Arab Reform Brief

44 February 2011

Egypt: Before and After*

*Virginie Collombier***

Even before the current uprising began in Egypt, major changes in the political system had begun to threaten the stability of the Mubarak regime as the presidential succession became imminent. Electoral fraud and constitutional reforms could have resulted in a political deadlock in 2011. At the same time, the relative openness and freedom of expression that has emerged in Egypt since 2005 had laid the ground for new political movements to emerge and develop. Events in Tunisia, combined with a severe degradation of economic and social conditions in Egypt, and the growing perception that its citizens would have no say in the coming presidential succession, have created a favourable context for the unprecedented mobilization in Tahrir square.

Uncertain transition

A number of events forewarned that 2011 would be a critical year for the Egyptian regime – even before Tunisian protester Mohamed Buazizi burned himself in December 2010, leading to a popular revolt and the flight of Tunisian president Ben Ali from his country less than one month later, and before the 6 April Youth Movement in Egypt called for a massive demonstration on 25 January 2011.

The presidential election planned for September 2011 might have resulted in the designation of a successor for Hosni Mubarak, in power for thirty years. The stakes were high. Moreover, despite the efforts of the previous decade to try and organize a smooth transition, it was not clear which scenario would prevail – just a few months before this decisive deadline. Would Hosni Mubarak's younger son, Gamal, be "elected" president? This option, long deemed the most probable, had become more uncertain,

*** This brief is published in partnership with Noref (Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre)**

** **Researcher at The Arab Reform Initiative**

notably because of the army's perceived opposition to it. Would the military seize power? This option, which seemed to conform to Egypt's recent history, had been made more difficult by the 2007 constitutional amendments.

All these questions remained unanswered. At the same time, despite what still appeared to be the exclusive domination of the presidential party over the political scene, the regime was finding it more and more difficult to preserve its stability in a period of decisive change.

Not that the overall political picture had fundamentally changed: the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) was still monopolizing representation in parliament at the expense of several very weak opposition parties (such as the *Wafd*, the *Tagammu* or the Nasserist party), and it was struggling to curb the influence of its only real rival, the officially banned Muslim Brotherhood. The December 2010 parliamentary elections had even exacerbated this situation: the NDP had won 420 seats out of 508, whereas only 15 seats had gone to opposition parties and one to the Muslim Brotherhood – the party had secured the election of 88 of its members in 2005. The remaining 70 seats had gone to candidates who were allegedly "independent", but in reality often related to the NDP.

Beyond this apparently dominant grip on power, however, these results signalled that the strategy implemented by the Egyptian regime during the past ten years or so had failed. From 2002 onwards, as a result of growing American pressure and aware that the political system had to be modernized if it was to remain stable, President Mubarak had chosen to promote his son Gamal and several of his close business associates within the ruling party. He had entrusted them with the mission to modernize the organization, turn it into a genuine political party capable of mobilizing people and winning elections.

At the same time, the whole political system was to be modernized and liberalized. The objective was a smooth transition, so that Gamal (or any other candidate chosen by the ruling party) should be able to win the presidential election in a way that would appear perfectly constitutional – not to say legitimate. In this ideal scenario, the NDP candidate would have had at least one credible competitor, representative of a non-Islamist party – the *Wafd* for instance.

Yet, by late 2005, after the first presidential election was organized (and orchestrated by Gamal Mubarak and a team of so-called "reformers" within the NDP), it progressively became clear that this strategy would be difficult to implement. The task was huge and the opposition fierce, even coming from within the party itself. Those who had joined the NDP after 2002, hoping that the time had come for more democracy, gradually realized that their hopes would be dashed.

Those who were responsible for modernizing the party and improving its image soon came to embody the most detestable profiteering and were seen as a corrupted elite by the citizens. Those who had joined Gamal hoping that this would help their ambitions of power began to realize they might have made the wrong choice, and some of them started distancing themselves from the party. Finally, at the end of 2010, the constitutional amendments adopted in 2007 combined with electoral fraud resulted in the NDP being the only political party able to field a candidate in the 2011 presidential election. As the deadline approached, a ten-year strategy was failing, and there was no clear alternative to it.

