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Egypt’s Revolution Turned on its Head

EMAD EL-DIN SHAHIN

The revolutionary euphoria that Egypt witnessed in 2011 has given way to increasing doubts about the possibility of change. Popular hopes for a democratic state that respects the rule of law and human rights have been replaced with resignation and a growing willingness to accept autocracy. And the Egyptian youth movement that made the revolution has lost momentum. Although thousands are still protesting and being arrested, the regime is gaining international support. The revolution has been turned on its head, and average citizens are experiencing a counterrevolution that is charting an uncertain course for the country. The failed transitions that followed the revolution have come at a substantial cost, compromising the social fabric, the economy, and fundamental human rights.

Egyptians have missed a historic opportunity to establish a democracy and end six decades of military hegemony. The two transitions undertaken after the uprising—the first overseen by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces from February 2011 to June 2012, and the second under Muslim Brotherhood rule from June 2012 to June 2013—were both divisive. They were plagued by instability, which culminated in mass protests against the rule of Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood leader who served as president during the latter period. Both transitions engendered distrust among civilian political figures and other key actors, and alienated millions of ordinary citizens. Unkept promises and lack of agreement on shared values contributed to this distrust. It is easy to blame one side or the other, but events taking place on such a large scale must be understood as the responsibility of many players.

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STRATEGIC MISTAKES

The key players had contradictory approaches to steering Egypt’s transition. Having been successful in the first election after the uprising, the Muslim Brothers (the mainstream Islamic opposition) and Salafis (Islamists who advocate strict adherence to sharia law) wanted to expedite the transition, even at the risk of writing a new constitution and holding presidential and parliamentary elections before securing a consensus in favor of the changes they pushed through. For their part, the revolutionary youth aspired to dismantle old institutions before constructing new ones, and insisted on writing a new constitution before holding elections. The old state—at its core, the military, security, political, and business interests that were part of the former regime—worked relentlessly to stall the transition and spoil any meaningful progress until they were able to make a comeback. Meanwhile, the liberal and secularist forces failed to win elections, but were able to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from gaining political traction.

The transition also failed due to disagreement over how to institutionalize the revolution and what sort of political system Egypt should have. A hostile regional environment and unsupportive international actors had a hand in reducing the transition’s chances of success. Deteriorating economic conditions further alienated large segments of the population from the revolution, raising concerns that working for change might be futile and instilling in many Egyptians a desire for the return of stability.

Islamists and liberals both made strategic mistakes that ultimately led to resentment of a democratically elected civilian government and set the stage for a military takeover. In many instances, they turned their political disputes into identity conflicts and existential dilemmas. For example, Islamists regarded debates over constitutional amendments in 2011 as an attempt by secularists

to change Egypt's identity by removing the second article of the 1971 constitution, which enshrined the principles of sharia law as the main source of legislation. Liberals aspired to crown the mass uprisings with a new constitution. The ensuing debate over the nature of a "civic state" accentuated divisions between Islamists and non-Islamists. Secularists viewed a civic state as a tantamount to a secular state, whereas Islamists sought a "civic state with a religious reference."

Another strategic mistake was the failure of civilians to solidify a broad coalition with unified goals and a firm stance against the potential return of military hegemony. Instead, they were reluctant to compromise and make the concessions that were needed to drive the democratic process forward. Coalitions continued to shift as the Muslim Brothers moved to the right by forming an alliance with the Salafis, and the liberals moved toward an alliance with the old regime. Ultimately, these divisions led to a popular uprising against the Muslim Brotherhood and invited the military intervention that followed.

Failed transitions often lead to either outright chaos or a return to authoritarianism. When General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi ousted Morsi in June 2013 and established an interim government, it became apparent that Egypt was taking the latter course. Sisi has gradually set himself up as a strongman, consolidating his power through a massive crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its leadership as well as on non-Islamist political opponents. He became president in June 2014. Under his rule, ultranationalism has embedded itself in Egypt's identity. His actions have contributed to sharp polarization among the citizenry, inciting xenophobic tendencies and encouraging Egyptians to accept that those who dissent can be physically eliminated.

