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Crisis without End: Story of Egypt's Democratic Transition

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Traditional democratic transition literature tends to propose a transition formula that is based on procedural aspects like free and fair elections, political party pluralism, presence of a transitional justice system, etc.

However, although criticisms of this Schumpetric approach (in reference to the Austrian economist and political scientist Joseph Schumpeter) have multiplied in recent decades – to such an extent that many researchers considered the use of "fair elections" as a criterion for democratisation a logical fallacy – ignoring the substantive socio-economic dimension of democratization remained a basic characteristic of the democratic transition literature.

The matter becomes even more complex when democratic transition is spurred by a revolution, as is the case in Egypt.

By their very nature, revolutions revitalize social groups and allow them to breathe new, though I will not say it is necessarily fresh, air which puts the subaltern classes in the position of history-makers after being its objects for many long decades. This practically defies the theories of political engineering from above, and all what is associated to it, including all "transition" roadmaps, no matter how perfectly drawn or logical they are.

For example, Dr. Mohammad Al-Baradei might be entirely convinced that the "original sin" was disregarding his advice to put the "constitution first" as the key to a roadmap that ensures a safe and smooth democratic transition. However, I believe that those who follow the Egyptian revolution closely will agree that regardless of the procedural order the transition could have followed, it would have been impossible to avoid the fierce struggle among the different social classes and political forces that the revolution has unleashed after the old regime's downfall. This means that it is useless to restrict one's thoughts to the issue of right and wrong procedures without examining the nature of the on-going fundamental struggle, and how to ensure that the democratic forces will ultimately triumph.

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Alright then; what is the nature of the on-going struggle in Egypt? And where is it today?

We could perhaps say briefly that the current struggle is essentially between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces. However, this begs the question as to who are these revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces?

I think that any rigid definition or prejudgment of these two terms will not do us any good here, since any accurate definition of a revolution and counter-revolution should be necessarily be based on a historical review of the changes in the concerned parties' positions and loyalties, based on their respective social interests and political heritage accumulated over their long or short history.

The importance of a historical— as opposed to a static — review of the revolution's path and its protagonists' positions lies in the fact that it avoids classifying the concerned parties under predetermined categories. What it does instead is explain how their positions have changed or been revealed as the conflict between the main stakeholders has developed and deepened.

It avoids, for example, levelling accusations at the Muslim Brotherhood of conspiring against the revolution from the very beginning, or describing Mohammad El Baradei and Hamdeen Sabbahi as pure revolutionaries whose loyalty to the revolution never wavered over the past two years. Each of these two parties has been part of a process that has put them, as it gradually

deepened, face to face with the challenge of escalating structural changes that touched or conflicted with their interests and they, in response, has either contributed to them, wavered towards them, or clashed with them.

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Any revolutionary process, especially in its deeper forms like the case of Egypt, has two aspects. The first is unleashing the power of the submissive and repressed social classes from below. As indicated above, the revolution has been a gift to the downtrodden: a kind of rebaptism of them as active historical players. This does not necessarily mean that these classes have suddenly acquired a fully-fledged revolutionary consciousness or that they have smoothly become part of organizations that are capable of recruitment and mobilisation. What it means, instead, is that the historical era in which a particular political elite or class singlehandedly decided, behind closed doors, in which direction society should go and how, has ended and given way to another era in which the collective will of the masses plays a role in shaping the present and the future.

This is not all, however. A revolution also involves a fundamental change on the part of the ruling regime, since all the ruling mechanisms nurtured by the dominating elite over the decades either stop functioning or become incapacitated. This dysfunctioning is more the explosion point of an accumulating process rather than an ahistorical rupture. In other words, the revolution is the final coup de grace for institutions that have long outlived their usefulness, just like Prophet Solomon's stick that was gnawed-on by ants

until it collapsed and revealed that he had actually died many years earlier.

