly important for a country like Egypt, which lacks strong political parties or a level playing field. The Mubarak regime long benefited from portraying itself as the only alternative, however imperfect, to Islamist rule. It did not want the emergence of strong liberal or leftist parties to spoil the narrative.

But that was only one part of the story. Islamists had the advantage of a recognizable ideology that was naturally attractive to large numbers of Egyptians in a society that was growing increas-

continue as they are... the Brotherhood won’t have any [parliamentary] seats at all.”³ At the time, it sounded like an exaggeration; after all, the group had eighty-eight seats, making it the leader of the parliamentary opposition. But, as it turned out, the November 2010 polls were arguably the most fraudulent in Egyptian history, giving 209 of 211 seats to the ruling National Democratic Party. The Brotherhood was shut out. In short, the outlook appeared exceedingly bleak.

Today, by contrast, the Brotherhood finds itself in an enviable, delicate

position as the most powerful group in Egypt. On 4 March, Egypt's new prime minister, Essam Sharaf, addressed a raucous crowd in Tahrir Square. Standing by his side was none other than senior Brotherhood leader Mohamed al-Beltagi, capping what amounted to a remarkable reversal of fortune for the long-banned group.

This has made many leftists and liberals nervous. If elections were held tomorrow, they would not stand a chance. And, even if elections are held within six months, they might still have trouble competing. Building credible political parties takes time. The Brotherhood, for its part, has tried to allay some of these fears, saying that it would not seek a parliamentary majority. This should provide some consolation—Islamist groups have a history of losing elections on purpose to avoid provoking powerful domestic or international actors.⁴ In the new Egypt, the old regime might be gone, but Islamists still fear a backlash if they rise too quickly. In the coming phase, the Brotherhood will want to focus on rebuilding its battered organization and expanding its influence in public life through educational activities and social service provision. That said, Egypt's Islamists, experiencing unprecedented freedom of movement, have grown more emboldened since the revolution.

How to Design Institutions.

With or without the Brotherhood, Egypt's young revolutionaries and its smattering of small secular parties will need to find a way to extend their reach beyond the cities, build grassroots support, and devise distinctive political programs. Their success will depend

not just on their own efforts but also on the political institutions that mediate and channel political activity. Unlike some of its neighbors, Egypt has a set of existing political institutions, however flawed, left over from the old regime. There is no need to start from scratch. Not surprisingly then, Egypt's transition has proceeded more smoothly than would normally be the case in a country emerging from sixty years of uninterrupted authoritarian rule.

But the fact that Egypt has something to build on has its downsides as well. In the absence of political institutions, actors are free to consider new and varied arrangements. They are less bound by preconceived notions of what does or does not work. Instead of drawing up an entirely new constitution, amendments were proposed to govern political life in the interim period. Those amendments were ratified by 77 percent of voters in a 19 March referendum. Some opposition figures find the old constitution to be inherently flawed. El Baradei, for example, said that keeping the 1971 constitution is "an insult to the revolution."⁵ Even with the amendments, the Egyptian constitution gives privilege to the position of the president, failing to put any real limits on his power.

The most important institution—one that Giovanni Sartori calls "the most specific manipulative instrument of politics"—may be the electoral system.⁶ Egypt has grown accustomed to First-Past-the-Post, the system used in the United States and Britain, where the recipient of the highest number of votes in any single district takes the seat. It does not matter if the runner-up wins 48 percent or 24 percent. Unfortunately, because of their evident dispro-

portionality, majoritarian systems may be appropriate for some societies, but not for others. The debate over which electoral system best fits the country is one that emerging democracies should have but often do not. As Barkan notes, leaders in transitional situations have “rarely considered the likely outcomes of alternative forms of electoral systems when choosing a system for their countries.”⁷ Usually, the choice is made “on the basis of what is familiar.”⁸

What, then, should Egypt want—and need—from a new electoral system? Single member districts will boost large, well-organized parties and manufacture artificial majorities, while shutting out smaller parties from significant representation. Hypothetically, a medium-sized party could win 15 percent of the national vote in a majoritarian system and end up with absolutely no seats in parliament. Majoritarian systems also depress women and minority represen-

re-elected or voted out of office.

Meanwhile, proportional systems aim to minimize the gap between the votes that a party receives and the share of seats it gains. They therefore privilege fairness over effectiveness, and consider the inclusion of minority voices to be critical to democracy-building. With even small parties guaranteed representation, Egyptians will have more choices at the ballot box, making them more likely to vote in the first place. Of course, the fact that more parties are represented means that no one party is likely to win an outright majority and govern alone. One can envision a scenario where small Salafi parties are able to play the role of “kingmaker” in close elections. Government coalitions that include ideologically diverse parties are more likely to fall, which may lead to frequent government collapse and holding of early elections which produce similarly unstable coalitions.

If Egypt fails — either by reverting to authoritarianism or descending into chaos — it will have a profoundly negative effect on the

tation because parties have an incentive to run a candidate with the best chance of winning, and in Egypt, that would usually mean a Muslim male. On the other hand, because it is more likely to produce one winner, a majoritarian system would facilitate effective and stable governance. After five years, voters can then decide whether the party—rather than a confusing coalition of parties—did a good job and should be

Considering what is at stake, Egyptians need to have a wide-ranging conversation about the advantages and disadvantages of each of the available options. With fears of Islamist dominance, the relative weakness of political parties, and the marginalization of women and Copts, an electoral system that prioritizes proportionality and representation would appear to be the more promising option. During an

uncertain transition, it is important that all groups, from Nasserists to conservative Islamists, feel they have a stake in the new system. Otherwise, they may be in a position to play spoiler. At the same time, there are risks in a divided parliamentary system, where divisions in the cabinet and the disproportionate sway of radicals lead to policy paralysis, which in turn can lead to a loss of faith in the democratic project. Egyptians will want to see any democratically elected government quickly take up their concerns, reforming bloated bureaucracy and the crumbling health and educational systems while aggressively addressing economic inequity. With this in mind, electoral systems such as Germany's—a mixture of proportional representation and single member districts—may be worth considering.

