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Report

Original citation:

Stein, Ewan (2012) After the Arab Spring: power shift in the Middle East?: revolutionary Egypt: promises and perils. IDEAS reports - special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) SR011. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43461/>

Originally available from [LSE IDEAS](#)

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2012

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➤ Revolutionary Egypt: Promises and Perils

Ewan Stein

When the Egyptian people forced their leader from power on February 11, 2011, hopes for an ‘Arab Spring’ ran high. The ouster of Ben Ali in Tunisia just 11 days earlier was earth-shattering in itself, but regime collapse in the Arab world’s most populous country after just 18 days of protest was an event of far greater magnitude. Memories of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, whose ripples would define regional politics for more than a decade, were fresh enough to give even the most ‘stable’ of Arab monarchies and republics pause for thought. The impact of this latest Egyptian ‘revolution’ is, however, conditioned by the extent to which genuine regime change and democratic transformation are achieved. More than a year later, neither prospect is assured.

THE FORCES OF REVOLUTION

The revolution of January 25, 2011 was triggered by the uprising in Tunisia. But it was the fruit of more than a decade of a growing culture of protest in Egypt that encompassed the labour movement, pro-democracy activism, and newer internet campaigns against the brutality of Mubarak’s police state.

The January Revolution brought these protest sectors together around the unifying symbol of Tahrir [Liberation] Square. In the heady days of January and February 2011, the movement appeared to turn Egypt on its head. In a country known for political stagnation, new forms of leadership and organisation evolved, both within Tahrir Square and around the country as citizens formed ‘popular committees’ to fill the security void left by the collapsing security forces. Instead of chaos, anarchy and sectarianism, the regime’s abdication of responsibility produced cooperation and tolerance, unity between Muslims and Coptic Christians, and a reinvigorated sense of civic pride. The ouster of Mubarak on February 11 unleashed a palpable feeling of collective euphoria and unity.

Although the protests came to be identified with Facebook and Egypt’s tech-savvy middle classes (epitomised by the figure of Google executive Wael Ghoneim), they transcended class barriers and involved significant participation by the urban poor. Meeting points and times announced on Facebook were often decoys to enable the real demonstrations organised via word-of-mouth, a reality underscored by the inefficacy of the regime’s knee-jerk suspension of internet and mobile phone access.

Yet the utopian vision of Tahrir was soon tarnished. Female demonstrators were mocked and hounded out of the square during a march on International Women’s Day. Sectarian violence re-emerged, blamed by many on agents provocateurs, ‘remnants’ of the old regime. And as the numbers in Tahrir Square dwindled, the police returned to clear the stalwarts by force. Nevertheless, although the optimism of these early experiments in revolutionary leadership inexorably faded, the memory and symbolism of Tahrir Square – code now for revolutionary activism around the country – remains a powerful force in Egyptian politics, and the breaking of the ‘barrier of fear’ stands as perhaps the revolution’s most momentous achievement.

ACTORS AND INTERESTS

Egypt's official opposition parties, as well as the most powerful 'unofficial' opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, were initially absent from the revolution. Elements of the conservative Salafi trend went so far as to condemn the protests as haram. The Coptic Church declared its opposition to the demonstrations as did, initially at least, the Islamic institution of al-Azhar. In its early days, some saw the abstention of these actors as evidence of the revolution's secular character, but Copts and Islamists of all stripes had participated as individuals from the beginning. It was in large part a revolt against patriarchal authority, a category in which all established political and religious leaderships risked being included if they remained opposed or uncommitted to the revolution.

The Brotherhood and Salafi leaderships arguably felt they had the most to lose in supporting an uprising that may have been doomed to fail. But as middle class professionals deserted the regime in their droves, and masses of urban poor swarmed into the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and elsewhere, the cost-benefit calculations of these leaders changed. By the 'Day of Rage' on Friday, January 28, the Muslim Brotherhood had stepped off the fence and was mobilising its members.

