Egypt and the Challenge of Post-Revolutionary Change

Karim Emile Bitar
• In Retrospect: The Egyptian Revolution of 2011
  • The underlying causes of the Revolution: politics, economy, demography, Media & Internet
  • Was the Revolution a Trojan Horse for Radical Islam?

• The current crisis, the contradictory dynamics of the Egyptian transition
  • The forces at play
  • Manufacturing Pharaohs? The persistence of authoritarianism in the post-revolutionary phase
  • The economic meltdown
  • Sectarianism raises its ugly head
  • The Muslim Brotherhood Rule and its Discontents
  • Will the Military Reclaim Power?
  • The new Egypt’s Foreign Relations

• The crushing weight of History: “The past is never dead, it’s not even past” William Faulkner (Milestones in Egyptian History, Competing Intellectual and Political Traditions and how they influence the present)
  • Bonaparte’s Egypt Expedition in 1798
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  • Rifaat El Tahtawy, Huda El Shaarawi, liberalism, feminism
  • Hassan El Banna and the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood
  • Nasser and his legacy
  • Sayyid Qutb and the radicalization of Political Islam

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In Retrospect: The Egyptian Revolution of 2011

The Shock Wave of the Tunisian Revolution

4 dictators fall in less than a year

“Sometimes decades pass and nothing happens; and then sometimes weeks pass and decades happen.” Lenin
A region in turmoil
The psychological domino effect: revolutionary and democratic contagion
The underlying causes of the Egyptian Revolution

• Wake-up call: The brutal killing of Khaled Said...

• The end of a political cycle
  – Mubarak worn down by the exercise of power, authoritarianism, police brutality, torture, plans of a dynastic succession, hardware vs software: Arab nationalism and anti-colonialism vs actual foreign policy...

• The Economics of the Egyptian Revolution
  – Demise of a Rentier State, Inflation, youth unemployment, absence of territorial planning or land management, rent economies, rising inequalities, corruption, kleptocrats...

• Demographic changes
  – Demographic Boom between the 1920s and the 1980s, followed by a rapid decrease in fertility rate, and an increase in the literacy rate...

• Social networks and the Internet Revolutions
  – Wikileaks and the global quest for transparency, satellite channels, the end of governmental control over the media: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube...
The Alexandria blogger Khaled Said, police brutality, Waël Ghonim and the Facebook effect
The underlying causes of the Revolution: politics, economy, demography, Media & Internet

The Egyptian people and the Egyptian Army rejected the very idea of a dynastic succession.

“A hereditary ruler makes no more rational sense than a hereditary dentist.”
Thomas Paine

Hosni Mubarak and his son Gamal: The poster says: «If you give your son a mobile phone, you are nice, If you give your son a car, you are generous, But if you give your son a country and a people to play with along with his friends, you are... Mubarak»
Demographic transition

Tahrir Square in the 1950s

Aswan

Tahrir Square in 2011

The demographic transition and its consequences

Egypt’s population reached 84 M
The Economics of the Egyptian Revolution: Demise of a Rentier State 1 / 2

• Egypt is largely dependent on economic rents and politically-motivated external financial flows

- Oil
- Suez Canal ($5 billions in 2008)
- US Foreign aid ($ 2.1 billion per year)
- Tourism, 15 million tourists, $ 12 billion per year before the revolution
- Remittances : $ 7 to 8 billion per year
The Economics of the Egyptian Revolution: Demise of a Rentier State 2/2

- Revenue dependent on foreign or geopolitical factors: stability, price of oil, US aid...

- Rent is not reinvested to promote production

- Both external and domestic rent appropriated by the State, which holds various monopolies, particularly in the trade sector → inflation of the public sector

- Allocation of income from rents allocated mainly towards the privileged groups that support the political regime in power

- The 2008 crisis, inflation of food prices
"If you want to liberate a society just give them the Internet." Wael Ghonim

The short phase of cyber-utopism

Is the Information Superhighway a Superhighway to freedom and democracy? Not so fast
The citizens of Egypt fight President Mubarak with social media.
The Facebook generation was instrumental in bringing down Mubarak but failed miserably at the elections.
A revolution confiscated?
Was the Revolution a Trojan Horse for Radical Islam?