In the context of this dual qualitative change – liberating the power and activism of the downtrodden and the collapse of the autocrats’ coercive mechanisms – the socio-political conflict, for long concealed from view, continues on new grounds. Here, positions are not rigidly or finally determined. That is because in addition to all the hesitation and lack of experience that the revolution necessarily surprises us with, there are scores of convergences and turning points that the daily changing circumstances impose on the stakeholders.

In general, what has become clear with time, and through the thick fog of transition, is that while some want the revolution to continue, deepen and assume new dimensions that will ultimately tear-down the entire political, economic and social infrastructure, others are working hard to put an end to the revolution using a variety of means. Chief among these means is using the bourgeois democratic process as a means to an end; as a new situation brought about by the collapse of the old autocratic mechanisms which they use to paralyse the street and steer energies towards competition from above among forces that mostly belong to the interests of old world.

This explains why all the competing forces that seek to curb the revolution insist that the ideal world they envisage for Egypt is one in which the citizens need no longer to resort to collective action from below – strikes, demonstrations and direct actions like blocking roads and occupying institutions – but should only express themselves through the magical ballot box.

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In the first days following the deposed president’s stepping down, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) – representative of the old regime’s repressive mechanisms which succeeded in escaping the revolutionary storm in the early stages – agreed with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis, with astonishing speed and smoothness, to quickly introduce limited constitutional amendments – mainly pertaining to the election of a new authority and drafting a new constitution – designed to bring the “transitional period” to an end within six months.

As it became clear later, the agreement’s intention was not essentially to end the transitional period, but rather to liquidate the revolution. These parties’ main interest was not to hand power over to the people, but to stop the fearsome monster of the street revolutionary momentum, as was revealed by their mantra: “the wheels of production need to start turning, and the ‘rightful revolutionary’ needs ‘to calm down’.”

Therefore, what these “warring brothers” had in fact agreed on was to oppose the revolution from below and to opt for procedural democracy from above. In other words, their aim was to turn the rebellious masses into voters whose will can only be achieved through the ballot box, manifested in the form of elected parliaments dominated by powerful forces that have the funds, organisation and ideology to curb the revolutionary march.

The issue is not that there was a fundamental contradiction, necessarily and in all cases, between dynamic activism from below and ballot box democracy. Rather, the case was

that at that particular revolutionary moment the ballot box represented another option – an opposing/alternative option – to the revolutionary upheaval whose role, believed the Brotherhood and the SCAF, had ended on February 11, 2011.

Thus, the March 19, 2011 referendum, touted by the reactionary forces as a "democratic wedding," was held because the hegemonic forces believed it would bring, once and for all, an end to the trouble from below and restore to the state its lost prestige and role.

However, the surprise was that the revolutionary momentum revealed itself much too deep to be curbed by the referendum that granted the authoritarian alliance electoral legitimacy. And hence we witnessed in 2011 an unprecedented wave of labour strikes and million-man marches that called, among other demands, for retribution, real democracy and social justice.

Also in 2011, we witnessed the famous July sit-in in Tahrir Square and the events of Mohammad Mahmoud Street that called on SCAF to hand power over to an elected civilian government.

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The events of Mohammad Mahmoud have their own particular importance here, not only because they revealed – once again – the vitality of the revolutionary street, but also because – and of equal importance – they unmasked the fragility of the new authoritarian alliance between the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis and the military junta.

We said above that the agreement among members of the authoritarian alliance centred round ending the revolutionary process from below and launching a new political-electoral path that would pull the carpet from under the feet of the socio-political forces working to dismantle the dysfunctional old hierarchical arrangements that infiltrated every aspect of the country's social life. However, this agreement among the authoritarian forces to absorb the revolutionary process and counter it from above was only one of the many aspects of the on-going struggle in the post-Mubarak era.

The other, contradictory and complementary, aspect was the conflict raging among the authoritarian forces themselves on sharing the spoils of power.

The right-wing civilian forces (many of whose symbols and strongmen became members of the Consultative Council established by the military after the events of Mohammad Mahmoud) had objected to authoritarian arrangements imposed by the Military-Brotherhood alliance since February 2011. This objection was not the outcome of a genuine democratic sense on their part as much as it was due to their unhappiness at being excluded and their fear that early elections will reveal their lack of a popular base.