If Islamist organisational involvement boosted the strength of the protests – and ultimately helped direct them – the most important part in the uprising's success in ousting Mubarak was played by the military. The protesters singled out Mubarak, his ministers and the clientelistic network surrounding his son Gamal – and not the military regime in toto – as the target. They invited the army to join them. Images of soldiers carried aloft in Tahrir Square, and tanks daubed with revolutionary slogans, cemented the view of the people and the army as 'one hand' against the Mubarak regime.

The military leadership, for its part, saw an opportunity to settle scores in a long-festering intra-regime feud. From the army's perspective, the revolution's most important dividend was to see off the potential threat to its economic and political prerogatives posed by the aggressive privatisation agenda of the Nazif government and Mubarak's would-be heir, Gamal.

Mubarak himself dismissed Nazif and his cabinet on January 29, a move that pleased the army but did little to placate the protesters. With Gamal's faction gone, the army's economic interests were safe from an increasingly confident new business elite who saw this 'new guard' as their main ally within the regime.

The army thus had an interest in exploiting popular protest, but also in containing and ultimately controlling the revolutionary movement. It played a double game. Having won a prized concession from Mubarak, the military allowed camel-riding thugs wielding swords into the square on February 2, producing one of the revolution's bloodiest confrontations. While apparently protecting protesters against interior minister Habib al-Adly's police, it was arresting and torturing activists itself.

But the fact that the military did not turn its full force against the protesters was crucial to the revolution's initial successes. More positively, the high degree of popular prestige that the army has long enjoyed as a bulwark of order in Egypt gave the revolution an unassailably patriotic and nationalistic flavour that broadened the movement's support among more risk-averse Egyptians.

THE POLITICS OF TRANSITION

Mubarak's position as leader was filled by his former defence minister, Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi. As head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) Tantawi assumed control during the transitional phase. SCAF moved rapidly to hold a referendum on amending the constitution on March 19, 2011. The referendum, which was approved with 77 percent of the vote, paved the way for parliamentary and presidential elections.

Soon after Mubarak's ouster, numerous new political parties were formed, both secular and Islamist. The Muslim Brotherhood established the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), a vehicle consciously modelled after the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP). The largest Salafi grouping, Alexandria-based al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya, established the Nur (Light) Party. Islamist groups campaigned intensively for a

'yes' vote in the referendum, believing – accurately as it turned out – that their name recognition and organisational experience would serve them well in early elections. In elections held from November 2011 until January 2012, these parties gained a substantial parliamentary majority.

That said, it is SCAF that commands the predominance of hard power in Egypt. It appointed and controls the government of Kamal Ganzouri, as it did that of his predecessor Essam Sharaf. The government cannot act in any substantive way without SCAF approval. SCAF continues to set foreign and economic policy during the transitional phase, and controls the domestic security forces.

At the same time, SCAF's power is limited by its 'despotic' as opposed to 'infrastructural' nature. Although the military as an institution is held in high esteem, as a governing authority SCAF has little popular legitimacy, and neither does it possess – nor is it likely to seek to develop – effective mechanisms of governance at the grassroots. It is for this reason that it has come to accept, if not depend upon, more socially embedded Islamists as a link between state and society.

The revolution has allowed Islamists to formalise their position within the structure of power. With the ear of the SCAF, an electoral mandate, and an established local presence throughout the country, Islamist parties occupy an intermediary space between SCAF and the revolutionary forces. This is a precarious role to play. If the Brotherhood and Salafis appear too close to SCAF they jeopardise their popular standing. But if they are over-eager to flex their 'revolutionary' muscles they may alarm SCAF and its international supporters, and precipitate repression. An intra-Islamist rivalry between the Salafis and the Brotherhood also plays out in the context of these tensions.

It is in disrupting this marriage of convenience that the revolutionary coalition becomes most significant. Unlike the major Islamist parties, the Tahrir forces lack significant parliamentary representation. They comprise a heterogeneous patchwork of movements with quite diverse political agendas. These forces are predominantly found within the January 25 Revolution Youth Coalition (I'tilaf Shabab al-Thawra).