- Is there any truth to the cliché: «From the Arab Spring to the Islamist Winter»?
- Political Islam after the Arab Spring: myth and realities
- The old regime’s faustian pact with the islamists
- A new role for the Salafis
- Polls and student elections show a sharp decline in the Islamists’ popularity in the past few months
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The current crisis, the **contradictory dynamics** of the Egyptian transition

- An explosive situation
- Egypt on the brink
- Two years after the revolution, the horizon has narrowed

- Intense ideological confrontations
- Minorities anxious
- The legitimacy quarrels
- A divided opposition
- Complex scenery
- Very fluid political spectrum
- Aspirations to democracy AND growing conservatism
- Can Violence Spin Out of Control?
- Witch hunts
• The Constitutional Debate

• Growing Gulf between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Secular Opposition

• A stolen revolution?
The forces at play

THREE PLAYERS CHESS GAME

- The Army
- The Islamists
- Civil Society Liberals and Progressives
The Arab Spring Chess seen by blogger and satirist Karl Sharro
www.karlremarks.com
The presidential elections

- Egypt’s political geography is very plural and diverse, it should not be seen as black and white, religious vs secular, fundamentalists vs progressive...

At the presidential election, several currents were competing

- Hamdeen Sabahi’s Arab Nationalist Labor Left: 20.17%
- Amr Moussa’s Right of center: 11.3%
- Ahmed Shafiq’s Authoritarian Secularists: 23.66%
- Abdel Moneim Abu El Foutouh’s Moderate Islamists: 17.47%
- Mohammed Mursi’s Muslim Brotherhood: 24.78%

The Deep State inherited from the old regime supported Shafiq
• Mohammed El Baradei’s Boycott

• The Muslim Brotherhood’s «spare tire», Mursi
• The Salafists
Manufacturing Pharaohs? The persistence of authoritarianism in the post-revolutionary phase
The economic meltdown

• The latest official figures show 13% unemployment

• Joblessness stands at 74% for people under 30: a time-bomb (under 30s make up an estimated 30% of Egypt’s population)
• 1500 business establishments have already shut down

• «If the social and political disorder persistsm Egypt’s economy will end up with crippling inflation, severe balance-of-payments problems and a budgetary crisis. The risk of a vicious, self-reinforcing downward spiral would rise sharply.» Former IMF economist Mohamed El-Erian

• No durable economic and financial solutions are possible without cooperatively adressing the country’s political quagmire

• Rather than collapse like Asian and Latin American economies during the debt crisis, Egypt’s economy risks a return to black market and stifling controls

• Is Egypt too big to fail?
• External assistance can only postpone the day of reckoning
Sectarianism raises its ugly head

Awaking the sleeping sectarian ogre

- The culmination of sectarian anxieties, tensions and violence
- Christians feel sidelined, marginalized
- Attacks on churches
- Widespread anti-Shiite prejudice, despite the fact that Egypt was a Shiite nation for two centuries (969-1171), Al Azhar was originally a shiite place of worship, founded in 970 to spread Shiite islam

- Egypt’s first constitutional drafting committee in 1923 had 30 members, including 6 Christians and a Jew. It embodied the National Unity sought by the 1919 revolution with its famous slogan: «Religion is for God, the Homeland is for All»
The Muslim Brotherhood Rule and its Discontents

- More continuity than discontinuity
- Concentration of power
The worse of both worlds?

New monsters to tame

The IMF, the MB and their neoliberal economic policies
Will the Military Reclaim Power? 1 / 2

• Sidelined after the elections, will the generals come back as saviors if the transition falters and the economy crumbles?

  • Impatience and regret
  • Criticism of the MB’s incompetence and mismanagement
  • Nostalgic hunger for “law and order”
  • Violence in the streets led to calls of a military coup, but
    – Memories of military abuse
    – An undemocratic institution
Will the Military Reclaim Power? 2/2

The generals might prefer not to assume power

In the words of famed Egyptian blogger Sandmonkey (aka liberal activist Mahmoud Salem), “they already have financial autonomy, they can still militarily try anyone they feel like, their US aid money is not being threatened and they can do anything they damn please with zero accountability (…) Why would they assume the administrative and financial responsibility of ruling the country as it is entering its worst economic crisis in decades? Would it not be strategically better for them not to deal with this unruly impossible-to-please population, let the Muslim Brotherhood carry all the blame while they remain the shiny better alternative?”
The New Egypt’s Foreign Relations