This was the reason why the true radical democratic opposition to the Islamic-military alliance got mixed up with a phoney right-wing opposition, equally authoritarian in nature, whose main concern and source of dissatisfaction was its exclusion from the new setup. This right-wing opposition pursued a dual path in applying pressure to achieve its

interests. On the one hand, it cautiously took part in the mass movement against the Islamists-Military authoritarian alliance and, on the other, it tried hard during closed-door discussions to rearrange its deck vis-a-vis SCAF to keep the latter in power as long as possible, thinking that this would grant leverage versus the Islamists.

The Constitutional Principles Document, better known as El-Selmi Document (named after the then Deputy Prime Minister Ali El-Selmi), was one of the outcomes of this civilian right-wing effort. El-Selmi Document blatantly and openly instituted "military sovereignty", first as a non-accountable or transparent force, and second as the arbiter between the different parties and the protector of legitimacy.

More importantly, the Document also imposed a selection system for members of the Constituent Assembly (assigned with the mission of drafting the new constitution) that limits the number of Islamists in it. It did that by predetermining the number of members from state and civil society institutions on which the Muslim Brotherhood has no influence, in clear violation of the Constitutional Declaration of March 2011, which stipulates that members of the Constituent Assembly should be freely chosen by members of the elected People's Assembly.

In response, the Islamists staged the "Single Demand Friday" one of whose demands was the annulment of El-Selmi Document. However, despite the seemingly democratic nature of the Muslim Brotherhood's demands at the time – i.e., letting the ballot box decide – it was at the core a struggle over power, or

rather, over the new regime's arrangements between the Islamists, the military and the civil right-wing forces. The latter had come down on the side of the military dictatorship opposed to the ballot box, which required bribing the military among other, while the Islamists called for electoral democracy to the extent that it served their momentary interests.

In the end, El-Selmi Document fell and parliamentary elections were held; these were elections stained with the blood of the martyrs who fell in Mohammad Mahmoud Street.

And although the Islamists won the majority of seats in the parliament, nothing changed save perhaps for boosting the latter's confidence when they realised the extent of their popular base; a thing that allowed them to face-down the military six months later in the showdown over the presidency.

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Thus, El-Selmi Document and the events that followed revealed the fragility of the authoritarian alliances which were considered to be solid as a rock. From that point until Morsi side-lined SCAF from power after becoming president, in August 2012, the gap between the Muslim Brotherhood and SCAF kept getting wider. Each side knew that although it could not eliminate the other it still had to manoeuvre and struggle to expand its sphere of influence in the future power structure. In the meantime, the civilian right-wing tried to increase its influence as well using the best means at its disposal (in light of its poor performance in the elections), namely reaching out to parts of the old regime, especially SCAF.

The presidential election in mid-2012 was yet another round in the struggle among the authoritarian forces. This became amply clear when efforts to agree on a consensus candidate of any shape or form failed miserably. Thus, when the military and the Brotherhood failed to agree on a single candidate, the latter decided to nominate first Khairat Al Shater, then Mohammad Morsi in a step that came as a surprise to many. The Islamists – the Brotherhood and the Salafis – also failed to agree on a joint candidate, which left the Brotherhood with Morsi and the Salafis split between Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh and Hazem Abu Ismail. Finally, the civilian and/or revolutionary forces also failed to agree on a single candidate, which meant that Hamdeen Sabbahi, Aboul Fotouh and Khaled Ali had to compete against one another.

On the other hand, it became clear that the problem with the presidential elections was that they were held at a time when the public was totally exhausted after one-and-a-half years of street battles, without any palpable improvement in the lot of the country's poor and marginalised. It was the exact contrary; the escalating political crisis and increasing poverty and unemployment rates fostered anti-revolutionary sentiments among the poor and marginalised, in both the cities and the countryside.