THE YOUTH FACTOR

Recently, the regime's emphasis on the very real threat of terrorism and on combating domestic militant groups has detracted from its ability to reassure the public about Egypt's stability and security. Sisi's focus on fighting terrorism has shifted the nation's political narrative from democracy and freedom to security and war, alienating many of the young people who viewed democracy and proper governance as prerequisites to restructuring state institutions and seeking transitional and social justice.

The role of youth across the Arab world in organizing protests against dictatorships has been

remarkable. Young people have spearheaded mass uprisings, successfully mobilizing millions of people to press demands for freedom and social justice. In Egypt, they drew on past political experiences as well as new techniques to bring down the regime of Hosni Mubarak, who served as president for nearly 30 years before stepping down in the face of massive street protests in February 2011. The youthful protesters avoided many of the mistakes made by traditional political parties, while deftly using social media for mass mobilization. More than any other sector of society, they paid dearly during the violent upheaval that led to Mubarak's ouster. Hundreds of protesters, mostly young people, lost their lives during the 18 days of the uprising.

These young activists had a strong desire for change and for building a new political system, but they lacked a clear vision of what the new system should be and how it could be built. Instead, they made a series of demands on traditional political parties and the old generation of elites. Their demands focused on dismantling the old system, bringing to trial those who were responsible for the deaths of protesters (including Mubarak himself and members of his regime), and honoring the sacrifices of their martyrs. Although they were adept at staging sit-ins and strikes, the activists lacked the leadership and organizational structure to evolve into a formidable political force. They formed loose networks with a wide array of organizations, sometimes too many to count, which made them susceptible to manipulation and deep divisions.

The Egyptian youth who stood at the heart of the revolution are now among its victims. They were marginalized during the transitional period, unable to build their own political parties or maintain popular support. Many were drawn into the media limelight and turned into celebrities; some, in their desire to end the rule of the Muslim Brothers, ended up siding with elements of the Mubarak regime. In the process, they have lost a sense of direction, overlooked larger strategic goals, and forgotten who their real enemy is.

Tamaroud, a movement composed primarily of young people but with ties to security agencies and elements of the old state, succeeded in undermining the legitimacy of Morsi, who was democratically elected as president in June 2012. Other youth movements joined Tamaroud's call for early presidential elections. On June 30, 2013, they played a crucial role in mobilizing

against the Muslim Brothers and setting the stage for a military takeover. Upon taking power three days later, on July 3, Sisi pledged to include young people in the political process, going so far as to declare that as one of the main goals of the coup.

In fact, the opposite happened. Sisi and his security agencies have systematically targeted youth in their crackdown on dissenters. The military-backed regime blames the young people of Egypt for the January 2011 revolution that toppled Mubarak and almost ended the decades-long hegemony of the generals. Since Morsi was ousted, Sisi's regime has repeatedly accused protesters of trying to overthrow the state. A restrictive anti-protest law, enacted in November 2013, curtailed the right to assemble. It was used as a pretext to round up thousands of university students and youth who demonstrated against the regime's repressive measures, calling for the restoration of democracy and the rule of law. Authorities have arrested several icons of the January Revolution, notably Ahmad Maher and Mohamed Adel, leaders of the April 6 movement (formed by youth following a general strike that took place on April 6, 2008, in support of workers in Mahalla, an industrial city in the Nile Delta; it played an instrumental role in the revolution). Other arrested leaders included Alaa Abdel Fattah, a prominent blogger; Yara Sallam, a civil rights lawyer and advocate; and Mahinour al-Masry, another politically active lawyer.

By now, a majority of Egypt's youth is disillusioned and frustrated. According to a 2014 survey conducted by the Egyptian Center for Population, one out of four males age 15 to 29 wants to leave the country and live abroad. Nearly five years after the January Revolution, young people are being crushed by a ruthless counterrevolution. They feel their revolution has been stolen several times over and the chances of reviving it are getting slimmer by the day. They also realize that the public euphoria that accompanied the revolution has dissipated.