1. Ambiguity regarding the **relations with the US**

2. The complex **relationship with Qatar: dependency & resentment**

3. Opening towards Iran?

4. **Egypt and Israel: a balancing act**

5. **Egypt, the Syrian Revolution and the Sunni / Shiite divide**
US influence on Egypt is no longer what it used to be:

- Only a few cards to play
- The US cannot save Egypt’s economy

American ‘exceptionalism’

Exceptions:
- If it’s bad for Israel
- If it’s bad for oil co's
- If we like the dictator
- If we appointed the dictator
- If the revolution fails
- If radicals are elected

America is our:
- Friend
- Ally
- Enemy
- Don’t know
Qatar announced $18 billion in investments in Egypt over the next 5 years
• a $10 billion North Coast tourist resort
• $8 billion of investments in oil and gas
• 100% stake in NSGB bank
• Hostility of Egyptians towards Qatar
The powerful Qatar-based Egyptian cleric Yusuf Al Qardawi

- Qardawi’s role in the regional cold war
- The Al Jazeera Factor

With Hamas’s Ismail Hanniye

With Tunisia’s Rached Ghannouchi
OUTLINE

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Bonaparte’s Egypt Expedition in 1798

- The first major modern encounter between Europe and the Orient
- The French revolution started with the Human Rights Declaration and ended with a colonial enterprise
- Discourse vs geopolitical interests
- Bonaparte’s orientalists: embedded intellectuals and their legacy
British colonialism and its consequences

- The imperial traumatism
- The long struggle for sovereignty and dignity
Rifaat El Tahtawy, Huda El Shaarawi, liberalism, feminism and Egyptian civil society

- Tahtawi’s trip to France, his influence
- In 1923, Shaarawi tears off her veil, launches newspapers and feminist organisations
- She does not separate the feminist struggle from the national struggle
The World of Yesterday 1 / 2

French actress, socialite and libertine Sarah Bernhardt in Alexandria in 1906

A masonic lodge in Egypt under King Fouad’s portrait

King Farouk
The World of Yesterday 2 / 2

Omar Sharif and the Ladies

Famous belly-dancer Tahia Carioca, she married 14 times

Two Arab legends: Fayrouz and Um Koulthoum
Hassan El Banna and the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood

- 1906-1949
- Social and political action
- «The Coran is our Constitution»
- Nationalism vs Ummah
- A highly effective grassroots organization
- An ambiguous relationship with Western Colonial Powers
- Skilled and experienced in election tactics and mobilisation
- They have been waiting for 80 years and refuse to accept compromises
An ominous Muslim Brotherhood Poster: They all fell and we’re still around
MB warns SCAF: heed the lessons of history
It would be a big mistake to lump Nasser with the likes of Saddam Hussein or Hafez El Assad. The quest for National Dignity. The 1956 Suez Crisis. Persecution of the left, persecution of the Islamists, Authoritarianism, but...
• Numerous flaws
• 1967 mistakes
• But he remains a towering figure
• His slogan «Raise your head, my brother» speaks to the new generation
Nasser, the Muslim Brotherhood and the question of the Veil
Sayyid Qutb and the radicalization of Political Islam

• 1906-1966
• Jahillya Concept: No compromise with political power
• Political Violence and Takfir
• The spiritual father of modern-day jihadist movements
• His trip to the United States: the trauma of sexual promiscuity
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The Education Battle

- The Illiteracy problem and Alaa El Aswany’s politically incorrect proposal
The Glass Half-Full: the new media landscape

• The media before and after the revolution
The Turkish Model is unlikely to work in Egypt

• Egypt is no Turkey
• AKP vs MB
• The Egyptian military has yet to say its final word
• It’s the economy, stupid!

Mursi kicking SCAF’s Marshall Tantawi out while reading a book titled: Erdogan’s way to power
Towards the Pakistanization of Egypt?

- Powerful military
- Powerful islamists
- Long protracted struggle
- Foreign Dependency
An ungovernable country?

- The intense polarization could lead the parties to resort to street politics
- Partisans of the old regime are still entrenched

- In the Ministry of Interior, the prevailing «security doctrine» holds that protesters are nothing but traitors serving foreign agendas rather than active citizens
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