

Egypt: Retreat from Democracy

Written by Atef Alshaer

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ATEF ALSHAER, AUG 10 2013

Egypt is the first Arab country to produce the problematic novelty of replacing its first democratically-elected president, Dr. Mohammad Morsi, after the Arab uprisings, which promised to usher in a new era of democracy and civilian governance underpinned by the rule of law. Everywhere else in the now maligned 'Arab Spring' countries, democracy is flailing. This is mainly because of existing long standing undemocratic, patriarchal and ideological structures that reproduce social, cultural, political and economic malfunctions on a scale that can only be remedied with patient, but dedicated and sincere efforts to address them. Democracy is vital to the development of all these spheres. Without it, it is difficult to see how the Arab state can accommodate pluralism that respects differences and manages them within a framework of peaceful contention, compromises and cooperation. The State has been deep in the Arab world, while also ransomed to powerful individuals and elites to the detriment of institutional efficiency. This dents its credibility and renders the presumed social contract between it and the citizen feeble, and indeed hardly existent. The outcome of such a picture, in which the struggle over power and preservation of the unviable status quo, undermines any genuine attempts towards change enabled by democratic means and strengthened by the rule of law, is costly and threatens further civil unrest and instability. At the present time, Egypt is split between two images: the image of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and that of the deposed president Dr. Mohammad Morsi. The former engineered the latter's toppling and disappearance from the political life of Egypt.

Both actors symbolize political agendas, paths and ways of seeing. However, they stand for incompetence. The two men, and the organisations they represent, the army and the Muslim Brotherhood, have both proven incapable of cooperating with each other in the interest of relieving Egypt of the enormous economic strains it has further come under since the revolution that toppled the Egyptian dictator Mubarak in February 2011. Instead, both operated in contradictory ways that reflected their own partisan interests. Morsi appeared to exclude a large number of Egyptians by appointing Muslim Brotherhood personnel and indulging in an ideological rhetoric that secular and liberal Egyptians quickly grew weary of. Such rhetoric acted to foster social and political cleavages in an already divided society. Rather it would have been better, particularly at this transitional democratic stage, if Morsi and his party had built genuine alliances with other parties so as to be able to gradually overcome the old dictatorial structures — the oppressive edifice of dictatorship. Instead, Morsi handed his detractors and enemies plenty of mistakes and blunders to throw back at his face, abetting the army to join force with disgruntled oppositional elements and ultimately unseat him from the legitimate presidency.

The army, led by Sisi, appeared shaken by Morsi's single-mindedness and, particularly that Morsi is the first civilian president in Egypt's modern history since the Free Officers' 1952 revolution. As a result, the army amassed wealth, privileges and established a whole system of knowledge and practices in Egypt that puts it above every other law or institution. The army is the political master in Egypt. And any politics that deviates or seems to threaten the prestigious position of the army will be marginalized with the approval of a large number of people who genuinely believe that the army is their savior, because this is the sort of discourse with which people have been fed for decades. Therefore, Sisi has been dangerously canny in drawing on the support of the people, knowing that there is relatively a positive image that has been created in Egypt about the army, albeit an irrational image. Herein lies the danger of populism and street politics which threatens Egypt's hesitant walk towards democracy.

One of the major achievements of the Egyptian revolution, and indeed the Arab revolutions, was that it seemed to put an end to the rule of the strong man and the savior. Such myths evaporated and with them, the fear of the dictator

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and his apparatuses of torture and distortion. Yet, the revolution did not give way to mechanisms of cooperation between oppositional parties to the benefit of the nascent democratic process. Narrow and impractical ideologies reign. This is instead of practical alliances that could have cooperated to enhance the ideals of democracy, such as social justice and freedom in order to undermine the pillars of the ancien régime with its entrenched positions in the institutions of the deep and authoritarian state. Sisi understood the weakness of the Muslim Brotherhood and their inability to cooperate with others on the basis of sharing governance and its responsibilities at this critical and transitional period in the history of Egypt. What Sisi did with this well-organized (*one could even say, good looking*) coup reeks of regressive corruption of a specific kind.