Most Egyptians are now exhausted and unready to relive the uncertainties of the revolution. They are willing to trade their hopes and freedom for authoritarian stability and economic recovery. Capitalizing on this sentiment, Sisi has demon-

strated zero tolerance for dissent. Thousands of the country's young are in prison; others have become "boat people," taking the risk of crossing the Mediterranean in their desperation to start new lives abroad. Many more are staying home, nursing their shattered hopes and afraid even to dream.

STAGNANT STATE

Over the past four years the Egyptian economy has been mired in a state of stagnation. Attempts by several governments to implement reforms have failed to address chronic structural problems. According to the World Bank, Egypt's gross domestic product grew at an average rate of 2.5 percent a year from 2011, at the end of the revolution, to 2015. Meanwhile, the annual increase in consumer price inflation, by the World Bank's quite conservative estimate, averaged 9.2 percent from 2011 to 2014, far outstripping per capita GDP growth. Pressing concerns include expanding trade and dealing with budget deficits, high unemployment, and corruption.

Class disparities have been an enduring problem. The poor feel truly deprived, while the middle class is beset by inflation and the devaluation of the Egyptian

pound. Both classes have played the role of economic spectators, relegated to watching the lifestyles of the extravagant rich. Malls and gated communities stand in stark contrast with grotesque shantytowns and cemeteries, which serve as housing for millions of families. In 2014, the percentage of the population in poverty reached 80 percent, according to the Egyptian cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center.

Mubarak's restructuring policies began the process of privatization, attracting foreign direct investment, promoting real-estate development, and bolstering the country's foreign-exchange reserves. Yet he failed to create a productive and sustainable growth-oriented economy, or to address youth unemployment.

Meanwhile, the Mubarak regime institutionalized corruption. Kickbacks, tax evasion, and bribes became business as usual, and an informal economy took root. State cronies were granted tax breaks and financial incentives including subsidies, land deals, and huge loans. Arguably, Mubarak's policy reforms exacerbated these per-

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vasive economic problems and contributed to the 2011 uprisings. Indeed, the slogans and demands of the protesters included calls for sustainable growth as well as social justice.

Sisi has promised to transform the nation's economic landscape, and he has initiated some daring reforms. Since coming to power, he has slashed government subsidies for electricity, gas, and oil, but this has basically shifted the burden of unsound energy policies from the government to the population. At the same time, he has been keen to augment the economic benefits that flow to the military, granting its companies major contracts for the Suez Canal expansion and the construction of housing units, which are then subcontracted to private firms. Allowing the military to act as the primary broker in the distribution of contracts puts the disbursement of enormous amounts of government capital outside civilian oversight. This chronic lack of oversight perpetuates Egypt's corruption problems and encourages the inevitable skimming of vast sums from foreign aid.

In September 2015, Sisi dismissed the cabinet of Prime Minister Ibrahim Mahlab over charges of corruption. Unfortunately, that was a selective step, rather than a much-needed, systematic anticorruption campaign. Many analysts have interpreted the high-profile but isolated action as posturing on Sisi's part, as opposed to a serious attempt to reform state institutions and increase the accountability of the bureaucracy.

Sisi has initiated plans to downsize the bloated bureaucracy and reduce bonuses awarded to civil servants. But the bureaucracy, while massively inefficient, acts as an indirect welfare program, combating joblessness and creating a mechanism for the distribution of government benefits. Although shrinking the bureaucracy is sensible in the long-term, the cutbacks, when considered in the context of reductions in energy subsidies and rising food prices, impose an added burden on the public. Meanwhile, in an effort to appease his supporters in the security agencies, Sisi has raised the salaries of the military and police forces four times since the coup.

