
الجيش و الشعب

Egyptian Dreams

Why the Tahrir Uprising Has Failed to Deliver its Promise

By Tarek Osman

Revolts resemble love affairs. At the beginning, the participants are overwhelmed by joy at their initial success, and at the new possibilities that the affair has afforded them. But the affair is never isolated: it falls under the weight of the past and the confines of the present; it also inevitably unleashes new (or previously concealed) forces. And the same opportunities that excite the participants endanger others, who seek to stem the change they see threatening. And though the memories of early days—the possibilities, the promise—remain poignant, the stories evolve in different ways: happy endings or crushed dreams.

In the last hundred years, two Egyptian dreams have been crushed. The Egyptian liberal age that extended from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century gave rise to the country's modern institutions, such as Western-styled universities, a secular judiciary, professional syndicates, and a varied and dynamic press. The period witnessed the liveliest cultural wave the Arab world has ever seen: the birth of Arab novels, theater, cinema; an impressive translation movement; and burgeoning secularism that subtly challenged the authority of religion (both Islam and Christianity) in Egyptian society. Industrialization, the emergence of local banking giants, the introduction of modern agri-business, and a services sector evolved the Egyptian economy from its agrarian foundations toward a modern, multi-sector one.

A middle class began to emerge; educated professionals populated the expanding new neighborhoods of Cairo and Alexandria. And as the two cities rose to become the commercial, trading, and artistic hubs of the entire region, tens of thousands of Levantines, Jews, Armenians, Greeks, as well as sizable Italian and Maltese communities migrated to Egypt. Within a single generation, these immigrants became integral parts of cosmopolitan Cairene and Alexandrian societies. The social

◁ Egyptians celebrate ouster of President Mohammed Morsi, Cairo, July 3, 2013. *Khaled Desouki/AFP/Getty Images*

code had changed. The new urbanized middle classes were increasingly comfortable with Western norms and values, from the mixing of genders to man-made laws. And amidst these social, economic, and cultural changes, Egypt was gradually moving towards liberal democracy, with different political forces representing various ideologies and interest groups competing in free elections, in a tolerant milieu that respected political and civil rights, and freedom of expression.

Yet, the liberal experiment proved lacking. The political elite failed to deliver on the most important national objective of the time: Egypt's independence from Britain. The elite fell into excesses that separated their luxurious lives from those of the vast majority of Egyptians; and they were incapable—and dis-incentivized—to alter the country's extremely skewed economics. By the late 1940s, around 5 percent of the population controlled more than 65 percent of the country's asset base (private companies and traded stocks); more than 20 percent of Egyptian peasants were landless while about 3 percent of the population held over 80 percent of all cultivated land; foreigners, meanwhile, continued to exert decisive influence on the economy.

The liberal experiment also failed to answer a basic question, which the waves of modernization, economic development, and exposure to the West had repeatedly brought to the fore: What is Egypt's identity? Three answers had emerged. The Arabists believed that the Arabic language and its dominant influence on the country's culture meant—if not dictated—that Egypt belonged to the Arab World, which was then emerging from the chains of Western colonialism. This group believed that Egypt's association with the East (the Levant, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula) was a historic imperative; Christianity and Islam came to the country from the East; all major waves of immigration—to and from the country—were also Eastern-oriented; and Egypt's cultural and political influence, since the Pharaohs and throughout the country's varied historical episodes, had been felt in the East (especially in the Levant). In the view of the Arabists, Egypt's future was inextricably linked with the Arab world.

Others disagreed, profoundly. The most prominent figures in Egyptian culture at the time, including Taha Hussein, the doyen of Arabic literature, among a score of writers, philosophers, and artists, argued that the modernization, secularism, and cosmopolitanism that Egypt had gone through in the preceding decades had evolved Egypt's identity toward Mediterraneanism; that is, a unique cultural blend that incorporated the country's Arabic heritage with the modernity it had now undergone. This project was to turn Egypt into a part of Europe.

Rise of the First Republic

The Arabists and the Mediterraneanists thrived in the higher echelons of Egypt's social, political, and cultural circles. But there was a third view gaining a huge following

across society by the 1930s and 1940s: the Islamists, who firmly believed that Egypt had always been, and will continue to be, an Islamic country, with Islamic values, frame of reference, and laws exerting a decisive influence over its society. The Islamist groups—especially the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928—had become a very visible political force in the country, and aimed to transform the Islamic identity into a political reality and turn Egypt into an Islamic state.

