



ARI Projects

Debating Egypt

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On The Limits Of Theoretical Frames

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On the Narrow Theoretical Frames and the Openness of the Squares: Egypt's Blazing Summer

For the Nth time preset analytical frames preceded practices, where actors calling for continuing the revolution mixed with those coming to support the army, confronting today's ally/yesterday opponent embodied in Muslim Brotherhood. The revolutionaries mixed with former regime loyalists (feloul), those who are democratically-inclined with a fascist tendency, and those seeking a livelihood and the right to expression with those calling for the return of authoritarianism as a stable framework the Egyptians have long lived under.

What the Egyptian arena is witnessing now is a multi-layered revolutionary meltdown through which several social forces are trying to articulate their demands that were never fulfilled. And through which established political forces are trying to ride the wave to impose their own control of the coming phase. Thus, it becomes clear that the ouster of the president is not a compromise of democratic legitimacy as much as it is a manifestation for power struggles in a moment where the revolutionary alternative was not well formulated and where alternatives presented internationally are competing as plausible scenarios for creating a transitional system.

Here two bases for legitimacy contest each other publicly: One representative legitimacy and the other the legitimacy of the "squares".

But can the Muslim Brotherhood really embody the democratic choice in face of an authoritarian option suggested by the military and the alliance of urban middle classes? And can the groups mobilized in the name of revolutionary legitimacy go beyond the patriarchy of the military establishment? This is the challenge that resists the intelligibility of categorical/analytical units based on the revered literature of democratic transitions – starting with and ending with – representative democracy as the only lifeline for Arab revolutions of dignity, and at the heart of them, Egypt.

The Limits of Ballot-crazy

The analysis that calls for safeguarding the democratic transition gains, fails when confronted with the political and legislative context where under its aegis political Islam managed to secure a victory in the elections (the March referendum, exhausting the squares, and restricting the architects of the transition to the army, the old technocrats, and the Islamists before any public referendum between February and March 2011).

This justification is humbled when reminded with the several constitutional declarations that the Muslim Brotherhood president issued since his election and that came out in contradiction to any

rules of democracy.

This same justification also falters when we show the photos of the Islamist militia (whether Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi) and their alliance with the ministry of interior and the army against the protesters and those on strike since last summer.

And the arguments of the democratic transitions falls apart when the considerations of forming the government and writing the constitution dismisses, in an exclusionary way, all the forces that oppose Political Islam as the sole reference point. And when we examine the mechanisms of institutional takeover done daily by the Muslim Brotherhood over a year, as a political group monopolizing all access to the state administrative institutions, on the level of ministries, media and culture platforms, leadership offices in the provinces.

And the last fig leaf falls off Schmidter and O'Donnell's theses on the mechanisms of democratic transition when we recall the last speech for Morsi as an elected president: a speech where he publicly threatened his political opponents with retaliation, he also promised to create local bases to fight violence in way that reminds us of the time of the American Patriot Act post-9/11.

The facts on the ground show that the effective control of power and security was going to come with no dispute, from the Brotherhood or the state security apparatus. And therefore we have to read the incensed Egyptian scene -and its central position in the region – as givens for floundering in a revolutionary context that has been contained and not as democratic procedures that were suspended before its time.

Democratic transition itself started as a path where deliberations of authoritarianism, nepotism and exclusion took over. A course imposed by international criteria before its time and which confined itself – as usual- to procedural accuracy at the expense of considering the actual demands on the ground, and the momentum calling for a time to elucidate and sort out, and thus the political party laws, and legislative elections, and the constitutional committees, looked like enough formula to secure Western blessings and to fulfill the conditions of democratization procedures as measured by international think tanks seeking to shift the revolutionary state that is out of control, by definition, to a reform state that can be dealt with according to international rules that have been followed before in Eastern Europe over the past two decades.

The Immediate Challenges for the Revolutionary Course

The need for a new road map developed by the revolutionary forces represents one of the dilemmas of the Egyptian scene post- 30 June. But it remains one of the dilemmas and not the only one. The multiplicity and rivalry of counter-revolutionary forces -which is presented in the the classic trinity of security apparatus, political Islam, and second-tier leaders of the former regime – could obstruct the quick crystallization of a vision in the name of continuing the revolution. And that is, in spite of the expanding base of Tamarrod popular movement and that is increasing especially among segments of the youth and professional and labour segments.

The danger of civil war as they call it, or escalating violence between supporters and opponents of the Political Islam, more accurately, represents a second obstacle that is being manipulated by the disputing forces as scarecrows to subdue the popular momentum and domesticate it in a post-mobilization moment of exhaustion.

One look at the fleeing of pro-Muslim Brotherhood supporters from Tahrir or the use of violence against Morsi supporters yesterday at dawn and the killing of 40 protesters, reflects the true size of the risks that are being promoted by the Armed Forces and the Muslim Brotherhood as a point of leverage in the their ongoing battle.

The internal struggles between the opposition forces and the complete absence of trust between them and the rest of the Islamists groups that affected the support of popular anger, all reflect a third challenge that discounts the capacities of everyone to negotiate or exert pressure in the face of any escalating violence immediately from the army, and the hindering of possibilities of crystallizing an axis that is closer to popular demands that still call for the slogan that incited all revolutionary zeal since January 2011: Bread, Freedom and Social Justice

We are mistaken when we adopt the dichotomy of democratic legitimacy / military coup as a scheme of interpretation. Both camps did and still do take the transitional moment as a loophole to control and re-institute authoritarianism. Dealing with the Egyptian blazing summer as a continuous revolutionary course and not a Robespierre moment that sacrifices hundreds of thousands in the name of a Thermidorian power followed by an extended military rule, listening to new momentum against the continuous attempts to usurp by the counter-revolutionary trinity diminishes the space between reality and the suggested categories of analysis. The new and the old, one that is influenced by the centrality of Eastern Europe or armed with memories of Latin American in the 1970s.

It is possible that the momentum decreases as happened time and time again, over the course of the last two years but it is also possible that it surprises us with successive waves declaring anger against attempts to contain the revolution.

Therefore, it is incumbent on us to constantly reassess our theoretical approaches and analytical frameworks so we are able to grasp the complexities of the Arab scene. That scene that possesses dual compasses in each of Egypt and Tunisia and that is generating a fourth wave, in progress, for democracy and the mechanisms of constructing it in a post-authoritarian and post-Islamist (together) moment. Or a victory for counter-revolution not only through a coup but through the breaking of the ranks as has been the case since 2011 and maybe even through resorting to the sanctified democratic transitions criteria.