Parliamentary elections held in October and November 2015 in this highly restrictive environment were expected to further enhance Sisi's grip over the political system. The victors in the first

round were mainly loyalists willing to rubber-stamp his decisions and return Egypt to a strong presidential system. The remarkably low turnout put the legislative body in a weaker position vis-à-vis the president, who claims superior electoral legitimacy, having been elected with 97 percent of the vote.

LACK OF VISION

In March 2015, the government held an international economic conference in Sharm el-Sheikh to court foreign investors. The conference carried symbolic importance for the regime, which tried to project an image of stability and portray the country as a magnet for foreign investment. It was viewed as a success in the domestic media, though the regime secured considerably less than it sought in investment commitments, mostly in the tenuous form of memoranda of understanding.

The government also used the conference as a platform to launch the idea of building a new

Egyptian capital city, a mega-project of questionable practical and financial feasibility. Ashraf al-Arabi, the minister of planning, attempted to dampen public hopes for an immediate development overhaul, stating that “the

projects presented will be implemented by 2030.” This underscored the administration's lack of a cogent strategy to improve the nation's economic prospects.

To his credit, Sisi succeeded in completing an extension of the Suez Canal ahead of schedule. However, there is concern that its exact costs are unknown and projected revenues may have been inflated. Canal revenues were \$48 million lower in August 2015 than in the same month a year earlier, putting a damper on the heightened expectations that accompanied the inauguration of the new extension. Other megaprojects, including expansions of housing construction and land reclamation, have also been launched without a clear economic vision.

More than two years after Sisi seized power, his regime has still not been clear about the orientation of his economic policies, nor has it given the average Egyptian citizen a sense of direction. While the regime draws heavily on outside assistance, its social and economic preferences are strikingly ambiguous. It has used direct extortion

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to force businessmen to donate to its projects and crowded out the private sector by assigning major contracts to the military. Recently a group of businessmen closely associated with Mubarak's regime were arrested on corruption charges and their property was confiscated. Despite rhetoric from successive regimes promising a better economic future, the average citizen has yet to see tangible improvements.

Countries in the Persian Gulf have poured huge amounts of aid into Egypt since Sisi took power—reportedly between \$30 billion and \$60 billion—but it has been ineffectual. The country's foreign reserves are rapidly decreasing; in September alone, the Central Bank's reserve fell by \$1.7 billion, out of a total of \$18.1 billion. A shortage of foreign currency has drastically curtailed imports of basic commodities, including food and medicine. The government has resorted to desperate measures to address the currency shortage, offering land worth \$4 billion to Egyptian expatriates, requesting an urgent \$3 billion loan from the World Bank, and setting limits on foreign currency transactions.

Despite this acute fiscal crisis, Sisi's government insists on spending lavishly on armaments. During his first year as president, he purchased weapons worth about \$10.5 billion. The latest deal to reveal Sisi's true priorities was the acquisition of two French Mistral helicopter carriers.

Sustainable growth cannot be based on short-term solutions and external aid packages; it must come from developing internal capacity for production. The administration's lack of vision, slow structural reforms, and skewed priorities have undermined the potential for economic recovery. Deep bureaucratic and legal constraints weigh heavily on the country's ability to attract investment.

RIGHTS UNDER SIEGE

The state of human rights in Egypt has deteriorated significantly over the past four years, particularly under the current administration. Between July 2013 and May 2014, Human Rights Watch reported, 41,000 people were detained, charged, or sentenced by the regime. This figure has undoubtedly risen in the past year. Deplorable prison conditions, including severe overcrowding, a critical lack of medical services, and harsh physical treatment, have resulted in the routine deaths of prisoners. A politicized judiciary has contributed to the problem by imprisoning politi-

cal dissidents wholesale, charging thousands of defendants at a time in summary trials. Since the beginning of Sisi's administration, 2,500 dissidents have died and 17,000 have been injured, according to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, while Human Rights Watch has issued an extremely conservative estimate of 1,000 civilian deaths.