The acute economic strains caused by the Second World War, and then the shock of defeat in the 1948 war with the nascent State of Israel, exacerbated the tensions and pressures that the severely skewed socioeconomics—and the political tension—had placed on Egyptian liberalism. Perhaps the most perceptive observer of the situation was King Farouk, who in 1951 confided to a few in his entourage that the Egyptian monarchy would not survive the decade.

The finale was, in fact, much nearer. The liberal age—and with it the dream of a secular, democratic, modern Egypt—came to an end in 1952 when Gamal Abdel Nasser, an ambitious, nationalist officer, overthrew Farouk and ushered in the first Egyptian republic.

Nasser was a true revolutionary. He wanted to transform Egypt. His land reform and his program of nationalizing a swathe of Egypt's private sector utterly changed the Egyptian economy. In a dozen years starting in the mid-1950s, more than 75 percent of the country's gross domestic product was transferred from private to state ownership. Nasser's totally subsidized university education, and the dramatic expansion in public employment—especially in the state's bureaucratic structure—resulted in the fastest and broadest social mobility Egypt has ever experienced. The elite of monarchical Egypt became marginalized and by the late 1960s, the new middle class of the 1930s and 1940s grew to become one of the largest social segments in the country. For the millions of new doctors, engineers, officers, teachers, the hundreds of thousands employed in the burgeoning public sector, and to the millions of farmers who had become, for the first time in many generations, landowners, Nasser was a hero.

Nasser also had a decisive answer to Egypt's identity dilemma. He not only sided with the Arabists; by the time of his death in 1970, he had become—in the words of Nizar Kabbani, the Arab world's most prominent poet of the last half century—the prophet of Arab nationalism. During his reign, and especially in the 1960s, Egypt became the most powerful and influential political force in the Arab world and Africa, and a leading voice in the Third World—on par with Nehru's India and Tito's Yugoslavia; and as Che Guevara put it, a "mecca for world revolutionaries." The rapid social and economic transformation was accompanied by a dramatic rise in Egypt's regional and international positioning.

The price, however, was creating a highly centralized power structure. Nasser's republic revolved around the military, which emerged as the most powerful—and revered—state institution, detached from (and above) all other institutions. The republic dispensed with free elections, genuine political representation, checks and balances, and freedom of expression; civil and political rights were severely curtailed; and power was centralized at the very top, in the tiny administrative and security group surrounding the president.

And the state became the provider for the people. Eradicating the country's private sector, the exponential increase in the public sector, and the sweeping welfare systems (from education, to health care, to transportation, to guaranteed employment) that were created in the 1950s and 1960s, led the largest social groups in the country—the lower middle classes and the poor—to depend on the state for providing almost all their salient socioeconomic needs.

The three decades that followed Nasser's death brought about major changes in economic policy (from socialism toward different types of capitalism) and an upheaval in Egypt's foreign policy (from an assertive Arab nationalist, pro-Soviet positioning toward becoming one of the key allies of the United States in the Middle East). Over time, economic pressures mounted; the state's ability to meet its socioeconomic obligations receded; and Egypt's influence and regional prestige weakened.

Fall of the Regime?

Like Egypt's liberal age, the dream of Nasser's utopia was also crushed. And crucially, the social and political contract that the first Egyptian republic had forged with the people became increasingly frayed. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, that contract was nearing breaking point.

The first reason for this was demographics. By the late 2000s, Egypt's population surpassed eighty-five million, of which more than half were under thirty-five years of age (including the largest cohort of teens in the country's history). New generations were coming to the scene at a time when the state was increasingly unable to fulfill its provider role. Inflation, including prices on basic goods, was soaring; the country's infrastructure was decaying; and as a result of waves of enrichment, corruption, and poor management, the gap between the upper classes and the rest of the population was reaching shocking levels.

A second factor was power transition. President Hosni Mubarak, who had ascended to the presidency in 1981 after a thirty-five-year military career, was aging and he isolated himself more and more in a seaside compound in Sharm El-Sheikh, five hundred kilometers from Cairo. Decision-making was divided between his family, the government, the ruling party, the security apparatus, and a coterie of oligarchs. His administration

worked to pass the presidency to his son, Gamal, who had never worked for any of the institutions upon which the first republic was based. Inheriting the presidency from Mubarak senior to junior necessitated the approval of these institutions, and especially the military; whether this approval would be forthcoming remained unclear.

