

Egyptian Democracy: An attainable goal or a mirage?

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The January 25 revolution that inspired the world has been quite a roller coaster ride, a result of which Egypt is going through very rough transition. These days, the eyes of the world have turned to Egypt once again for the final runoff in the country's first democratic presidential elections. In order to embark on an analysis of the situation, we must back track a little:

Given Egypt's historical significance - its critical mass, and status as the regional cultural hub- Egypt's current struggle will undoubtedly set the tone for the region. A nation with the significance of Egypt by virtue of the sheer size and composition of its population, the complexity of the issues it faces. Egyptians are holding their breath for the official outcome of the second and final round of presidential elections. As important as it is the presidential election is not the challenge. The real challenge is setting the unshakable foundation for democracy.

When Egyptians of all walks of life took to the streets in January 2011 demanding change, they had clearly reached a boiling point. So immense was the focus on achieving that initial and seemingly unattainable goal of Mubarak stepping down, that it almost appears as if the entire country has been somewhat thrown into disarray now that it has been achieved. Sixteen months after Mubarak was toppled, the country still seems to be struggling to come to grips with the reality of life in an Egypt without Mubarak. The revolutionaries, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces [SCAF], the Muslim Brotherhood, The Salafis, the liberals, in fact all stake holders, and above all the mass population all still seem to be caught in the daze that is figuring out how to best use their newfound and hard earned freedom.

I will begin by giving some insight into the political scene and the main players in Egypt today.

First: Constitutional disarray:

The constitution of 1971 was suspended, with the exception of 6 articles which were picked for amendment by an appointed Committee. The amended articles were put to referendum in their totality. Again without going back to the people the referendum was followed by a constitutional declaration that went beyond the amended articles. The Constitutional declaration set the rules governing the transitional process, the parliamentary and presidential elections as well as the selection of the constitutional assembly mandated to rewrite the Constitution. So far the outcome of the transition period is

- 1- Constitutional disarray and the constitutional assembly that will rewrite the constitution still not in sight.
- 2- A parliament, which was elected in a much talked about free and fair election but which was deemed unconstitutional, and annulled last Thursday, only two days before the second round of presidential elections.

The time allowed before parliamentary elections was too short to allow for the establishment and consolidation of new political parties. Only MB and other Islamic groups were prepared with full-fledged apparatus, huge financial resources, including but not limited to, using mosques to disseminate their propaganda. Religion was massively manipulated as a tool. Liberals blamed SCAF for what to them seemed like a deal with MB. Despite the many concerns, Egyptians accepted the outcome of the election. Egyptians were proud of their democratic landmark achievements. Another positive aspect of the parliamentary elections, however, was that they took place as scheduled and were widely regarded as being open and transparent by local and international monitors- a first for Egypt.

Second The main political players:

a- SCAF: The Supreme Council for Armed Forces

SCAF is a group of senior army generals, who have taken control of the country on an interim basis when Mubarak stepped down- The bond between SCAF and the different political forces including the masses on the streets saw a short lived honey moon.

SCAF is widely criticized for mishandling transition by reversing the road map and accused of wanting to cling onto power for as long as possible. More than 18 months after the fall of Mubarak, Egypt still doesn't have a constitution.

b- Muslim Brotherhood and other groups of political Islam:

Political Islamist parties benefited the most from a democratization process triggered by the liberal vanguard that initiated the revolt against Mubarak regime. We should make an important distinction here between various groups of political Islam in Egypt. While the Muslim Brotherhood are the most prominent and most powerful, they are by no means the only group. After the revolution, Egyptians began to see many small groups of political Islam begin to come out of the woodwork. Most of these groups were previously unheard of and the wide and diverse array of views they represent is astonishing, particularly when they all claim to operate in the name of one ideology. Long considered to be the largest and most organized political group even though it still remains officially outlawed, the Muslim Brotherhood finally earned its right to govern when it won with other Islamist parties that vary in their militancy, an overwhelming majority in Egypt's first ever free parliamentary elections in November 2011. Egyptians have always had a love-hate relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. From their early days under British rule where they would often resort to political assassinations to voice their opinion to their consistent oppression and apparent under-the-table dealings with the Mubarak regime, they have always been waiting in the wings for their chance to rule the country. Though they claim they represent the revolution, their performance was out of tune with youth demands to

