THE SECOND EGYPTIAN REPUBLIC

Spurred by Youth, an Era of Pluralism Has Arrived

By Tarek Osman

J ust before taking an unofficial oath of office in front of supporters in Tahrir Square, Egypt's first civilian and freely elected president, Mohammed Morsi, spoke of the struggle of the Muslim Brotherhood, from its creation in the 1920s to the decades of persecution under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, to the last decade under President Hosni Mubarak.

The ascension to the presidency of a Muslim Brother symbolically crowned the group's journey over nine decades, in addition to marking another key milestone— after the removal of Mubarak and the beginning of the process of drafting a new constitution— in Egypt's transition from the 'first republic' of the past sixty years to a new republic, whose features and characteristics remain unclear. Interactions between three key political players will have the biggest influence on the development of Egypt's 'second republic': the country's military, the Islamic movement (with its assortment of constituents, and at its core, the Muslim Brotherhood), and the various groups that fall under the 'secularist' umbrella.

'Sons' of the Military

Since the 1952 coup against the Mohammed Ali dynasty that established Egyptian republicanism, the military establishment, consisting of the armed forces and the intelligence services, has provided the framework within which Egyptian presidents have ruled. Notwithstanding the importance of Nasser's personal charisma, Sadat's transformative socioeconomic policies and Mubarak's long balancing act, all three relied on their military credentials, *gravitas* gained by leadership in war, and the unquestioned support of the military establishment—the only institution in the country able to effect change by force—to buttress their rule. And in return, the three presidents presented themselves (genuinely)

▷ Egyptian parliament, Cairo, March 11, 2012. *EPA/Corbis*

as the 'sons' of the military establishment and, to a large extent, its representatives in leading the country.

This positioning was flexible—Nasser graduated from being a coup leader to the country's 'hero,' and Sadat changed his image from the leader of the 1973 war to that of the president bringing peace—but it underscored the importance of the military in the power dynamics of the country. Egypt was arguably never a dictatorship in the overtly militaristic way a number of Latin American countries were from the 1960s to the 1980s, and the military establishment never assumed the role of 'the guardian of the state' as it had in Turkey. And though before the 2011 revolution, the military never ruled per se because the president always controlled all power levers, the military establishment enjoyed a detached, exceptional status superior to that of any other authority in the country.

That power dynamic was shaken (though far from broken) in the last decade of President Mubarak's rule. A new capitalist elite emerged as a conspicuous power group at the heart of the Mubarak administration, carving out for itself specific power domains in the areas directly affecting Egyptians' daily lives—economics, finance and services—and leaving to the military establishment principally the areas of state sovereignty—defense, national security and foreign policy. The balance of power between the military establishment and the liberal capitalist elite was only achieved through the presence of President Mubarak. Mubarak ruled supreme: his unsurpassed authority indicated clearly to the liberal capitalists who was boss, which in turn lessened some of the apprehension felt by the military establishment at the rise of the capitalists. But that balance proved unsustainable: Mubarak's delegation of power to the scores of capitalists who had formed close links with his administration hastened the merger of power and capital, contributed to the erosion of his legitimacy and the weakening of decision making, and fueled the popular rage against his regime that brought his rule to end.

Many observers inside and outside Egypt have engaged in creative scenario-planning for the future power dynamics in post-Mubarak Egypt. The military, led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), has ruled the country since the removal of Mubarak in February 2011. Debates—and tales of intrigue—swirl about whether or not the military will ever accept the dilution of the institution's power under a civilian president who represents the Muslim Brotherhood. The March 2011 Constitutional Declaration and its amendment in June 2012, issued by the SCAF during the second round of the presidential election, indicate that the leaders of the military intend to preserve at least veto powers over national security and defend their institutional independence from the supervision of the elected president and parliament. Some observers speak of a 'deep state,' with the military at its core, that opposes a democratic transition in Egypt.

The removal of President Mubarak and the sidelining of the capitalist elite that dominated the country in the last decade stirred hopes among many Egyptians, on the liberal and Islamist sides, of a complete rupture with the past six decades. Wide segments of the country's middle class envisage a civilian government, with a completely independent decision making system that does not defer to the military's prerogatives. This would effectively mean the downgrading of the military to just another state institution—which could prove objectionable to the military establishment, which might opt to support the new president on the condition that he is acceptable to Egypt's middle classes and that the military can continue to exercise influence behind the scenes.

