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The Paradox of the Egyptian Revolution

Dr. Abdel Monem Said Aly

On August 3, 2011, the last Pharaoh was brought to court and behaved as defendants do. When his name was called, Egypt's former President Hosni Mubarak, who only a few months earlier was still serving as Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Judiciary, responded with a simple "Yes sir, present." It took only these three words to signal the end of Mubarak's privileged status as President, King, "Khedive," "wa'il," and Pharaoh. Now, the former commander in chief of the armed forces and head of the police, the judiciary, and many more state organs than even he could probably remember was brought to justice like any ordinary citizen.

So the Pharaoh was gone. But was the Pharaonic Egyptian state he had ruled for three decades gone with him? The answer to this question is far from clear. In the short term, Egypt is ruled by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), comprised of senior military officers who served under the now deposed Mubarak. And the Egyptian peoples' continued yearning for the stability which a Pharaoh can provide is unmistakable. A public opinion poll conducted recently by the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS) in Cairo shows, ironically, a high degree of support for Egyptian state organs. SCAF enjoys the support of 80 percent of respondents, followed by the judiciary, at 60 percent.¹ Moreover, 95 percent trust SCAF to allow elections to be held as soon as possible, and virtually the same number (94 percent) trust that SCAF will in due course transfer power to civilians.

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It is noteworthy, too, that among presidential hopefuls, former state officials scored the highest levels of support: Former Foreign Minister Amr Musa received 63.5 percent, former Prime Minister Air Marshal Ahmad Shafik scored 49 percent, and Judge Hisham Al-Bastawisi scored 40 percent. The only individual not associated with the Mubarak regime who received close to 40 percent support was Salim Al-Awa, a lawyer.

Compared with this support for state institutions and for individuals associated with these institutions, however, the same poll revealed a remarkable lack of trust in democracy—a shocking finding, given the slogans of the revolution. When asked whether or not a multi-party political system is useful, 48 percent of respondents answered that it was not, while only 27.5 percent thought it was—and 69 percent did not trust *any* political party.

These numbers, coinciding as they do with the deposing of former President Mubarak, expose one of the most important aspects of the Egyptian revolution: the tension between the forces supporting the continuity of the revolution and those supporting the continuity of the state. This Brief examines the reasons for this tension, which have their source in the particular roots of the revolution and the competing agendas of the different forces at work that will be affecting Egypt's post-revolution future. It goes on to argue that the interconnection between the state and the revolution will inevitably escalate these tensions in the months and years ahead.

The Forces of the State and the Forces of the Revolution

The departure of President Mubarak from Cairo to Sharm El-Sheikh on February 11, 2011, began a new era for the Egyptian revolution, for Egyptian politics, and for the country at large. By surrendering his powers to SCAF, Mubarak assured the continuity of the state, as represented by three major institutions. First, SCAF carried out the responsibilities of the President and in particular his executive and legislative powers², particularly after its decision to dissolve both legislative councils: the Shura Council and the People's Assembly. SCAF comprises twenty senior military officers, headed by Field Marshal Mohamed Husain Tantawy, Commander in Chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces and minister of defense and military production, and his deputy, Lieutenant General Sami Anan, chief of staff of the Egyptian Armed Forces. In addition, SCAF includes all the heads of the Egyptian Armed Forces' field commands and their army branches.

Second, the judiciary had in many ways become part of the revolution by providing a check on President Mubarak's powers via the High Administrative Court (HAC) and the High Constitutional Court (HCC). In recent years this was demonstrated in a number of important HAC rulings concerning minimum wages and prices as well as the agreement Egypt signed with Israel regarding the sale of natural gas. In these and other cases, President Mubarak and his cabinet considered HAC rulings to be infringements on the authority of the executive branch of government.

Similarly, since its establishment in 1980, the HCC has annulled more than two hundred laws. It has also declared elections to the Peoples' Assembly in 1984, 1987, 1990, 1995, and 2000 illegal owing to the lack of requisite judicial supervision as promised in the constitution. Indeed, during the past few years the Judiciary has been in a state of semi-rebellion over the issue of judicial independence, including its right to an independent budget.