"If the door is closed, let's get in through the window."

At the end of 2010, the Egyptian political landscape was very different from the early 2000s. The traditional opposition parties remained very weak, incapable of realising change or articulating a clear political platform that would go beyond saying "no" to President Mubarak and hereditary succession. Yet the relative opening of the political system initiated in 2005 had had an impact on Egyptian society. The creation of several private televisions and newspapers and the interest they raised in the public revealed public unease. Movements such as *Kefaya* contributed to freedom of speech on political matters, even though they were severely repressed by security forces and their impact remained very limited in the population – demonstrations rarely gathered more than a few hundreds of persons. It became common for demonstrators to use slogans attacking the regime and President Mubarak personally, whereas this had never been the case before the demonstrations against the Iraq war in 2003..

From 2006 on, the regime had also been confronted by unprecedented waves of social unrest. Emerging in industrial cities such as Mahalla al-Kubra, these protests – mostly centered on salaries – had rapidly expanded and mobilized thousands of workers and employees from all sectors. The unrest had spread in the country, which proved that far from creating apathy, the increasing deterioration of social conditions was mobilizing Egyptians.

Yet protests remained localized and sporadic, failing to develop into a coordinated movement across Egypt. Moreover, there was no clear connection between socio-economic and political movements. From 2008, movements such as the 6 April Youth Movement – which had called for the January 25 demonstration – had unsuccessfully tried to fill this gap. However, they have played a central role in the emergence of new instruments of political expression and mobilization – the most important being the use of internet and social networks – and contributed to the emergence of a new political generation in Egypt.

It thus became increasingly clear that at least one part of society was becoming aware that it could not – and should not – remain out of politics and let the regime decide in its place. Most of them were young people; they had not known any president other than Hosni Mubarak, had no voter registration cards, and would lose the opportunity to take their destinies into their hands if they did not act.

Social networking as a political tool

In this context, new forms of political awareness have gradually emerged among younger Egyptians, under the very noses of the authorities. Until the January 25 demonstration, the means of communication and action used by young people were not considered to be politically significant. Internet was not taken seriously as a potential instrument of political mobilization. Even though young Egyptians were exchanging slogans, ideas and videos through their computers, it was felt that this would not result in people taking the streets and acting collectively. The fact that social networks could build bridges, making it possible to go from virtual mobilization to real mobilization, went unnoticed.

Events in Tunisia, combined with a severe degradation of economic and social conditions, and the growing perception that the citizens would have no say in the coming presidential succession, thus created a favourable context for unprecedented mobilization in Egypt – both in the means used and the scope. Many of those who have been standing in Tahrir Square for the past week are "newcomers" in Egypt's political landscape. Rather than holding specific ideological positions, their engagement stems

mainly from their will to take part in political decision-making: they do not want others to decide for them anymore, they want to participate.

In this context, their reactions to the significant concessions announced recently by President Mubarak and the newly appointed vice-president, Omar Suleiman, remain to be seen. Having secured that Hosni Mubarak will not run for another mandate nor his son will be a candidate, and that the results of last parliamentary elections will be reviewed, many Egyptians may consider that time has come for an orderly transition. However, not all the demonstrators will be satisfied with such a compromise, and it is far from clear how the army will deal with their demands.

The military has now become the key actor in Egypt. Regardless of when and in what manner President Mubarak finally leaves office, they will play a central role in the political transition. Among them, Omar Suleiman, as the vice-president, will certainly be at the forefront during this period. In the longer term however, and when a presidential election is organized, other figures may appear as better candidates, especially those less close to the Mubarak regime and less directly involved in the management of the current demonstrations. An army officer would be an option, but only one option. An important condition may be that the candidate is seen as trustworthy by the military.