There are also a number of observers who argue that the country still has not developed the institutional base or educational and social infrastructure necessary for a transition to genuine democracy or purely civilian rule. In this line of reasoning, liberal capitalists, despite their influence during Mubarak's last two decades and far reach across the economy, drew all of their power from President Mubarak's support; and as the liberal groups behind the 2011 uprising are scattered, leaderless and inexperienced, they are unable to form a credible and responsible leadership in the short or medium term. Therefore the only way to stop Islamists from establishing an Islamic republic would be for the military institution to retain its influence, uphold the secular nature of the state, and maintain its supremacy through a power-sharing system with the elected president.

These arguments fail to appreciate the immense changes that have been taking place in Egypt for a number of years before the 2011 revolution. The military should be sophisticated enough to understand that the fall of the Mubarak regime marks the end of Egypt's 'first republic.' It needs to recognize that the 2011 uprising produced an unstoppable wave of political energy, backed by a large youth population and vast sections of the country's growing middle classes, that no wise leadership would try to oppose. The groups that propelled the 2011 uprising, and new social constituencies emboldened by the revolution's results (for example within Egypt's labor organizations and inside many of the country's universities), will continue to push for a more open, transparent, efficient and civic political process.

Regional changes should also induce the military to take a step back. Almost all military establishments in the region are opening up to civilian rule. In Turkey, the military establishment was not able to prevent the rise of the Islamist AKP party, and has gradually given in to the march towards genuine civilian rule. In Israel, quasi-civilians such as Benjamin Netanyahu and Tzipi Livni are increasingly assuming the leadership mantle from the military establishment's trusted sons, the generation of Shimon Peres and Ariel Sharon.

There is much in Egyptian history and tradition that predisposes Egyptians to expect and accept authoritarian rule. The country has no experience of an orderly transfer of power governed by an institutional system of checks and balances. Egyptian history teaches its students that political stability in the country is best assured by a powerful, benign dictator or a cohesive, solid institution of the state. But the vigor of today's young Egyptians and their disillusionment with authority and recent history could mark a departure from that long-standing tradition and sustain a people-led transformation.

A new political reality, the beginnings of the country's 'second republic,' will emerge, with two main characteristics. First, Egypt's political landscape will be fragmented for the foreseeable future. Young Egyptian liberals created the momentum that stirred the revolution. Different civic opposition groups augmented the numbers and provided logistical support. The Islamist movement—different variants and at their center the Muslim Brotherhood—provided organizational skills and tenacity in the face of the regime's violence. The uprising was the work of different players and proved larger than the sum of its parts. This means that no revolutionary legitimacy could be conferred on any single political entity or institution in the country. Also, no single political player in Egypt today has the organizational strength or heroic narrative that would allow it to dominate internal politics. This fragmentation will stoke fluidity, weak decision making, and a period of uncertainty in the short term. But it will prove very healthy in the long term. Different players will compete to widen their constituencies and promote their ideas. In the next few months and years, financial power and the ability to disseminate ideas will prove advantageous for some political players (many of whom belong to the Islamist trend), but with time, others will close the gap in the possession of such resources. The country's politics will be much more competitive than in previous decades.

The second characteristic is more complicated. Egypt will witness a protracted political struggle between the Islamist movement and secular forces that oppose religion as a socio-political frame of reference for the state. This political struggle was partly side lined in 2011 and the first half of 2012 because of the focus on the transfer of power to a civilian authority and as a result of the myriad of details that blurred political affiliations. But it remains—and will continue to be for a number of years—the central issue in Egyptian politics.

The Islamists and the country's liberal secularists dominate the struggle for the hearts and minds of young Egyptians. Factions within the Islamist movement believe that the Islamists, plagued by the experience of militancy from the 1970s to the 1990s, should move towards a more liberal framework. Influenced by the seemingly successful Turkish experience under the AKP party in the 2000s, these factions advocate

a return to the thinking of the liberal Islamists of the early decades of the twentieth century (most notably Sheikh Mohammed Abdou who had argued for "rationality" in applying religion); they are trying to develop an Islamic social and political compact that will allow for a marriage between political Islam and the needs of modern society. The liberals, on the other side, are championing as their own many of the young Egyptians' initiatives (from spearheading the 2011 revolution to the remarkable waves of business entrepreneurialism, to creative drives in modern Egyptian art and culture) and so in their own way also offer a framework for young Egyptians' inventiveness and enterprise.