Therefore if, as mentioned before, we see the revolution as a mutual elimination struggle between street democracy and ballot box democracy, then the presidential elections came at a time when street democracy had become increasingly exhausted. This meant that large sectors of the population had, to a great extent, given up on change from below

and saw the ballot box as the last chance to escape a bottleneck that seemed to have no end.

The first round of the elections saw the collapse of the political middle ground; the fact that Amr Mousa and Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, whom most observers thought had the best chance of winning, failed to garner enough votes was a reflection of the acute division in the Egyptian street.

However, the presidential election was also a reflection of the "last chance" syndrome that compelled a majority of voters to endorse more radical and less nuanced options, with the hope that they would bring more concrete solutions to a crisis without end.

The result was the shock the re-election round. In that round, the two big candidates who are most distant from the Revolution, Mohammad Morsi and Ahmad Shafiq, competed for the presidency in a contest that caused even larger sectors of the population to lose hope in the ballot box democracy; this happened at a time when collective street democracy from below had already begun to seem useless and unproductive.

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Some thought that Morsi's victory in the presidential elections – especially after his Constitutional Declaration of August 2012 which side-lined SCAF from power without opposition – would bring the troubled transitional period to an end. Here was a man who secured behind him the biggest organization in the country and who succeeded in reaching power and eliminating all competitors. So it is over and there is nothing left to do.

Now, after all has been said and done, we can say this view was a rather hasty and premature.

Stability has two faces each of which feeds on and reproduces the other: the cohesiveness of authority and submission of the submissive. How does authority become cohesive; is it by fulfilling the wishes of the rebellious masses which have imposed itself on the scene by force? Perhaps. Is it by using, or uniting with, other fascist or quasi-fascist movements that use extraordinary repression to eradicate all the seeds of rejection and rebellion? Perhaps. Is it because the powerful ruling and owning class has unified itself behind a single alternative? Perhaps. But Perhaps it is also a mixture of all of the above, which is what all successful autocrats have done. They always mix repression with concession in context of unifying the apparatuses of repression behind them.

Nothing of the sort has so far happened in Egypt, and it is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future.

Let us first look at the option of "fulfilling the wishes of the masses." Did Morsi do that? Is he capable of doing that? Of course not...

The Muslim Brotherhood in its entirety is part of the ugly neo-liberal world. Whether through its leadership structure (from Hassan Malek to Khairat Al Shater), its opportunistic deformed reform history and its tendency to reconcile itself to the old world to which it belongs, the Brotherhood is trying to resolve the socio-economic crisis by increasingly resorting to neo-liberal methods: budgetary austerity, price rises, subsidy reductions, reconciliation with the business community and signing agreements with imperialist

financial and monetary institutions like the International Monetary Fund. This is formula designed to impoverish the poor and enrich the rich. Who expects that such a formula would calm the social and labour movement? Who expects it to be a formula for a new social contract that would end tensions and open a new page without any ill-will?

As to "widespread repression", despite the savagery of the police, the number of people killed in recent months and all the mistreatment on the streets and at police stations, the repression never rose to the level necessary to quell public activism or end the increasing instability. Morsi is borrowing all Mubarak's old tactics; but who says that Mubarak and his methods are any good in today's world? At a time when state institutions are crumbling under the revolution's weight, restoring control and authority requires much more than just putting a professional repressive machine in motion. This explains why the ruling classes need fascism, whether populist or military, in order to end the instability that typically plagues the ruling authority following a massive revolution or rebellion.

Could Morsi and his coterie blatantly become themselves a fascist apparatus? Of course not; this would require a fundamental change in the Brotherhood's vision, nature and mainstay, something that is neither envisaged nor possible.

On the other hand, could the present or potential ruling authority ally itself with fascist or quasi fascist movements to eradicate the revolution and all popular rejection? I do not think so, for this would require widespread agreement in the corridors of

power and within the governance system and the old regime; an agreement whose impossibility is revealed by the endless infighting and wrangling between the Brotherhood and the military, the Brotherhood and the Salafis and the Brotherhood and the civilian right-wing forces.