Finally, the bureaucracy, which historically constituted the backbone of the Egyptian state, supported the revolution for economic reasons, but showed its conservatism by working to restore law and order—a principle which the revolutionaries consistently violated. In the immediate aftermath of the first mass protests, the bureaucracy was headed by a new cabinet formed on January 29, led by Ahmad Shafik, a former minister of aviation and a former commander of the Egyptian Air Force. (Not only is the Egyptian bureaucracy the oldest in world history, it is also the largest, in relative terms, among contemporary nation-states. Counting government and public sector workers, the army, the police, other security organs, and others who are on the government payroll, it comprises over seven million employees, amounting to about 29 percent of Egypt's 24 million workforce.)

For their part, the revolutionaries were divided largely along four strands:

- The youth who launched the revolution and who were soon to lose its leadership as it fragmented into a large number of coalitions, unions, and trustees. According to one account the revolution was initially made up of 216 different coalitions, while another account asserts that by July 2011 there were 180 such coalitions. Regardless of the exact number, what this reflects is a highly fragmented phenomenon. Consequently, these groups have so far failed to unite under one or even a small number of political parties. Not surprisingly, by late August 2011, neither the Egyptian Economic Social Party nor the Justice Party nor the Free Egyptian Party, each of which represented different revolutionary factions, has scored high in any public opinion poll;
- The traditional political parties that functioned before the revolution as the formal and informal opposition to the Mubarak regime. These parties—for example, the liberal *Wafd* and the leftist *Tagammu* parties—were devastated by the results of the 2010 elections. After experiencing initial successes in the late 1970s, they had lost their popularity on account of their perceived surrender to the Mubarak regime's "rules of the game," which were based on the dominance of one party: the National Democratic Party (NDP). Another reason for their decline was the fragmentation both on the Right and on the Left into a variety of political parties, like *Al-Ghad* and the Democratic Front, which prevented them from mounting a serious challenge to the NDP. These parties' fears of the dominance of the Muslim Brothers, who had made impressive gains in the 2005 elections, pushed them further toward the NDP's embrace. Yet the 2010 elections caused them to join anti-regime forces and to accept the leadership of the Muslim Brothers

in the hope that the Brothers would in turn accept the notion of a "civic state," which they—the Muslim Brothers—promoted;

- The Muslim Brothers themselves, who also constituted part of the traditional political opposition before the revolution, but who now represented a distinct voice, expressed by new, "Islamic" parties. At the liberal end of the spectrum defined by these new parties is the religiously liberal *Wasat* party, which tries to emulate the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey; at the more radical and militant end are the *Gama'at Islamiyya* and *Jihad* groups, whose members had been serving long prison sentences for committing acts of terror in and outside Egypt and who consider Islam to be simultaneously a religion and (the basis of) a state. These members are scornful of Western political values and consider liberal and secular ideas as tantamount to blasphemy. Now these various movements and groups were joined by the Salafis, who advocated strict implementation of the Sharia, the literal interpretation of the Quran, and strict imitation of the acts and behavior of the Prophet Muhammad; and
- The various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations, human rights groups, and public personalities that opposed Mubarak and his regime. Egyptian civil society had grown massively in the previous two decades to number over thirty thousand organizations and associations. They benefited from the growing reach of the media, from globalization, and from funding from international and Western—especially American—organizations such as the Ford Foundation, the National Endowment for Democracy, Human Rights Watch, and Freedom House. Although the agenda of these organizations originally focused on development, they were soon to shift to political goals. Many of the individuals involved in these organizations—Hisham Al-Bastawisi, Salim Alawa, Mahmoud Al-Khudairi, Nuha Azzeni, and Hamdeen Sabbahi, as well as a long list of journalists and TV anchors, including Ibrahim Esa, Abdel Halim Kandil, Magdy Al-Gallad, Amr Adib, and Mona Ashazli—have recently become presidential hopefuls.

"The people and the army are one hand"

As the revolution unfolded, the organs of the state and the forces of the revolution jointly arrived at a formula represented by the slogan: "The people and the army are one hand." It is not clear who coined this slogan, which became a chant as soon as Egyptian army forces were deployed to the streets and in the squares where

the protests had been taking place. But the slogan was indeed very suitable for the army and the revolutionaries alike: It expressed a sense of patriotism and reflected the indivisibility of the Egyptian polity. The high regard for the army as a national force, and the professionalism of the army as the organ responsible (and which saw itself *as* responsible) for the safety and security of the country and its citizens, helped avert a possible confrontation.