dignity, social justice and freedom. No bill was presented to ensure an infrastructure of constitutionality and justice. They also failed to see that the revolution was all about the economy, job creation and poverty alleviation. The parliament hardly allocated any session to engage into a serious discussion on possible solutions. It didn't even consider the widely known strategic answer to these demands through reform of education. Parliament ignored the fact that poor quality education lies at the core of youth unemployment and poverty. University graduates lack life skills that make them attractive commodities in the labour market. rote learning must give way to critical thinking that prepares youth for competition and for democracy as well. School curricula need major revamping to meet realities of the 21st century. Instead of debating such crucial issues, . Whether it is their prioritization of issues which focused on revenge rather than moving forward, or their disregard for matters at the heart of Egypt's crumbling economy, their parliamentary performance was dismal. Rather than focusing on passing laws that would usher in economic growth and confidence, they prioritized decriminalizing FGM and abolishing women's rights and seeking to ban toys they deem offensive over the more pressing and urgently needed social and economic reforms or the worsening security situation, they have showed an unprofessional and narrow minded approach.

Their failure to act under the dome of Egypt's parliament was further compounded by a number of personal scandals that dogged its members ranging from corruption to indecent public behavior, although it must be said that those who have been caught in compromising positions usually belong to other parties of political Islam like the Salafis, who are generally less-refined and sophisticated than the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood's long involvement on the fringe of Egyptian politics has allowed it to absorb a great deal of political suavity.

At a time when Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court handed down a ruling that put an end to their brief time in Parliament, what is most striking about the recent turn of events is that the Muslim Brotherhood seem to have lost a considerable amount of credibility and public support with the court's decision being widely welcomed by both supporters and opponents of the revolution alike. The Muslim Brotherhood is now bolstering its efforts to push its presidential candidate as the candidate of the revolution, while it is a known fact that they did not really have a noticeable presence during the early and crucial days of the revolution.

c- The Revolutionaries and the Liberals

I hesitated quite a bit before using the term "revolutionaries" and before grouping them with the liberals. In my mind, they are one and the same simply because of what they stand for. Unfortunately it has become common for the revolution to be used and abused in recent times in Egypt as a way of getting popular. One can also argue that the Muslim Brotherhood are revolutionaries because they were out to destroy everything the Mubarak regime stood for because of how it persecuted them over many decades. Being associated with the revolution now seems to be the quickest and most guaranteed way of gaining public favour and support. The sad truth is that those who triggered the revolution are not heard. The revolutionaries and the liberals are those who took to the streets to destroy the Mubarak regime with no ulterior motive. They were not in favour of establishing the quasi-military state that Egypt has lived under since the revolution, nor were they in favour of replacing the Mubarak dictatorship with an Islamic dictatorship led by the Muslim Brotherhood. The revolutionaries and the liberals; those who sought to create a civil, democratic state based on the principles of equality now seem to find themselves in a difficult position. While the military continue to battle behind the scenes with the Muslim Brotherhood, the revolutionaries appear to be watching helplessly. I would not fear for them too much, however, as I believe they will be a definite force to be reckoned with in the near future once they regroup, unite and set out their common goals for the good of a greater Egypt.

Third: The outcome of the transition:

There is no doubt in my mind that we have made progress as a country since the revolution. People have finally found their voices and the barrier of fear has been torn down for good. Egypt will not have another authoritarian leader simply because the people will not allow it to happen. When we assess the progress that has been made, however, things become less clear. On the positive side, we seem to be slowly getting the hang of free and fair elections. Egyptians went to the polls earlier this week to choose their new president in the fourth elections since the revolution and there is general consensus among local and international observers that they have all been free and fair elections- a first for Egypt after decades of rigged elections were very much a part of life. For the first time since the declaration of the republic in 1954, the president will come to office with a majority of 51 and not 99.99% of the votes. People watch vote counts live on TV as it happens in a process which I am proud to say is very transparent

The transition to democracy, however, goes much deeper than holding successful elections. Democracy needs to be thought of and approached as a philosophy and a cultural mentality rather than an occurrence; more of a journey than a destination. A big part of democracy is learning to accept the outcome, no matter what. Freedom is giving people the ability to choose who lead and govern them whether it is the president or parliament. The concept of democracy is one that needs to be engrained into people's minds and one that must become a natural reflex and not something that requires effort. It needs to exist in every facet of life and not just when choosing MPs or the president. While Egypt has made considerable progress towards democracy since the revolution, a lot of work still lies ahead and many groups remain marginalized, such as women, Christians, to name but a few. Despite women playing a pivotal role in earning Egypt its chance at democracy, the tide has turned against them and they are now being deprived of a chance to set the foundation of key transitional justice processes. Christians remain isolated and worriedly unsure of their future with the advent of Egypt's next president.