It is here that the other side of the coin comes clearly into focus: the cohesiveness of the authoritarian forces and of the ruling classes in general. The Constitutional Declaration of November 22, 2012, and the ensuing multi-layered struggle, have shown how fragile the fleeting moment of general stability, between August and November of that same year, really was.

After scoring good results in the presidential election (despite Morsi's ultimate success), the civilian opposition, including its right-wing, was able to reconstitute itself in the form of new parties, including, among others, Hizb el-Dustour, the Popular Current, Strong Egypt and the Congress Party.

The explosion of November 22 pushed most of these forces (with the exception of Strong Egypt) to form a new coalition: the National Salvation Front (NSF). NSF proved capable of large scale mobilisation from among the upper, middle and lower classes, as well as among some sections of the poor and dispossessed (Al-harafish). And despite its failure to dislodge the Muslim Brotherhood (and the Salafis) from power, and despite its right-wing nature, NSF proved that it was able, to an extent, to destabilise the Brotherhood and impose itself as a part of the power game.

However, the NSF is just another right-wing force. It's not a radical substitute for the Brotherhood; it is almost the same old wine poured into new bottles. So the struggle from above continues and instability continues.

This is where the classical dismemberment that afflicts post socio-populist revolutionary stages appears. Forces that mostly do not belong to the revolution dominate the political sphere and strongly compete for positions of influence in a rotten institutional structure, against a backdrop of entrenched and continuing social instability. While the competition continues, authoritarian voices are raised higher and higher calling for an "end to the instability farce" and for "governing with an iron fist." But no one is capable of doing that.

This is the paradox which the Egyptian ruling elite finds itself in today. It is a paradox which I believe could last quite a long time regardless of the marginal adventures and turns in the road.

What further exacerbates the situation is that the Salvation Front has burned the traditional liberal and leftist opposition, in the literal sense of the word. For after raising radical slogans calling for the immediate downfall of Morsi, his constitution and entire political structure, and after allying itself with the remnants of the old regime and the extremist neo-liberal right-wing, it turned around and reopened the door to contacts with Morsi's regime and its policies, by taking part in the referendum on the constitution and by discussing the option of a national salvation government. And the zigzags continue.

All this was taking place in the absence of a cohesive revolutionary force capable of

opposing this track and providing an alternative to Morsi and his right-wing opposition. This has cost the radical mass movement the political leadership it is most in need of at a time of deep instability and despair.

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After all that, the question that begs itself is: what is left of the revolution? My answer is: a lot, a great lot, is left.

History teaches us that despite the apparent sombre conditions, Egypt's current situation is open to three future possibilities. The first is the rise of a fascist/quasi-fascist/security state capable of resolving the situation even if partially (Hitler, Mussolini or even Putin). In this scenario the elements of the governing alliance will probably not change; what will change is the balance and distribution of roles among the alliance's elements. The second possibility sees the current state of instability continue for a relatively long time, similar to what we see in Pakistan today, and saw before that in Germany's Weimar Republic. The third possibility is a new popular rebellion which, in my opinion, is the most likely scenario, even if we pass through a momentary and futile authoritarian period.

What motivates me here is not childish revolutionary optimism that has no basis in reality, but rather the fact that Egypt is not alone in the world and that the political struggle is not disconnected from its structural socio-economic roots. We are living a moment in which the neo-liberal system, that imposed itself in the early 1980s, is experiencing a long and deep crisis. We are also living a moment in which capitalism, which formed the basis of the system's stability for thirty years, from the 1940s and 1970s, cannot experience a new major revival.

Egypt that is witnessing instability today and does not look to know how to complete its democratic transition is the very same Egypt that is getting ready for a new revolutionary round. Neither were the masses defeated, nor was the crisis resolved or the authority capable of being authoritarian; what we have is a vicious circle that will keep revolving until the new revolutionary wave hits our shores, be it tomorrow or in the next few years.