

Egypt's Failed Transition to Democracy: Was Political Culture a Major Factor?

Written by Abdeslam Maghraoui

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ABDESLAM MAGHRAOUI, APR 29 2014

When General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi deposed and arrested president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, he delivered the coup de grâce to an already ailing democratic process in Egypt. Now the country is most likely bracing for more years of autocratic rule under field marshal and national hero al-Sisi. Why did Egypt miss the chance to build democratic governance? Moreover, what does the astonishing popularity of another military strongman tell us about Egyptian politics? There is sufficient evidence to argue that reckless human action, more than structural constraints or some innate culture [1], caused Egypt's democratic fiasco. Yet the problem seems to go much deeper than the political actors' bad behavior or miscalculations.

Ignoring Rules of the Game

There is little doubt that the failure of the Egyptian political elites to endorse clearly defined rules of the game is a factor. The main political players agreed neither on the mandate nor on the composition of the constituent assembly (POMEPS 2013). Yet this committee was in charge of drafting the country's most important political document. Questions about the timing, sequencing, and logic of elections were settled in a highly partisan manner, with little consideration for democratic outcome. Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court regularly called into question the constitutionality of elected bodies that Islamists have come to dominate. Recurring disagreements over the most basic procedures plunged the country into institutional chaos at moments when forging trust was crucial. Institutional ambiguity is particularly detrimental to sorting out fundamental issues such as the role of religion in public life and the role of the military in politics.

Then, there is the problem of building political pacts. Even when quarrels about procedures, prerogatives, and mandates were somewhat patched up (Bernard-Maugiron 2013), president Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood's senior leadership missed the opportunity to bring in the non-Islamist opposition. Morsi too often dismissed any type of policy disagreement or political opposition as either a violation of the "will of the Egyptian people" or an attempt by old regime sympathizers to derail the revolution (Revkin 2012). But in fact, building broad political consensus was hardly a top priority for the Islamists, even though they are not the only ones to blame. The secular, liberal or nationalist, opposition parties were likewise partisan, confrontational, and unable to come to terms with the Islamists' democratic victory (Revkin 2012).

Strategic Alliance: The Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian Military

Still, it was clear from the outset that the Brotherhood's senior leaders had banked on a "strategy" of cooperation with the military (Shehata 2012). If it was indeed a calculated move, it was shortsighted because it set a bad precedent for future civil-military relations. Unlike young democracy advocates, senior Islamists supported with cautious, but clear, determination the dominant role of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in the transition process (Hanna 2012). When pro-democracy groups contested a military's "constitutional declaration" in March 2011, the Brotherhood acquiesced, thereby legitimating the military's interference in constitution writing. When the military cracked down on civilian protesters, tried some ten thousand civilians in military courts (Shehata 2012), or conducted virginity tests on women detained among protesters (Wilson 2012), the Islamists remained silent (Wilson 2012). In

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general, the Brotherhood chose cooperation rather than confrontation with the military irrespective of democratic principles.

The Islamists' "alliance" with the military had three irreparable negative consequences. The Brotherhood tied its political destiny to the goodwill of a military corps that was not brought under civilian control. Lopsided cooperation between the two (even if at times awkward, given past mistrust and hostility) guaranteed from the start that the Egyptian revolution was not going to bring about a new form of politics.

Equally troublesome, the alliance opened the door for other remnants of the old regime – entrenched in the judiciary, the Ministry of the Interior, and the bureaucracy – to also claim a role and exert inherited influence. From the delivery of basic social services to routine law enforcement operations, elements within the so-called "deep state" could sabotage the government at will. For example, for weeks policemen in charge of traffic control mysteriously disappeared from the streets, which created a chaotic situation. The police magically reappeared to direct traffic the day after the military coup (El Sharnoubi 2012).

Last, the Muslim Brotherhood's reliance on the military weakened its motivation to build political coalitions or to seek support beyond the usual constituencies. But growing security problems and worsening social conditions since Mubarak's departure alienated diverse and large segments of Egyptian society. Morsi's "will of the majority" argument to justify rulings by decree (Revkin 2012) was no longer convincing. After a marathon of national elections and referenda, which only aggravated political polarizations, millions took to the streets calling on Morsi to step down.

Reckless Decision-Making?

Clearly, the major political actors made bad decisions, at the wrong time, and under taxing circumstances. Their ill thought-out actions fragmented the transition process into uncoordinated, often contradictory directions. Even street demonstrators joined the self-destructive path. While vowing to do anything to save Egypt's revolution, they ended up destroying its democratic potential. In sum, the reason why Egypt buckled during the transition seems quite obvious: partisan, intransigent, and inexperienced political actors mismanaged it. The debacle was avoidable.

However, a close examination of the larger political environment in which actors made these critical decisions reveals something deeper and more troubling: a widely shared belief, among actors as well as millions of Egyptians, that the arbitration role of a strongman is essential to doing politics. That providential man today is Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, an obscure member of SCAF, the interim authority that was in charge of the transition after Mubarak's forced departure. Without political support and popular enthusiasm, it is not clear if Sisi would have staged a coup or sought high office. In fact, he clearly stated in a recent interview that more than thirty million Egyptians demonstrated in the streets to solicit his leadership (Weymouth 2013). The Brotherhood's odd "trust" in the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) (Ginsberg 2011), the political elites' backing of the military takeover (Al Anani 2013), and the breathtaking rise of al-Sisi to national prominence reveal the pernicious workings of a still-engrained authoritarian political culture in Egypt. One can only speculate whether more experienced actors, better political choices, or better timing and sequencing of elections would have made a difference. But it is hard to dissociate the euphoria behind a new military strongman from Egyptian political culture and history.