While many presidential candidates tried to ride the revolution and claimed to be its representative, none truly were, more so in the presidential run-off elections. However sad, it does not justify boycotting the run-off elections and even going beyond that to promote boycotting so as to dissuade others from voting. 85 million Egyptians are likely to pay the price for over the next four years.

Another important aspect of democracy is that you cannot change the rules of the game you agree to participate in. Before the first round of elections, none of the thirteen candidates agreed to join forces thinking they were above it and confident they would achieve success on their own. Once the first round results were announced, however, some of the eliminated candidates called for the abolition of the election results, the disqualification of the two finalists and the establishment of a presidential council to eventually take control from the SCAF. What kind of message does this send to a candidate's electorate when one day he is promoting democracy by running in the elections and then calling for open protests in Tahrir Square to nullify the elections after finding out he lost?! As I speak here today, Tahrir square is full of protesters voicing their opposition to the latest round of constitutional amendments announced by SCAF days ago. I also have little doubt that when the victor is announced in the presidential elections in the next two days, we will see many protests in Tahrir regardless who that victor is. This can be attributed to the very close nature of the vote where early indications show each candidate as having garnered 50% with an error margin of 1 to 2 percent.

Egyptians are about to discover that democracy is a journey not a destination and it is a philosophy and a way of life that will take time to be engrained into people's mindsets by default. It needs to exist in all facets of life; in a marriage, family, workplace or at the national level. It is based on mutual respect, equal representation and above all inclusion. Whichever way you look at it, the marginalized sectors of society are not marginal. Women are marginalized yet they represent a full fifty percent of the population. Children are marginalized yet they represent the biggest single group of the population. Christians may be relatively small in number but the overlapping societal groups could provide for remarkable electoral power and influence if used correctly.

We may stumble along the way but the most important thing is to pick ourselves up and march forward and not look back when we do stumble. I am confident we are on the right track and we will eventually achieve success. The hardest first step of breaking the barrier of fear has been achieved and we must continue. The political wrangling reflects a growing maturity and Tahrir square remains the strongest player. It will continue to be the watch dog. It may be manipulated and abused by some political powers but every day it is getting wiser and more immune to exploitation.

I want to close quoting Rami Khouri who wrote yesterday:

Egypt this week is a country in post-revolutionary turmoil and deep transition, without a governance system. But it will be fine. It will emerge from this transitional moment in better shape than it has been at any time in the past two generations -- because the Egypt that will configure itself during the coming phase will enjoy the unprecedented. quality of being a country that has been defined and shaped by its own people.

The enormous power of populist legitimacy that was unleashed in January 2011 and toppled the government will now regroup and reassert itself in more complex and institutionalized political forms than merely demonstrating in public squares.

On Jan 25th 2011 a baby was born, that which will eventually grow into a mature adult known as Democracy. This baby is growing fast and is learning to use its newfound voice. At the same time, however, it is also going through growing pains. As Egyptian democracy grows and seeks to develop its own personality, it is likely to face some challenges which are very likely to be overcome and which will help shape this personality. A fitting example of this is the recent constitutional disarray I previously highlighted. Yes this is an issue but Egyptians will get through and it will only make them stronger as they show admirable determination to use their newfound voice. Over the past sixteen months, Egyptians have managed to convert Tahrir from a transportation hub to a symbol of their struggle for freedom and their quest to nurture democracy. As long as Tahrir exists, Egyptians will keep going back to it until they get things right and in so doing they discover that with their new found power comes hand in hand with great

responsibility. They must know when and how to use this power and I have no doubt that they will do just that. I am confident that Egyptians will continue on their journey to democracy and will continue to impress the world as we have been known to occasionally do over the course of 7000 years.