

The Egyptian conundrum

By Rabab El-Mahdi

■ Executive summary

The puzzle of Egypt's apparently wild swings from the Mubarak regime to a Muslim Brotherhood government and then back to a military dictatorship has been manipulated to fit the simplistic linear and binary categorical models of democratic transition, with an emphasis on procedural outcomes, when in fact deeper structural issues are at stake. Three challenges explain mainstream Egyptians' choices and the tumultuous path the revolution has been following. The first is the structural economic crisis facing Egypt, coupled with a lack of state administrative capacity, which no government has been able to effectively deal with. The second is the repercussions of Egypt's post-colonial history, which tend to make Egyptians see the army as the "saviour" and "liberator" of the nation. The third is the failure of alternative groups to provide solid political alternatives for the majority to rally around against the two reactionary poles and their inability to devise strategies to break loose from and reconstruct the hegemonic discourse. Consequently, international actors who throw their weight behind one reactionary faction or the other based solely on pragmatic considerations of its ability to bring about stability will be backing the wrong horse.

Over the past few months Egypt has become a conundrum for many observers. The sweeping rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to political power has been followed by equally sweeping support for the Brotherhood's current arch-enemies – the former Mubarak regime and the military establishment – represented by Field-Marshal 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sissi. What looks like a collective national schizophrenia of shifting support from one extreme to the other and moving from supporting an uprising against a regime to effectively championing that regime's reproduction is prompting many observers to come to the wrong conclusions. Whether it is that Arab countries are "culturally" prone to authoritarianism and anti-democratic choices or that these uprisings are only destined to fail through ensuing violence, the turbulent path of the Arab uprisings is ushering in variations of the dominant neo-Orientalist outlook. At the core of these fallacies is the fundamental conceptualisation of what started in 2011 and is still unfolding. Hence, in order to correctly understand the conundrum that Egypt currently seems to be, it is crucial to properly delineate the causes, challenges and prospects of the current situation.

Unfortunately, the tectonic shifts that swept many Arab countries, including Egypt, have been reduced and manipulated to fit the linear and binary categorical models of democratic transition, with an emphasis on procedural outcomes (e.g. constitution writing, elections and legal frameworks). While such outcomes are important, they are simply a superficial function of more structural challenges that are qualitatively different from those conceived by transitology adherents and that should therefore be seen as part of a historical process and not an ephemeral procedure. Egypt continues to face three challenges that explain mainstream Egyptians' choices and the tumultuous path the revolution has been going through.

A decaying state confronting grave economic demands

Economically, Egypt is facing the challenge of growth *and* redistribution simultaneously. This to a great extent explains not only the fragility of subsequent Egyptian governments since the uprising, but also the rapidly changing public support from a Muslim Brotherhood majority to

a pro-military majority (with al-Sissi as its representative) in search of a political actor that might be able to deliver on the economic front. One of the main slogans of the Egyptian uprising was “social justice”, which was preceded by a wave of labour strikes since 2006 that involved more than two million Egyptians and called for better wages and working conditions. However, the issue of the redistribution of wealth is further compounded by the question of how to generate economic growth. Despite earlier reports hailing Egypt’s economic performance under Mubarak, this growth was at best transient and generated by a short-lived influx of different forms of rents and the selling of public assets, and at worst inflated. Hence, any Egyptian regime needs to come up with an economic vision that can generate growth while simultaneously fulfilling the short-term economic demands of the majority of disenfranchised Egyptians. This challenge is further complicated by the ongoing post-2008 global economic difficulties, which are unlike the experience of the second half of the 20th century.

Despite what many believe, this prolonged structural deficiency cannot be remedied by the influx of grants and loans from the Gulf countries, not only because of the magnitude of the problem and the demands in a country that exceeds 85 million inhabitants with poverty rates estimated at 26-40% of the population (depending on the index used), but – more importantly – because of the lack of capacity to properly administer such grants/loans. The Egyptian bureaucracy, like the economy, was suffering from chronic problems long before the end of Mubarak’s presidency. Unable to remedy such problems in a state that has almost six million public employees, during the last few years of the Mubarak regime attempts were made to create parallel systems in many government agencies and ministries (known as technical bureaus+). While such attempts were not successful at the peak of this process, after the revolution their manifestations have been totally insignificant. From protests by policemen in support of illegal acts by an officer that forced the minister of the interior to reverse his decision to sack him, to the state not being able to verify the users of more than ten million mobile phone lines – despite multiple decrees and threats – examples of the lack of state capacity are numerous.