A more practical factor averting such a confrontation was the balance of power between the forces of the revolution and those of the state. While the revolutionaries in Tahrir Square were aware that a violent confrontation with the army might mean a bloodbath that would abort the revolution, the army, for its part, feared the revolutionaries' massive numbers and the possibility that a vast number of civilian casualties might result in the armed forces splitting or facing the same fate that the police forces had experienced earlier. The army's decision to refrain from supporting the regime and to protect the revolution from a violent confrontation *with* the regime, along with its orchestration of Mubarak's smooth departure, brought a number of revolutionary groups to adopt the assessment that "the people have made the revolution, but the army protected it."

The tension between the forces supporting the continuity of the revolution—the need for Egypt to undergo a process of revolutionary change on a massive scale—and those supporting the continuity of the state was in effect built into the revolution and became a central feature of it. The translation to reality of the slogan "The people and the army are one hand" is that while political change in Egypt has become a state matter, the institutions effecting change are operating under the watchful eyes of the revolution. In the short term, this has allowed a semi-stable situation in the country; but it has also ensured an ongoing state of tension around a growing list of subjects. Moreover, each of the two contending camps has its own levers: The state has its armed forces, the bureaucracy, and the judiciary, while the revolutionaries have the power of numbers—the ability to mobilize mass protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square and in the country's other main cities.

Soon enough, however, the divergent pulls of the state and the revolution were to generate tensions *within* each side of the equation. Such problems were further compounded when local forces at the governorates and sub-administrative levels began to take public matters into their own hands. One example of this took place in the governorate of Qina, where the population demonstrated its opposition to the appointment of a new governor by blocking the railway between Qina and Aswan for nine days, until the appointment was suspended. In addition, minorities such as Copts, Nubians, Shia, and the

Bedouins of the Sinai Peninsula now asserted their rights through the media, and by means of continuing protests and strikes in addition to some violent acts. The result of these activities was a complete paralysis of the Egyptian economy.

What Should Come First? The Role of SCAF

In the revolution's aftermath, it seemed that everything in Egypt had become subject to debate. Of particular importance were debates about how to run the country during the transitional period and how to chart the country's future course.

The first area of controversy was what the country should do with respect to crimes the former regime was alleged to have committed during the revolution, and particularly what to do regarding former President Mubarak and his family. Ahmad Shafik's cabinet, which was formed while Mubarak was still in power, was now asked to cleanse itself of members of the old regime, but after doing so it resigned on March 3. The revolutionaries were then asked to appoint a new head of government, and they chose the former minister of transportation, Esam Sharaf. Despite his previous membership in the NDP, Sharaf had taken part in the revolution. More than half of his cabinet, however, was composed of former members of the NDP. Criticized for being slow in implementing the demands of the revolution, Sharaf was pressured to change the composition of his cabinet. His new government, formed on July 21, now included a much smaller contingent of NDP members.

A second issue for debate concerned the road to be taken in the transition to civilian rule. It became conventional wisdom among various political forces that the country should adopt a civilian system of government. Accordingly, members of SCAF asserted publicly and repeatedly that SCAF functioned as a conduit for the transformation of the Egyptian political system to civilian rule, and that the Army was eager to return to its original mission of safeguarding the country.

Tensions soon grew, however—both between the different factions of the revolution and between some of these factions and SCAF—over the proper means of achieving this goal. Some revolutionaries, particularly liberals and those on the Left of the Egyptian political spectrum, pushed for creating a steering committee or presidential council formed of civilians and military personnel who would run the country's affairs. Others, including all Islamic organizations as well as the nationalists on the Right, favored keeping SCAF in charge.

Reflecting this division, the first group opted for electing a constitutional assembly that would deliberate and then suggest a new constitution for the country; it advocated postponing new legislative and presidential elections, which would be based on this new constitution. The second group suggested the reverse: a process that would begin with electing new chambers of the legislative branch, which would in turn be empowered to nominate a constitutional council that would formulate a new constitution for the country.