The coup has shot democracy in its cradle. No matter how much Morsi plundered and looked increasingly incongruous as a leader, democracy is more than Morsi and his presidency. It is an idea put to the hard test of practice, impregnated with the significant promise that, in the long term, it will nurse diversity to the benefit of an entire society. Patience with the democratic process and its development is an obligation in the interest of the state itself. Larbi Sadiki, the Tunisian scholar on Arab democracy, emphasized the significance of a democratic space, ‘...for people to acquire attitudinal behaviour, a situation the Egyptian people are going through. This ‘learning curve’ involves discussions and toleration of difference, so that people can be led by someone that is not ideologically like-minded, or have an adversarial political party lead them for a limited term until periodic elections take place again – all of these are important steps in the right direction of democratisation’.[i] In addition, it is premature for one to suggest that Morsi was a dictator or was developing in that direction, as some propaganda-prone voices within Egypt suggest. Unless the democratic process is properly exhausted through legal means, it remains irresponsible to claim that this is the case. Political mistakes and irrational discourses do not amount to dictatorship within the context of Morsi’s one year presidency. To this end, the coup in Egypt sets in motion a dangerous precedent, as the somehow faceless street is manipulated to be the arbiter for who to govern or not, rather than the court and the ballot box. What is further disheartening about the recent developments in Egypt is that it has descended into a field for demagogic discourses with blank rants emanating from some figures and parties. Some strands of Egyptian liberalism demean the Muslim Brotherhood, not only or because of their ideological narrowness, political opportunism and incompetence, but for their very beliefs, their dress code and way of life. Such attitudes and behaviors are anathema to democratic life and society. Worse, some have gone after the Palestinians, the Syrians and other nationalities, accusing them of fomenting unrest in Egypt. Such accusations, apart from the fact that they are reductive, categorical and inhumane, contaminate the public sphere where rational debates about democracy and its values must be cultivated and inculcated so that the values of democracy are given space to develop and prosper.

Egypt has averred the tragic path of Syria; and it is hoped that the Egyptians, whether elites or ordinary people, overcome their differences and give themselves the time to do so. Violent incidents and practices; and mismanaged diversity can derail into further violence and instability, which Egypt needs to keep avoiding at all costs. The Muslim Brotherhood supporters are entitled to protest and contest the army’s measures; and the latter should respect the right to peaceful assembly and protect it. Otherwise, marginalization and disrespect will foment violence. In this respect, the obvious question is: How can the army or anyone in Egypt expect no protest over the toppling of a democratically elected president? Any promise of democratic change cannot materialize unless such basic rights are guaranteed.

Meanwhile, it has become clear that since the initial Egyptian revolution of 25th January 2011 a new democratic space has been created; that no figure can monopolize. Though the toppling of Morsi is alarming and sets in motion a negative pattern, it is unlikely to freeze the democratic process to the point where the old status quo prevails indefinitely. The current personalization of politics in the figure of Sisi, while dangerous in its own right, is doomed as more people understand the price of military rule, particularly if it is prolonged and produces the same stagnation and political morbidity that loomed over Egypt when Mubarak and later Morsi was in power. In particular, it falls on the intelligentsia and media professionals in Egypt to insist on widening the democratic space, so that the Muslim Brotherhood as well as other secular parties are partners in the political process and the formation of the future at this critical moment in Egypt’s history. It is hard to predict Egypt’s trajectory, considering the grave state of the economy, the breakdown in security in certain areas, the divisive media campaigns and the absence of the spirit of union which Egyptians once embodied in the wake of their revolution. But it is clear that revolutions ferment and pass through stages which, more often than not, are not entirely peaceful. This is true in the case of the French revolution of 1789

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as well as of the Iranian revolution of 1979. Yet, in this globalised age, it is hoped that efficient steps are quickly taken and historical lessons are learnt from past mistakes so that new democratic outcomes can help to achieve a stable and enduring democracy. This is the stage that Egypt and indeed the other Arab countries need to reach to move away from the dictatorial past and its tried ways.

In the end, as many have already said, democracy is far more than having an election. It is an enlightened culture of legal governance, equal accountability and allowing spaces for different dialogues and discourses to be present; these must be cultivated, amended, and reinforced institutionally, socially, individually, nationally and internationally. Democracy, with all the unfortunate incidents it might give rise to, remains the best political option to manage human relations, at the heart of which lies respect for the different Other. As the French writer, Albert Camus, put it in his visionary book, *The Rebel*, 'all consciousness is, basically, the desire to be recognized and proclaimed as such by other consciousness. It is others who beget us. Only in association do we receive a human value, as distinct from an animal value.'^[ii] In particular, it falls on the intellectuals and bodies invested with power to foster democracy and guard it against manipulative interests.

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[i] See Sadiki, Larbi, Q& A, What is next for Arab Democracy, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/07/2013759105248478.html>, last accessed on 4th August 2013.

[ii] Camus, Albert, *The Rebel*, London: Penguin Group, (2000 [1951]), p.108.

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