Tensions Among the Islamists

Most of the Egyptian opposition of the past few decades has something to gain from the 2011 revolution. Political Islam, however, seems to have used it as an escalator to political power. The Muslim Brotherhood lent decisive support to the uprising at its most critical phase. While liberal groups summoned up the will to initiate demonstrations in the last week of January 2011, it was the Islamist movement, especially thousands of young members of the Muslim Brotherhood, that summoned up the means to translate that will into very sizable organized displays of anger and rejection, and which managed to maintain pressure on the regime for the last two weeks of the uprising and spread it across the country. Certainly, Egyptian political Islam does not own the uprising (and its leaders have repeatedly sought strength through electoral successes, rather than "Tahrir Square's legitimacy"); however, Islamists remain among the uprising's most conspicuous players.

Also, unlike the complex rhetoric of most liberals, the Islamists' message is simple. They address the yearning of most Egyptians for a society run by and for ordinary people, with Islam as its guiding principle, and without too many questions, analyses or complications. The rhetoric of the Freedom and Justice Party set up by the Brotherhood in May 2011, and the messages of the presidential campaigns of Mohammed Morsi and of Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, a former leading member of the group, are examples of such uncomplicated discourse. The moderate voices within political Islam also try to present their thinking in a language that does not affront the liberal sections of the country's middle class, repeatedly stressing that there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. And crucially, despite the non-religious rhetoric of the 2011 uprising, Egyptian society remains pious and religiously conservative.

Political Islam and the Brotherhood also enjoy tactical benefits: the dispersal of votes and dilution of political influence after the sidelining of the erstwhile ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) help the Islamists' campaigns in a political field that is no longer dominated by any central power. That was a key reason why the

Islamist movement succeeded in the March 2011 referendum and the December 2011/ January 2012 parliamentary election, while the scattered liberals failed.

But the Islamist movement faces immense challenges. The liberal Islamists' message is increasingly gaining resonance among wide sections of society, but at the same time faces internal resistance and, at times, outright hostility from the more conservative wings in the Salafi movement. After decades of persecution, some ultra-conservative groups are increasingly becoming more assertive. In a number of poor Cairene and Alexandrian neighborhoods, some Salafi groups, emboldened by the retreat of Egyptian police in 2011 and early 2012, have demanded the closure of liquor shops; when refused their demands, some fundamentalists tried to forcibly impose their requirements. Others have staged protests, some in front of churches, to drive home their insistence on an Islamic Egypt. Salafi groups have been behind an increasing number of sectarian flare-ups. And crucially, the performance of many religiously conservative members of the (now invalidated) parliament in the first few months of 2012 indicated a hardening streak and an assertive legislative agenda.

The differences in modes of operation—and ideology—between these ultra-conservative groups and liberal Muslims are likely to produce cracks in the Egyptian Islamist movement. The actions of conservative Salafis will also blemish the image of liberal Islamists and of the Muslim Brotherhood at a time when its leaders strive to assure almost anyone listening, inside and outside Egypt, that they believe in multi-party democracy, strive for a secular state where Islamic *sharia* is a guiding principle but not imposed on society, support women's participation in all socioeconomic and political activities, and of course renounce violence in internal politics.

There are also clear signs of tension inside the Muslim Brotherhood itself. These include the apparently forced removal of Supreme Guide Mohammed Akef in 2010 amid clashes between conservative and liberal wings, internal confusion over whether or not to participate in the 2011 uprising, and new divergences that have emerged between different wings inside the Brotherhood since the revolution. Several youth groups inside the Brotherhood have serious reservations about the group's General Guide office, which they see as monopolizing the Brotherhood's thinking and political activities.

These internal conflicts not only consume the energy of the liberal Islamists; they signify that political Islam in Egypt is pursuing two contradictory sets of values. On one hand, it aims to put forward a liberal Islamist narrative that corresponds with the notion of a secular state, and yet on the other side, many of its leading proponents are antagonistic to liberal democracy and any deviation from Islamic *sharia*. There is also confusion about the values that should guide society and state. The society can have a number of frames of reference corresponding to the wants, aspirations and cultural orientations of its many constituents. The state, however, has an agreed-upon governing

framework that all citizens must subscribe to. This confusion has been at the heart of the successive disagreements between the Muslim Brotherhood (and the wider Islamic movement) on one side and most of Egypt's more secular political players on the other side, over the principles that should guide the drafting of Egypt's new constitution.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the vast majority of the really influential leaders within the Islamist movement, and not just the few spokespersons who regularly appear on Egyptian and international TV stations, sit on the fence. They do not hesitate to condemn any act of violence or any rhetoric that appears menacing but they are skillfully evasive and brilliant wordsmiths when it comes to the truly crucial issues affecting the nature of the new Egyptian republic.