If indeed elected in May, al-Sisi would be the fourth military officer to rule Egypt [2]. Egyptian military men exerted tremendous political power not so much by subordinating the civilian sector, but by positing themselves as the supreme, indispensable *arbitrators*. The honorific title of *Za'im*, meaning leader or chief, is predicated on the belief that a strongman's hand is necessary to moderate social cleavages, partisan politics, and competition over economic resources. The key political and social players are expected to defer to the *Za'im* to arbitrate; that is, to singlehandedly carry out the ultimate act of power. The institutional mechanism is set in motion to endorse a *Za'im*'s decision, not to deliberate and negotiate. Precedent examples in Egypt include Nasser's "Socialist Decrees" of 1961, Sadat's *Infitah* or "openness" directives (1974-1977), and Mubarak's privatization orders in the 1990s. All these momentous, social, political, and economic actors left it up for the *Za'im* to decide.

This attitude has not changed much in the three years since the overthrow of Mubarak. When Morsi attempted to

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change it tardily and alone, he paid a hefty price. The supreme military council took over the tradition of arbitration on the very first day when it issued communiqué number 1. The political actors also assumed from the outset that the military would play a dominant role and ultimately resolve all outstanding issues. Disputes over mandates and agendas, electoral procedures and results, the prerogatives of the judiciary, and the autonomy of *al-Azhar* were all thrown back to the military interim authority. Al-Sisi's public frustration with the civilians' failure to hammer out differences and his subsequent ultimatums were certainly self-serving, but not unjustified. Yet this devolution of power was not just a strategic miscalculation or abdication of responsibility on the part of political elites. They were above all following a norm.

The Egyptian Military as Arbitrator

There is a parallel popular dimension to all of this. To ordinary Egyptians, the military's forceful intervention in the political process is not just justified; it was expected. The military symbolizes unified national power, decisiveness, and leadership in the face of civilian disunity, partisanship, and uncertainty. As al-Sisi put it himself, "a special relationship binds the Egyptians and the military" (Weymouth 2013). This is not just rhetoric. Millions were ready to literally hoist soldiers on their shoulders. In a fascinating study of informal politics in Cairo's poor quarters, Diane Singerman unveils a similar arbitration mechanism at work in the family, neighborhood, and community at large (Singerman 1995). Skilled arbitrators with good community reputation moderate fierce competition among individuals and groups over affection, resources, and symbolic social status. While the mechanism resolves some problems, it reinforces a culture of dependence and perpetuates a never-ending cycle of social discord that can inhibit collective action.

Hence, Egypt's democracy debacle was not simply the consequence of bad decision-making by political actors. Rather, it was part of a normative approach to mediating conflicts of power and interests. When in doubt, deferring to an arbitrator seems to be the default position in Egyptian political culture.

It is equally misleading to put the blame of the "counter-revolution" coup on the personal ambitions of a power-hungry officer who maneuvered his way to the presidency. Al-Sisi was practically an unknown entity in SCAF and the Egyptian political scene in general. Unlike his predecessors, he did not fight in a war against Israel, which presumably bestows popular legitimacy on military men in Egypt. Being the youngest and least politically experienced member of SCAF, his chances to become the top civilian leader were quite low. According to his colleagues, he had not even envisioned coming to power before the military coup (Hauslohner 2014). The day of the coup, he invited the most important players for consultation: the Coptic pope, the grand sheikh of *al-Azhar*, representatives of all political parties (including the Salafist Nour party and the Brotherhood's Party of Justice and Freedom), and representatives of women's groups, youths, and the judiciary establishment (Perry & Fick 2013). The Brotherhood skipped the meeting, but Al-Sisi was hardly acting singlehandedly; he knew he had broad political and popular support.

The dynamics behind the swift rise of al-Sisi are a mystery when abstracted from the general context of Egypt's authoritarian past. He is a man with no charisma, no political experience, no warrior's aura, no distinct ideology, and no clear plan of how to tackle Egypt's chronic social and economic problems. The idea of seeking high office germinated in public discourse after the coup when protesters, shopkeepers, peddlers, taxi drivers, politicians, entrepreneurs, and the social media began to hoist al-Sisi pictures. Like his predecessors, images of the field marshal with dark sunglasses are now plastered far and wide, from candy bars and fruit-juice stands to gigantic billboards along bridges and highways.

Conclusion

To argue that political culture is the main cause of Egypt's transition failure does not mean that the country has no potential for democratization or no democratic culture. On the contrary, millions of Egyptians took great risks in 2011 and again in 2013 precisely to topple authoritarian rule. The month-long, daily mass demonstrations in January 2011 were driven (at least in part) by democratic ideals including the rule of law, the desire to end corruption and nepotism, respect for human rights, free elections, and political representation. Even the acute institutional instability and political battles that followed Mubarak's departure showed that political legitimacy and popular sovereignty now

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matter. Although the 2012 Constitution was drafted by a Constituent Assembly dominated by Islamists, the drafters could not impose the text they wanted. Key articles, five and six notably, enshrine fundamentally liberal values (Youssef 2012). Also, when in November 2012 President Morsi issued a constitutional decree that gave him immense legislative and executive powers, the immediate popular reaction was to force Morsi back down. Hence it would be too simplistic to posit a mechanical causal relation between Egyptian political culture in the abstract and the failure of democratic transition. Nevertheless, while young protesters and activists have embraced negotiation and compromise, the more traditional parties and older generations are still in the logic of arbitration. The truth is, they still dominate the political scene.

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Notes:

[1] Focus on the role of actors is associated with a body of research that followed Dunkwart Rustow's "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model." *Comparative Politics* 2 (3): 337-363.

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[2] The previous ruling military officers were Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956-1970), Anwar Sadat (1970-1981), and Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011).

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