Sisi has tied his legitimacy to the mandate to fight terrorism that he solicited from Egyptians in July 2013. Over the past three years he has made the Muslim Brotherhood an enemy of the people. Having weakened the Brotherhood significantly, he has shifted his focus to non-Islamist dissidents—his remaining political opposition—who have been advocating for the implementation of a democratic process and the establishment of fundamental freedoms, including the rights of assembly and free expression. Major targets of this crackdown have included the leader of the secular political opposition, Mohamed ElBaradei (who had to flee Egypt in 2013 when he was accused of treason and conspiracy as part of an orchestrated campaign against him), the leaders of youth movements, and independent journalists.

The violent measures taken by Sisi's regime have put the international community in an embarrassing position. The United States and the European Union have tried to distance themselves from Sisi's more draconian and undemocratic measures, but have stopped short of condemning his actions. The international community often states that it is concerned about Egyptian human rights abuses, but in the interest of stability it seems willing to engage the regime anyway.

Gradually, both the West and regional actors have begun to reach accommodations with the authoritarian status quo in Egypt, hoping to conduct business as usual with a strategically important country. They have become willing to reward Sisi with recognition, state visits, and arms deals. The United States has lifted the freeze it imposed on military aid to Egypt following the coup. This political acceptance has continued despite the reports of Human Rights Watch and other internationally respected organizations documenting ongoing abuses. The regime has sought to justify its violations of fundamental human rights, persuading large portions of the population that the measures it has taken are necessary to save the country from civil war and terrorism.

Although Sisi has made the elimination of terrorism the country's dominant priority, violence

has increased exponentially. Since the revolution, the Islamic State (ISIS) has gained local support in the Sinai, an indication of a transition from domestic to transnational terrorism. ISIS has claimed responsibility for a series of attacks, some of which have taken place in major cities and targeted police and security headquarters. The strikes have reached senior state officials, some with close ties to the administration. On June 29, 2015, the general prosecutor Hisham Barakat, who was instrumental in the legal crackdown against regime opponents, was assassinated in a car bombing. Between June 28 and July 2, ISIS carried out 32 attacks that resulted in a large number of casualties among soldiers. The terrorists have been exploiting the media by publicizing their attacks in order to undermine Sisi's reputation for effectiveness and humiliate the military.

In response, the regime has demolished thousands of homes in the Sinai and evicted 3,200 families, ostensibly to eliminate the threat of smuggling tunnels to the Gaza Strip. The efficacy of these measures remains unclear. By some indications, evictions in the Sinai are exacerbating the country's terrorism problem, increasing frustration in the local population and animosity toward the administration, and breeding support for the same terrorist elements that the regime has been struggling to suppress.

ISIS claimed responsibility for the October 31 downing of a Russian passenger plane over the Sinai, which killed all 224 on board, calling it retaliation for Russia's military interven-

tion in support of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. While Western officials quickly attributed the crash to terrorism, an assessment eventually joined by Russia, the Egyptian authorities have insisted that there was no conclusive evidence of a bombing, refusing to admit any security failure. The incident will certainly affect the tourism industry, which accounts for 5.6 percent of Egypt's gross domestic product and 2.8 million jobs. Following the cancellation of foreign flights to Sinai, the ministry of tourism expected a loss of \$280 million a month in tourism revenues. In addition to its damaging economic impact, this incident has cast fresh doubt on Sisi's ability to maintain security with his harshly repressive measures.

In the face of these ominous developments, Egypt is sharply divided. Despite continued calls for change, many seem willing to return to the old order. For the past four years, the state and media have managed to shape the mindsets of large portions of society, alter their perceptions about the revolution, and subdue their hopes for the future. As a result, many Egyptians now share a feeling that the military's intervention has prevented an imminent civil war. In this new era of populism, the state's guiding narrative is no longer about remaking the 2011 revolution but about the revolution's failed transitions. These transitions, Sisi's included, have undermined the country's stability, economic health, youth, and human rights—the very same factors that mobilized millions of Egyptians to call for democracy and social justice nearly five years ago. ■