The Islamic movement is hardly a solid front, coalesced behind a unifying narrative. One of its crucial weaknesses is that its conservative wings cling to jihadist, confrontational and backward-looking views that are at odds with the demands and aspirations of a growing middle class and a forward-looking, youth-dominated population. To a large extent, today's Salafis (and some of the conservative wings of the Brotherhood) seem to be making the exact same mistake that their predecessors in the 1920s and 1930s made (at the zenith of Egypt's liberal experiment): championing a move to the past at a time when the most dynamic forces in society, and especially the tens of millions of citizens under the age of forty, are eagerly looking to the future.

The Audacity of Liberals

The impact of the 2011 uprising on the liberal movement in Egypt is unlikely to be one-directional. Some factors will be favorable to liberals. There is a major debate in Egypt as to whether the country should stick with its presidential system of government or migrate to a parliamentary one. It remains a contentious issue animated by heated political and legislative debates, as well as by personal ambitions. The road to Egypt's new political system may become more turbulent, with some of the key powers of the first Egyptian republic exerting their influence—or blunt, undisguised power—to rein in a macro political transformation. Yet, it is highly likely that Egypt's new political system, emerging from a painful and protracted transition process, will balance power between the presidency and a strong parliament and provide for extensive checking, controlling, and reviewing authorities. The empowerment of parliament harkens back to the 1923 Constitution and could reinstate a cornerstone of the country's liberal experiment in the first half of the twentieth century.

Democracy can offer new opportunities for liberal parties. After decades of being instruments in the hands of the Mubarak administration and the NDP, some of Egypt's traditionally liberal parties are trying to shed the stigma of being sclerotic organizations, controlled by a few funders, and to put new modernizing measures in place,

such as internal elections to choose leaders capable of inspiring younger recruits, and realistic manifestos and plans for legislation and governance to address the myriad of socioeconomic problems the country faces. Young members of some parties are trying to marginalize elderly leaders who refuse to step down, and in some cases, jettison the traditional structures altogether and set up new offshoots. This process sped up after the country's interim administration issued a law in March 2011 eliminating restrictions on the establishment of new parties from the Sadat and Mubarak eras.

Many observers have viewed the absence of leadership in the liberal groups behind the 2011 uprising as a major disadvantage. It could turn out, however, to be a strength. For sixty years, Egyptian politics developed in the shadows of strongmen with quasi-Pharaonic authority. Nasser's charisma and appeal put a sugary coating on that grim reality, which persisted under Sadat and Mubarak. In the 'second republic,' Egyptians will demand genuine equality and an open society free from impositions from the top. The lack of clear liberal leadership and the almost certain infighting and internal struggles that will develop amongst liberals could trigger an activism and dynamism that many Egyptians may find refreshing. That dynamism would draw a distinction between the liberals and the Islamist movement, which tends to sacrifice political creativity and imagination for discipline and deference to hierarchy.

In a peculiar way, the liberals will also benefit from the Islamists' almost certain continued strong presence in Egyptian politics as the largest and most organized bloc in the parliament in the short and medium term. The steady rise of Islamism in Egypt's political life in the next decade will force the leading players within political Islam to delve into the details of their constituents' daily lives. Increasingly, routine and commonplace problems will consume their efforts. That will leave time for liberals to experiment with new ideas; in some cases, there might be political imprudence, for example calls for the establishment of an utterly secular state, completely detached from Islam. Such demands are unlikely to gain traction in the short or medium term, but could add momentum and vitality to the liberal camp, and allow centrist liberals to benefit from the new ideas without being necessarily tarnished by them. Intelligent secularists could make a clear distinction between secularism as an abstract ideology and secularism as a notion in statecraft. They can invoke a complete separation of religious and political authority, without making any judgment on the success of religious authority. In effect, they would differentiate politics and law from religion and morality.

The macroeconomic situation will also help liberals. In the coming few years, Egypt will go through a period of economic upheaval; the country will continue to face considerable economic and financial challenges. This will not help in addressing high unemployment rates, especially amongst young Egyptians. These challenges will put pressure on the next parliament, likely to be controlled by Islamists. Political Islam in

Egypt has ideals, well-written manifestos, long experience in clandestine and ground-level political machinations, and two decades of soul-searching—but no experience of governance. Islamists will suffer from incompetence resulting from inexperience. Its members of parliament and ministers will make mistakes, especially in the tangled field of economics. And gradually a significant percentage of their constituents will hold them accountable for the day-to-day difficulties of life.