The Tahrir forces include, significantly, new Islamist parties such as the Egyptian Current (al-Tiyar al-Misri), formed by young Brotherhood dissidents. Support for the revolution is not a uniformly, or even predominantly, 'secular' vocation, which makes it problematic to put 'Islamists' and 'revolutionaries' in opposing camps. The unifying commitment to January 25 and Tahrir as a symbol continues to provide alternative avenues of political expression for Islamist-inclined Egyptians, particularly as the 'official' Islamist vehicles appear too close to SCAF and trapped within the old ways of doing things. Even the conservative Salafi movement – persistently averse to extra-Islamist alliances – is losing adherents to parties and groups within the revolutionary current.

These extra-parliamentary Tahrir forces reserve the option of 'returning to the square,' and numerous demonstrations have taken place since the fall of Mubarak. Via the official media and with recurrent Islamist support, SCAF has been partially successful in discrediting protests and portraying protesters as agents of foreign powers. But the fact that people no longer fear taking their demands onto the streets means that the army and Islamist parties must work harder to ensure popular support for their policies.

Regardless of the sociological reality, the process set in train on January 25, 2011 is almost unanimously referred to as a 'revolution' in Egypt. The military rulers celebrate the achievements of the revolution of the army and the people. Yet for the Tahrir forces the revolution remains a work in progress. Though there is little agreement on what completing the revolution would entail, some consensus exists on the importance of prosecuting Mubarak and others accused of killing protesters, and on sending the military back to barracks to allow civilians to take charge. Collectively, they channel the grievances of labour, the poor and other 'losers' in Egypt's neoliberal experiment, and push for a more complete break with the past.

THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN EGYPT

Meaningful democracy in Egypt is still a way off. Whilst the elections were generally accepted as free and fair for the first time since 1952, many vestiges of the old Egypt remain in place under SCAF. The state of emergency that has prevailed since Sadat's assassination in 1981 is set to continue until at least June 2012. This enables SCAF to bypass legal safeguards in much the same way as did Mubarak. Censorship and manipulation of the media remain routine, and pro-democracy NGOs are vilified and persecuted with much the same caprice as they were during the Mubarak era.

SCAF remains wedded to the idea of a strong executive (with a compliant president) and will seek a new constitution that guarantees that. It is supported in this aim by ostensibly 'liberal' parties that fear Islamist domination in parliament. The FJP and Nur Party each favour a stronger parliament, understandably given their high representation in that body. It remains to be seen whether the committee charged with drafting the constitution (which is to be composed of 50 percent MPs) will deliver a constitution to the Islamists' liking, but the issue is sure to constitute an important axis of friction between SCAF and the Islamist parties.

A powerful parliament is not in itself, however, a guarantee that the military's influence on politics will be curbed. As in the past, procedural trappings of democracy mask a resilient system of patron-client relations that has long underwritten political power in the Egypt. The electoral system, for example, does not reflect informed popular support for particular parties or political programmes. A third of seats in parliament continue to be allocated according to single-member districts, thus favouring local strongmen dependent on regime patronage. The retention of a quota for workers and peasants (opposed by Islamist parties) similarly facilitates the ascent of regime-favoured candidates, including retired soldiers and police officials. Such 'safe' seats militate against parliament's independent role as part of a broader system of checks and balances in the Egyptian political system.

The current parliament certainly represents an improvement on Mubarak-era legislatures, which were toothless bodies dominated by the President's

National Democratic Party, but the FJP shares some of the NDP's features and functions. The current head of the parliamentary Defence and National Security Committee, for example, ran on the Freedom and Justice Party's list, but he is also a general and the former head of internal investigations within military intelligence. The dissolution of the NDP, in other words, does not necessarily mean the military regime cannot place its people in influential and sensitive parliamentary roles.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF REVOLUTION AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION

Stability, and hence democracy, in Egypt depends largely on how the economy develops in the years to come. Tourism and investment are in decline and youth unemployment hovers at around 25 percent. The socioeconomic drivers of protest have not been alleviated. Some, but by no means all, of the January 25 protesters opposed neoliberal economics in Egypt and viewed themselves as part of the broader global movement against capitalism and globalisation. It was partially under pressure from the protest movement that SCAF refused a package of IMF loans in 2011, and although the protest movement has since been weakened, it is far from being broken.