Beyond the electoral setup, there is also the matter of presidential power. For the past five decades, the president concentrated power in his own hands, dominating all decision-making at the expense of legislature and the judiciary. Should Egypt remain a presidential system? And if so, what is the appropriate balance between the president and the legislature? Such decisions are made at the beginning of a transition and there are rarely opportunities to reconsider them. As Stephen Krasner cautions, "once a particular fork is chosen, it is very difficult to get back on a rejected path."⁹

Negotiating the Transition. Decision-making during the transition requires painstaking negotiations, often outside the public purview. Often, the ones negotiating are not those who

were in the streets protesting, which leads to a disconnect between those who want more and those willing to accept less. These divisions became apparent in Egypt when "opposition" parties and others seen as close to the old regime quickly shifted position and tried to align themselves with the right side of the revolution. Established political parties like the liberal Wafd and the leftist Tagammu, distrusted by the protest movements for perceived collaboration with Mubarak, now have a chance to refashion themselves in the new Egypt. They were seen as participating in—and therefore legitimizing—a broken system under decades of authoritarian rule. The Brotherhood, to a lesser extent, has been accused of failing to confront the regime when it was the only group—with upwards of 300,000 people—that could challenge the National Democratic Party's grip on power.

Meanwhile, remnants of the ruling party, which officially claimed three million members before the protests began, remain a potent force. They have begun refashioning themselves as faithful to a revolution that they first opposed. In early March, the party's new secretary-general Mohamed Ragab, in an effort to "clean the party," formally expelled twenty-one leading members, including President Mubarak's son Gamal and other hated symbols of the old regime. What is their role to play in the new Egypt?

Such tensions are inevitably difficult to manage. Any revolution needs to balance the desire for retribution and accountability with the need to forgive and rehabilitate. At what point does punishing regime officials and preventing them from participating become

counterproductive? At the same time, allowing regime officials to reconstitute themselves in a different guise runs the risk of allowing old patterns of power to persist well into the transition. This is only likely to hasten popular disillusion, as it has after transitions and revolution in Latin American and Eastern Europe. Hagopian writes that “after the peaceful alternations of power almost everywhere in Latin America lies a widespread disaffection, if not with the idea of democracy then with existing democratic regimes and established political parties.”¹⁰ In Brazil, for example, voter turnout dropped from a high of 95 percent in 1986 to 70 percent just four years later.¹¹

With these obstacles, Egypt’s transition will be difficult and uneven. As capable as Egyptians are, international support and financial assistance will be necessary, particularly from the advanced democracies of the United States and Europe. To be sure, Western countries have a checkered, tragic history in the region, having funded and supported Arab autocrats for upwards of five decades. Now, those countries have an opportunity to learn from past mistakes, and this time, to play a more positive role in Egypt. The United States was rightly credited for helping facilitate transitions in Eastern Europe and Latin America. The fact remains that democratization is more likely to succeed with, rather than without, constructive engagement from Western governments and organizations. In their new book, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way make precisely this argument; in states with extensive ties and linkage to the West, democratic transitions stand a much better chance

of leading to democracy. “Among high-linkage cases...nearly every transition resulted in democracy.”¹²

For these reasons and many others, Egypt should be a top policy priority for the United States and the international community. If Egypt fails—either by reverting to authoritarianism or descending into chaos—there will be a profoundly negative effect on the rest of the region. On the other hand, Egypt, as the most populous and influential Arab nation, has the potential—with the right sort of assistance—to become a model for others. Even if the latter happens, it will be a long, difficult road.

Egypt is in a strategically vital position. The region will be watching Egypt closely, with autocrats hoping that it will fail and reformers drawing inspiration from its successes. Inevitably, while the United States will be part of the unfolding story, it has a great deal of work ahead of it if it plans to overcome the distrust of Egyptians. When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Cairo for the first time since Mubarak was ousted, the Coalition of Revolutionary Youth refused to meet with her, citing “her negative position from the beginning of the revolution and the position of the U.S. administration in the Middle East.”¹³ Indeed, there is a widespread sense that the Obama administration stuck by President Mubarak and his regime well into the uprising. But now that Mubarak is gone, the United States has a chance to put the past behind it and to develop a new relationship with Egypt and, more importantly, with the Egyptians who long ago lost faith that America would do the right thing.

NOTES

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2 Frances Hagopian, "Democracy by Undemocratic Means? Elites, Political Pacts, and Regime Transition in Brazil," *Comparative Political Studies* 23 (July 1990): 148

3 Interview by author with Esam al-Erian, 16 July 2008.

4 For more on why Islamists deliberately lose elections, see Shadi Hamid, "Arab Islamist Parties: Losing on Purpose?" *Journal of Democracy*, 22 no. 1 (January 2011)

5 "ElBaradei: Keeping 1971 Constitution 'Insult to Revolution,'" Internet, <http://www.almazryalyoum.com/en/node/354318> (date accessed: 10 May 2011).

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7 Joel D. Barkan, Paul J. Densham and Gerard

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8 *Ibid*

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13 Kristen Chick, "Clinton, Rebuffed in Egypt, Faces Tough Task on Arab Upheaval," Internet, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0315/Clinton-rebuffed-in-Egypt-faces-tough-task-on-Arab-upheaval> (date accessed: 11 May 2011).