Since the 2011 revolution, Egyptian liberals have acquired a new sense of audacity, of defying power. Young people are ascertaining their ambitions and rising up to grasp them. In the first free student union elections after the fall of President Mubarak, a number of liberal independents swept the polls at Cairo University and Ain Shams University, securing majorities in a number of faculties. True, the Islamist movement was cautious not to antagonize liberal student groups, especially after the Islamists' major success in the March 2011 referendum, and therefore did not field many candidates. But the results nonetheless showed that young liberals have major followings amongst their contemporaries. That fiery momentum is tamed by wiser, calmer and older voices within the liberal current. Together, they could produce a coherent movement that might progress beyond the rage of the revolutionaries and yield a viable alternative to Islamism that wide sections of Egypt's middle classes might find appealing.

However, other factors could take the wind out of Egyptian liberalism's sails. The results of the March 2011 referendum and of the parliamentary elections in December 2011/January 2012 revealed the massive gap between the leading voices of the liberal movement in Egypt who have dominated the Egyptian media since January 25, 2011, and the sentiments of most Egyptian people. The referendum proved that many of these liberal thinkers lack any real influence outside the middle-class neighborhoods of Cairo and Alexandria.

Political strategy also seems to be a glaring weakness amongst Egyptian liberals. Those who brilliantly and effectively organized themselves through online social networks and who led the initial phases of the revolt appear to be amateurs in electoral politics, unable to transform the momentum of their movement into real on-the-ground influence. It is one thing to initiate a movement with a momentum that unified different political forces behind the slogan of "The People Want the Downfall of the Regime." It is quite another to build strong and durable political force.

The liberal movement does not always present itself well. A significant number of prominent liberal leaders suffer from social snobbery, which makes it difficult for many ordinary Egyptians to warm up to them. In many cases, there is a condescension not only in the way many liberal narratives are presented, but in liberal thinking as well. There seems to be an embedded worry in leading liberal circles in Egypt that upstarts or conservative simpletons could ascend to the apex of the country's political

system. This was particularly conspicuous in the dominant liberal characterization of Mohammed Morsi's campaign rhetoric, which suggested that he was unworthy of ascending to the political leadership of Egypt despite a clear electoral win. And increasingly, especially after the results of the parliamentary elections, there is hysteria about Islamist power. That frenzy consumes energy that ought to be invested into developing an achievable political roadmap for the liberal movement. For many, the cohesion that propped up the revolution and gave it the strength to remove the regime seems to be disappearing.

The Power of Pluralism
Egyptian and international observers like to speculate about what the presidency of Mohammed Morsi will mean for Egypt's political future, but the transformation in Egypt goes much deeper. The internal pressures and challenges faced by both Islamists and secularists will impose difficult choices on Egyptian society as a whole in the coming few years. These difficulties will be compounded by the search for a sociopolitical framework that vast sections of the population will accept and that can manage to achieve a broad societal consensus.

This will necessitate political compromises that all key political players in the country should be prepared to accept. The country's political players will need to be flexible and open to compromises. Indeed, unchallenged political authority will have no place in Egypt in the short or medium term. Despite what appears to be solid entrenchment of the key pillars of Egypt's 'first republic,' unstoppable sociopolitical developments in Egypt over the coming decade will empower democratically elected governments. Some players will be initially strong and will then be weakened by exposure to power and government; others may evolve new power bases with new supporters and constituencies. With time, these multiple political powers will, paradoxically, strengthen society and the state, in part by reducing the country's reliance on the military for stability. In the medium to long term, the army will cease to be the ultimate source of authority in the country, secularists will close the political gap with Islamists, and the foundations of a solid constitutional parliamentary system may evolve.

Egypt's second republic is not a new start. Egyptian society carries the achievements and failures and aspirations and frustrations of the past sixty years. The liberal experiment of the first half of the twentieth century gave rise to the beginnings of representation, constitutionalism, and the notion of equal rights and obligations in contemporary citizenship. That experiment crumbled when its leaders detached themselves from the realities of their society and nurtured the illusion of a "Paris on the Nile." The first republic started with a dream that inspired Egyptians to support a national project "by, for, and of the people." But the lack of institutional support

base, corruption, the rise of a militarist class, the increasing blur between power and wealth over the past thirty-five years, the severe centralization of political and economic power, and the dilution of legitimacy, swept that project away in an avalanche of rejection and resentment. The tens of millions of young Egyptians—Islamists and secularists—can now learn from the mistakes and move on. The land of the Nile has been stagnant for a long time. A deluge of energy is coming.