Based on the interplay among a declining economy, a failing state, and the continued economic failure since the deposition of President Muhammad Mursi, it can safely be assumed that the current support for al-Sissi will only be provisional and temporary.

The question of post-coloniality

Like many countries of the global South, Egypt as a state and a society is partially a by-product of post-coloniality. In this sense, post-coloniality is not a fleeting moment, but a determining condition. In the case of Arab countries, this

condition is further aggravated by the continued ordeal of Palestine and the invasion of Iraq, which have maintained a heightened sense of vulnerability that is easily manipulated by populist regimes. Accordingly, in Egypt the seeming arch-enemies and main political contenders (the Muslim Brotherhood and the military establishment) tend to play the identity politics card and gain popular support based on this. Both groups at different times constructed and championed a so-called “Egyptian identity” and rallied support by claiming to be its sole representative. Similarly, the easily cultivated support for the military and its proponent, Field Marshal al-Sissi, despite the military’s prior and current failure to achieve any improvements in living conditions, can be understood only in light of this historical condition, in terms of which the military is perceived in the collective public imaginary as the “liberator” and “protector” of the “nation”. In the same vein, this is partially why many self-ascribed liberals in Egypt tend to support the intervention of the military and its coercive practices in politics and to adopt an ultra-nationalist discourse of othering and annihilation.

A revolution without revolutionaries

Finally, despite the courage of many smaller groups and movements like April 6th, the Revolutionary Socialists, and the Revolutionary Path Front, who continue to uphold principled positions against the two reactionary political players, they have not been able to devise necessary strategies to break loose from and reconstruct the hegemonic discourse, nor have they been able to provide solid political alternatives for the majority to rally around. Three years after the beginning of the Egyptian uprising it is safe to assume that the known groups have reached their limits and that new formations emerging from the existing stalemate will be taking the lead in the coming years. Despite the current level of coercion, there will be a propensity for two types of organisations to arise in the near future: radical militant groups and more profound theme-based groups.¹ This propensity comes from the magnitude of the mobilisation – including the politicisation – of huge numbers of young people, coupled with unmet expectations and the accumulation of a plethora of experiences that left its mark on many individual lives, communities and sectors. It is the rise of these latter efforts that could be a trump card in reversing the course of the political battle in Egypt from one between two reactionary forces into a non-militant and more progressive movement that could save the country from years of spiralling violence.

Conclusion

Unlike Egypt under Mubarak and despite the heightened use of coercion by the current regime – and its expected continuation under soon-to-be-president al-Sissi – stability

¹ This trend started with groups like Doctors Without Rights and No To Military Trials and seem to be continuing in several circles.

will not be achieved in Egypt any time soon: protests, state violence and counter-violence will not subside in the near future. Hence, international actors who throw their weight behind one faction or the other based solely on pragmatic considerations of their ability to bring about stability will once more be backing the wrong horse.

Rather, interested parties should seek selective and meaningful intervention in a number of ways. Firstly, they should refrain from viewing Egypt as being a battlefield between Islamists and non-Islamists (secularists), and instead see the country in terms of a conflict between democratic and undemocratic forces, both of which include Islamists and non-Islamists alike. Such an understanding will permit the making of correct policy choices. Secondly,

the current focus of international actors should shift away from prioritising procedural demands such as observing elections (on the political front) or fiscal restructuring (on the economic front) and instead emphasise the implementation of structural changes. The principles of transparency and accountability need to be stressed and translated into policy demands such as participatory budgeting, structural tax reform linked to public spending, and mechanisms for the regular monitoring of human rights. Finally, continued support should be maintained for democratic forces in the form of consultation on policies, pressuring for the release of political prisoners and orchestrating campaigns against the use of judicial indictments for political purposes. ■

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