Meanwhile, SCAF took the initiative and formed a committee which suggested amending eight articles of the 1971 constitution. These amendments were approved by 77.8 percent of the public in a referendum that took place on March 19; they reduced the powers of the presidency and limited any occupant of the office to two terms of four years each. The 1971 constitution, which had been put on hold after SCAF had assumed the sovereign powers of the presidency, was then replaced by a constitutional declaration establishing the legality of the transition period. The referendum also resolved the “Which should come first?” debate by stipulating that elections to the two legislative bodies would be held first, beginning in September 2011.

In turn, this has led to a third area of disagreement, focusing on how to deal with SCAF. One school of thought views SCAF as the country’s new political leadership and, as such, as accountable to the public and deserving of criticism; a second insists that the army should continue to be honored for having protected the country and the revolution and that criticism of it constitutes a “red line” for revolutionaries that should not be crossed. Islamic groups constitute the core of the second school, even as liberals and leftists of the first school have accused SCAF of favoring them. The second school prevailed, meaning that elections to the legislative bodies would be held first; but these elections have been postponed to November and December—a change intended to give more time for new parties to organize and formulate coherent platforms.

Competing Ideas about the Country’s Future

As is the case with most revolutions, Egypt has become pregnant with ideas, trends, and paradigms—some old, some new—about how to run the country. Presumably, support or lack of it for these ideas will be tested through the new electoral process. Four of these ideas, trends, and paradigms are particularly noteworthy:

- First, the birth of a dynamic liberal trend in Egyptian politics that is youthful and capable of organization into political parties and coalitions and of taking the form of street politics. The “facebook” Egyptian revolutionaries are the children of the electronic revolution, the globalization process, and the growing Egyptian middle-class private sector, who could not accept the backwardness of the old regime and its failure to catch up with modern life and advanced countries;
 - Second, the consolidation of the Islamic trend in the country. The Muslim Brothers have been legalized and have established a new political party, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). Other Islamic parties have also been formed: the *Wasat* party on the Left and the *Gama’at Islamiyya, Jihad*, and Salafis on the Right. To avoid being outpaced in the politicization of Islam, the many Sufi orders began to organize and position themselves along the new and expanded political spectrum. Despite the major differences between them, however, these movements and groups acted as one during the post-revolution period, with minimum friction evident between the Sufis and the Salafis;
 - Third, on the socioeconomic front, a noticeable tilt to the Left, which, while not marking a dramatic departure from the policies of previous NDP governments, has nonetheless been marked by increased government intervention in the economy. Although none of the post-revolution governments⁵ presented a clear program to the public, the general direction is clear when a market economy is equated with corruption. The new government has also committed itself to avoid additional privatizing of public companies or institutions—though this constitutes less of a change than it might seem, because no significant public institution has been privatized in Egypt since 2008.
- More recently, moreover, there has been some return to the slogans of the 1960s Nasserite era, with its emphasis on grand state-run projects like the Aswan High Dam. The new discourse includes ideas such as the “Development Pass” and the “Reconstruction of Sinai”—the latter intended to relocate and settle five million Egyptians there—along with a Science and Technology Conglomerate. While many of these projects were on the table during the previous regime, they are now flaunted as part of a revolutionary approach to Egypt’s renaissance; and
- Fourth, some noteworthy changes in the foreign policy realm, even if such issues have not taken center stage in Egyptian politics. Egypt’s first post-revolution foreign minister, Nabil el-Araby, writing in *Al-Shrouk*

(in an article entitled “It’s Time to Review Our Foreign Policy”), argued that the previous Egyptian foreign policy was “incompatible with Egypt’s status and its history.” He opined that “Egypt’s stance toward the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip in the time of Mubarak was in breach of international humanitarian law prohibiting blockades of civilians even in wartime.”⁶

El-Araby did not stay for long in his position; he soon moved to become the Secretary General of the Arab League. But Egypt’s foreign policy continued to change, albeit not dramatically, with the aim of establishing greater balance in the country’s relations within and outside the region—thereby, as well, aligning the country’s strategic and geostrategic position with its public opinion, which in turn reflected the unprecedented changes sweeping the country. A significant part of the Egyptian public believes that Mubarak and his associates maintained close relations with Israel and the United States at the expense of the Palestinians and other Arab causes. Establishing a new balance in Egypt’s relations with African states—particularly in the Nile Basin states—was seen as another imperative of Egypt’s post-revolution foreign policy.⁷

The Way Ahead: A Pharaonic State in Islamic Garb?

