

Egypt Is on a Quest for Normalcy

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For Egypt, the removal of President Hosni Mubarak in January 2011 ushered in a period of turbulence characterized by political instability and economic degradation. That situation still prevails. The armed forces have been propelled from a position of power behind the scenes to center stage—a position of direct responsibility for conducting state affairs. This is still the situation with the exception of the one-year interval of Mohammad Morsi's presidency.

“A democratically elected president was removed by the army.” In the West, this is the widely accepted perception of the way in which Mohammad Morsi's rule ended. However, there are many reasons to question the accuracy of this notion.

In the short time that he was in office, Morsi demonstrated his eagerness to realize the partisan agenda of his own party, the Muslim Brotherhood: a Shariah-dominated society. He hastily tried to monopolize vast executive, legislative, and judicial powers. Morsi did his best to silence the media through the firing and hiring of editors and journalists, and through intimidation. His was an exclusive, rather than an inclusive or pluralistic regime.

Millions of Egyptian citizens watched with resentment as the country marched quickly toward a new identity, one much closer to an Islamic theocracy than to a civil society.

The scene on the streets changed rapidly, with more women wearing the *bijab* or even the *niqab*, whether out of conviction or more likely because of intimidation or just imitation. Observing the changes, one could hear citizens saying, “That is not us; it is not our Egypt.” The disillusionment with President Morsi and his party was also due to the fact that they came to power using the slogan “Islam is the solution,” but failed to solve any of Egypt's basic problems.

The millions who marched in the streets demanding the removal of President Morsi were even more numerous than the millions who, some two-and-a-half years before, had demonstrated demanding the removal of President Mubarak. They were happy when the army espoused their cause and helped in carrying out their wish. It was a popular revolt assisted by the army, rather than a removal of a president by the army. The claim that it was a military coup disregards the wide popular support and the deep social and cultural background of the event.

As for his being “democratically elected,” it is important to remember that the elections were touch and go and Morsi won by only a small margin. After the elections, and before their results were made public, Washington warned Field Marshal Muhammad Tantawi, then-ruler of Egypt, of the potential for a blood bath. This pressure tilted the balance in favor of Morsi, as the perception was that the Muslim Brothers would not reconcile themselves to the election of the other candidate, Ahmed Shafiq. As to his performance as president, the famous Egyptian writer Alaa al-Aswany had the following to say: “Mr. Morsi climbed the democratic ladder to power only to kick it away after him so that no one else could join him up there. In the process, he became a violent dictator.”

This explains the widespread resentment in Egypt at Washington’s expression of displeasure with the removal of President Morsi. American condemnation of the acts of violence by the military in dispersing violent pro-Morsi demonstrators was perceived in Egypt as encouragement to the pro-Morsi side and its use of violence. Cairo reacted by drawing nearer to Moscow in an attempt to balance, to a certain degree, its close relations with Washington. Thus far, this does not represent a genuine realignment of Egypt’s foreign policy as Cairo is cognizant of the importance of its relations with Washington, both politically and militarily. The US supplies Egypt with a vast array of arms practically free of charge.

Acquiring arms from the Russians, who do not display the same largesse as the Americans, seems to be a limited option for Egypt due to the country’s lamentable economic state. However, American reservations about the regime and its persistence in imposing penalties (reducing military assistance) may push Egypt closer to Russia. The Russians, of course, are only too happy to fill a void in a region that is strategically important.

The new regime acted swiftly against those who supported President Morsi, and had little tolerance toward those who continued to criticize his removal. In that framework, Egypt expelled the Turkish ambassador following the criticism expressed by Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan. Apparently this step was not a difficult one for Egypt, as it did not attach great importance to its relations with Turkey, the regional ambitions of which have aroused suspicions and resentment in Cairo.

The big loser from the removal of President Morsi is the Hamas regime in Gaza. Besides losing the valuable political and material support extended to it by Morsi, that organization has been subject to harsh measures including the destruction of most of the tunnels through which supplies are transported to Gaza. However, those measures should not lead us to underestimate the deep and continuing commitment of Egypt to the Palestinian cause.

At present, after the ouster of President Morsi, and close to three years after that of President Mubarak, Egypt's citizens realize that the light at the end of the tunnel is very dim. Gone are the enthusiasm and euphoria that prevailed after the removal of Mubarak. In her book, *A Girl's Wishes from Tahrir Square*, Amal Eltunsi, an Egyptian journalist who took part in the demonstrations, described the mood and expectations at the time

Joyfulness spread everywhere after the fall of the Mubarak regime that was filled with corruption and grievance for thirty years. It's over. There is no more injustice, no more theft, and no more torture. Congratulations Egypt ... my dreams were born in Tahrir Square. ... I dream that Egypt will be a civil state with freedom of worship for all religions. I hope our economy would become stronger than the Asian Tigers... I am longing to live freely. I yearn for social equity.

At that time of widespread exhilaration, everything seemed possible and immediately as if by the stroke of a magic wand. Today, the reality is gloomier, especially when it comes to the economic situation. There are also great uncertainties when it comes to the political situation.

The Egyptian economy is still suffering from the negative consequences of the political upheavals of the last three years. All the factors that contributed to the downturn of the economy are still valid, including the virtual collapse of foreign investment and tourism. The situation is aggravated by the increase of labor disputes initiated by workers whose rising expectations have not been met. In light of the political instability, rising insecurity, and unrest, many foreign companies have left the country and development projects have been halted. Economic growth, which reached 8 percent per annum in the last years of the Mubarak era, has been reduced to 2 percent in each of the last two years. The government forecast for next year is 3.5 percent, but that figure is contested by the IMF. Since the removal of President Mubarak, Egypt's long-range credit rating was downgraded by Standard and Poor's several times from Ba2 until it was fixed as low as CCC+ in 2013.