In December 2011 SCAF felt able to accept a \$3.2 billion loan facility from the IMF. This reflected the political consolidation of the transitional phase. Although both the military and the Islamist movement gained from the removal of Gamal Mubarak and his neoliberal 'change team', neither actor promotes a qualitatively new economic path. The current finance minister, Hazem Beblawi, is known for his neoliberal proclivities. The FJP considers access to IMF loans to be an Egyptian 'right'. Islamists, like the military, fiercely protect continued private investment in the economy.

If SCAF and Islamists have come together to pursue their own interests and neutralise further protest, their relationship is not without its own challenges. Friction between SCAF and the Brotherhood reflects particularistic economic as well as political interests. The military has to date focussed economically on resource-intensive sectors such as transportation,

heavy industry, oil and gas, wastewater treatment, and food production. Egypt has seen a doubling of proven gas reserves, and the military now controls almost as much of this sector as does the Ministry of Petroleum. The army remains engaged in joint ventures with national and international firms in many enterprises.

The Muslim Brotherhood, for its part, includes wealthy businessmen with significant interests in consumer goods and services, as well as in the financial sector. It too is actively seeking foreign investment and partnership, and has recently set up the Egyptian Business and Investment Association to help facilitate such ventures.

Regional political and economic dynamics can satisfy the economic interests of both the Brotherhood and the military, but come with 'counterrevolutionary' strings attached. Saudi Arabia has a clear interest in the 'non-exportability' of the Egyptian revolution, and GCC states implicitly condition their financial support for both SCAF and the FJP on a commitment not to promote revolution elsewhere or to cave in to further revolutionary demands at home. The Saudis also retain ideological soulmates in the Egyptian Salafi movement. Salafism has long been nurtured as a counterweight to the Brotherhood, with widely asserted Saudi support, and remains as a second option if the Brotherhood disappoints – although the Salafi movement is also far from monolithic and may not remain as pliant an ally as Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies would like.

The political concerns of the Gulf monarchies are also related to ongoing economic interests in Egypt. Moves that appeal to the forces of Tahrir and Egyptian society more broadly, such as the invalidation of Mubarak-era privatisation deals, disadvantage not only the crony capitalists of the old regime, but also their international partners. Saudis, Kuwaitis, Qataris and others are naturally concerned that their existing investments in the Egyptian economy not be jeopardised by such populism. Some 700,000 Saudis live in Egypt and current investment in the country stands at around \$12 billion. If cancelled deals are snapped up by the military or Brotherhood investors, foreign partners will expect to keep their share of the pie.

PROSPECTS FOR EGYPT'S POLITICAL FUTURE

Barring a major rupture, the nature of Egypt's political evolution following June's presidential elections may hinge on the complementarities of the military and Brotherhood economic portfolios, and the extent to which each side is willing to bargain economic for political privileges. For the military, this will not be a simple repeat of its rivalry with Gamal Mubarak's 'reformists' prior to January 2011. For one thing, the army will not be able to rely on another popular revolution to tip the balance in its favour. Gamal and his team had very little legitimacy within civil society and were reviled among the population at large. The Brotherhood, for its part, has an electoral mandate and considerably more strings to its social and political bow.

This may help protect the Brothers from the hard power of SCAF as well as enable it to secure its own spheres of economic and political influence. It will struggle to wrest control over foreign and defence policy from the military. But the opportunity to put foreign policy principles, particularly toward Israel, into practice is one that Islamists in power may gladly pass up.

The Brotherhood nevertheless has its popular standing to consider, and it is in this area that the revolution has changed the landscape. Whereas the crony capitalists of Mubarak's time could ride roughshod over popular sentiment, being able to call on an increasingly feral security apparatus when needed, the Brotherhood faces a newly mobilised public that expects change and is not afraid to take to the streets to demand it. Islamist failure to deliver on the political and economic fronts will open opportunities for newer political actors to exploit. Though a thoroughgoing revolutionary outcome remains out of reach in Egypt, with key elements of Mubarak's regime either still in place or staging comebacks, this pressure from below is a new and significant factor that will shape Egyptian politics in the years to come. ■