The trends described here reflect a sharp division among the revolutionaries—between the more civic and even secular groups and individuals on one side and those on the other with Islamic tendencies, who insist, to different degrees, on shaping Egypt’s new constitution so that it corresponds more closely to the Sharia. Although the Muslim Brothers have shown pragmatism by emphasizing the civic nature of the state and by issuing or signing a variety of documents to that effect, they refused to have such an approach codified by the general public’s approving something like a Bill of Rights. Other Islamic parties, however, have been far less pragmatic and have insisted on the devising of an Islamic constitution. This division regarding the basic concept upon which the state should be based has overshadowed all other serious debates about Egypt’s domestic and foreign policies.

Prior to the holding of elections, it is difficult to assess the relative strength of the different camps competing over Egypt’s future. An ominous signal was provided a few days before the opening of Mubarak’s trial, however, when on July 29, in Tahrir Square, the cradle of the revolution, a mass demonstration took place from which the liberal and secular youth of the revolution were forced

to withdraw. The day was pronounced as “Kandahar Friday”: Egyptian flags were ornamented with Quran verses, and Saudi flags were raised, as were the black flags of al-Qaeda and large photos of Osama bin Laden. The dominant chants were “*Islamiyya . . . Islamiyya*” [Islamic... Islamic] and “Raise your head up, you are a Muslim”—no longer “*Salmiyya . . . Salmiyya*” [Peaceful...Peaceful] and “Raise your head up, you are an Egyptian,” the original chants of the revolution. The speeches of the day were no longer about democracy, constitutionalism, progress, or “Liberty, Dignity, and Justice,” but rather about an Islamic state strictly implementing the Sharia.

That the forces represented by the July 29 demonstration will come to dominate the Egyptian state any time soon is far from a foregone conclusion, however: A balance sheet cannot be provided for a revolution that is still in the making. The socioeconomic and political changes that took place during the past two decades do not mean that the ultimate product of the revolution will necessarily be a new Pharaonic state in an Islamic garb. The aforementioned poll conducted by ACPSS indicates that the jury is still out concerning the future of the Egyptian state. A majority (51.6 percent versus 41.4 percent) favor a civil democratic state over an Islamic state, with 7.4 percent favoring a strong Egyptian state even if it is non-democratic. These numbers suggest a future Egypt that is neither fully democratic nor fully theocratic. More likely than not, Egypt’s future lies somewhere between the Turkish and Iranian models, and will contain tensions that will require more than a decade, or two election cycles, to settle.

Endnotes

- 1 Al-Ahram Center for Political & Strategic Studies, Cairo: August, 2011.
- 2 According to the Egyptian Constitution of 1971, the President has a number of legislative powers in times of emergencies.
- 3 Gamal Ghiatas, “Who Made the Revolution on the Face Book?” *Lughat Al-Asr* [Language of the Age], (Cairo), March 21–26, 2011.
- 4 Adel Abdel Sadek, “Is Facebook Becoming an Instrument of Popular Control?” *Al-Ahram*, June 11, 2011.
- 5 Four cabinets were formulated during and after the revolution; two under the Premiership of Ahmad Shafik and two under Esam Sharaf.
- 6 Nabeel Al-Araby, “It is time to Review Egyptian Foreign Policy,” *Al-Shrouk*, March 6, 2011 (*in Arabic*).
- 7 The Mubarak regime is seen as having neglected Egypt’s relations with Africa in general and with the Nile Basin states in particular, for over two decades. As a result, in 2010 some Nile Basin states recently signed a pact that guarantees what they consider to be a fairer distribution of Nile water among them. To avoid a conflict over this issue, Egypt’s post-revolution foreign policy is intended to improve the country’s relations with the Nile Basin states. Meeting separately with Ugandan and Ethiopian officials this month, a forty-member Egyptian delegation managed to postpone the ratification of the new agreement.



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