Prime Minister Hazem El-Beblawy claims that economic outlook is promising, citing the growth in foreign exchange reserves after a period in which they were almost completely depleted. He also noted the increase of remittances by Egyptian expatriates. Factually, he is correct. But the reason for that ostensibly positive development is a negative one: During Morsi's presidency, many Egyptians decided to leave the country and seek their future elsewhere. They started working in Arab and non-Arab countries and sending remittances to relatives in Egypt. There are no reliable statistics with regard to the number of those who left Egypt, which some estimate to be around 200,000–300,000. Among them are Christian Copts fleeing the harassment, violence, and acts of vandalism they have suffered at the hands of Islamists. Most of those who left or are planning to leave are well educated. Many of them are entrepreneurs, businesspeople and professionals. This is a serious brain drain that the country can ill afford and which will have serious ramifications for the future wellbeing of Egypt.

Of late, there has been a slight, temporary improvement in Egypt's economic situation. However, that was not due to better performance of the economy, but rather to massive foreign financial assistance. Immediately after Morsi's ouster, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates together pledged \$12 billion of financial aid to Egypt. Behind this assistance was the desire to support political change in Egypt. The majority of this sum has already been disbursed. Ahmed Zewail, Egyptian-born Nobel Prize laureate in chemistry, is optimistic about future prospects of the Egyptian economy, provided that the government makes educational attainment and economic growth its priority. He calls on foreign powers to assist in that direction, noting that the aid America gave Japan and South Korea after World War II enabled them to become economically vital. That, of course, is easier said than done and Egypt is not Korea or Japan.

Currently, Egypt is formally run by a provisional president drawn from the judiciary, Adly Mansour. But in fact, the real power is in the hands of the Minister of Defense, General Abdul-Fatah-al-Sisi, and the armed forces that stand behind him. Al-Sisi is committed to a road map that begins with the drafting of a new constitution to replace the one put forth by the Muslim Brotherhood; a referendum to adopt it sometime at the end of 2013 or beginning 2014; parliamentary elections; and, finally, the election of a president around summer 2014.

Al-Sisi faces a number of hurdles. The most urgent one is to pacify a country that has been plagued for too long by sporadic unrest, acts of violence, and mass demonstrations. Another urgent challenge is to fight terrorist groups in Sinai and elsewhere in Egypt. Success on these fronts is the prerequisite for the return of tourists and for regaining the confidence of the international business community, so that it can resume investment and development activities in Egypt.

If the ultimate aim of the present regime in its current struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood is to annihilate the Brothers completely, then it will be a long, endless, and futile struggle. The adherents of the Muslim Brotherhood constitute a sizable segment of the Egyptian people. However, if its real aim is limited to bringing about a change in the present leadership of the Brotherhood so that it is replaced by a more moderate and pragmatic one, it will have a greater chance of success. However, so far, there are no signs indicating that this is happening. It may be very difficult to stabilize the political situation without finding a way to include the Muslim Brothers in the next parliament and to give them a share in governing the country. Currently, their party has been dissolved by a decree of the regime.

Egypt's struggle against Islamic terror groups, which have found fertile ground for their activities in Sinai, is continuing with a degree of success. Israel has assisted in this effort by allowing the introduction of arms and military personnel into the area, contrary to the limitations stipulated in the military annex of the peace treaty. It is worth noting here that after the removal of Morsi, Egypt improved its military and intelligence coordination with Israel. The problem is that the terrorists largely enjoy the cooperation of the local Bedouin population who suffer from neglect and the unfulfilled government promises for investment and development.

Another source of serious concern for Egypt is the dam that Ethiopia is currently building, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, set for completion by 2018. The dam and the development around it can, in the long run, diminish the quantity of water flowing in the Nile River to Egypt. In the past, consecutive Egyptian governments considered such development projects *casus belli*, as the Nile waters constitute a lifeline for Egypt. Former President Morsi is on record saying that Egyptians will "defend each drop of Nile water with our blood." But Egypt is hardly in a position to seriously consider mounting a military strike because of the prevailing internal situation and also because of lack of international support for such a strike. An additional diplomatic obstacle for a strike is the fact that China is the contractor of the dam. However, the subject is too serious for Egypt to ignore, and perhaps it will have to find a negotiated solution that would limit the negative repercussions for Egypt.

The road map for Egypt's political advancement is well-known, but the question is whether the timetable will be kept. Another question is who will run for the presidency. Unfortunately for Egypt, all the secular groups and parties have yet to produce a charismatic figure with real leadership ability.

For the time being, the political scene has been confined to the person of Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, who enjoys a certain appeal and projects an image of strong leadership. His popularity and the personality cult being developed around him

have made al-Sisi a likely candidate for the presidency. From the little we know about al-Sisi the man, it is clear that he is a proud Egyptian patriot who believes in the Nasirite ideology, but at the same time he is also a devout Muslim. Above all, al-Sisi has a deep sense of loyalty and commitment to the officers' corps to which he belongs. However, his behavior reveals him to be a man motivated by pride not less than by other considerations.

Al-Sisi, apparently, fancies himself a modern-day Gamal Abd al-Nasir, a figure he venerates. It is to be hoped that if elected, he would provide a more sober and less adventurous leadership. Whoever is elected president of Egypt will face Herculean challenges. Besides striving to achieve normalcy and stability in the country, the new president will also have to deliver the goods. He will have to realize some of the Egyptian people's aspirations for a better life. He will be the president of a country the resources of which, in their present state, are hardly adequate for the needs of a population of ninety million. Whoever triumphs in the elections will be the leader of a people who have become far less docile and who have learned the way to Tahrir Square.