The project to transfer authority from father to son was widely seen as the ultimate bankruptcy of the first republic. By now, the country's socioeconomic challenges, demographic pressures, and the dilution of its regional positioning were being compounded by an acute legitimacy problem. Gone were the aspirations, dreams, and ambitions of the 1950s and 1960s; gone was the special link between leader and people that Nasser had cultivated. By the late 2000s, the first republic had descended into a corrupt, hereditary power structure, with nothing linking it to the tens of millions of Egyptians—and especially young Egyptians—nothing, but their anger at what it had become.

When tens of thousands of young activists descended on Tahrir Square in central Cairo on January 25, 2011, to protest the miserable conditions in the republic, their call resonated with huge social segments. President Mubarak fell, and it seemed that the first Egyptian republic had come to an end. The participants in the uprising were ecstatic, and the possibilities seemed limitless.

In the wake of Mubarak's ouster, three narratives appeared. The first was that of the activists who had triggered, or quickly joined, the uprising. The unity behind their demand for the "fall of the regime" soon gave way to a fragmentation into various ideologies, viewpoints, ambitions—and egos. In less than six months, more than a hundred youth coalitions and revolutionary fronts were formed, dozens of civil society organizations clamoring for various causes emerged, and many new newspapers and TV channels came into existence.

None of this was surprising. The leaderless uprising was an amalgamation of disparate groups that had come together haphazardly in a very short time period, and without any central authority, plan, or common vision for the future. That seemed healthy. The lack of leaders made the uprising seem the call of a generation, rather than the work of a specific political group; and the diversity in opinions and perspectives promised the beginning of political plurality. But these hundreds of groups, coalitions, and parties lacked any means of exercising political power. The moment they left the streets—when President Mubarak handed over authority to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces—their collective influence disappeared.

Islam's Challenge

The second narrative was that of political Islam. Neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor the ultra conservative, literalist Islamists (the Salafists) had participated in the

initial stage of the 2011 uprising. The Brotherhood's leadership was actually very hesitant to join, even after the first few days had passed and the momentum of the uprising was building. The decision to participate in the revolt came after several groups of young Brotherhood members had already taken to the streets alongside the initial protesters. Sensing a historic opportunity to move against Egypt's first republic—and to leverage on the work of the tens of thousands of young activists who had the courage to stage and trigger the uprising—the leadership of the Brotherhood threw in the group's considerable resources. Suddenly, hundreds of thousands of Brotherhood members came to the streets. And when Mubarak left the scene, they remained the only organized, structured political group that could fill the void that ensued.

This Brotherhood was different from that of the generation of Hassan Al-Banna, who built up the group in the 1920s and 1930s, and from the ideologues that Nasser had marginalized (and persecuted) in the 1950s and 1960s. Since the mid-1990s, the group's leadership had shifted from theologically trained scholars whose credibility was built on their religious training and on their steadfastness in Nasser's years to a new generation whose power and authority were based on their ability to generate revenue streams and financial resources for the group.

The most visible faces in this new leadership were businessmen and entrepreneurs with holdings in various economic sectors, from food to retail to transportation and financial services. And they came with new thinking. The key messages, whether to their core constituencies, in public media, in interactions with other political camps, or in the group's various electoral campaigning, for example in Egypt's 2005 parliamentary election, focused on Egypt's socioeconomic problems. The Brotherhood was, in effect, presenting itself not as a force of political Islam whose thinking is anchored on Islamic jurisprudence, but as a political actor promising to tackle the country's ills. This new positioning was anchored on the notion—strongly emphasized in the Brotherhood's new rhetoric—that the group, which had extensive experience creating and managing a wide-reaching service infrastructure, was well positioned to lead Egypt, especially in comparison to the liberal political forces. The Brotherhood's positioning paid off when it secured more than 40 percent of the seats in Egypt's parliamentary elections in December 2011 and January 2012 and, six months later, won Egypt's first free presidential election.

President Mohammed Morsi's triumphant address—in the afternoon of June 29, 2012, to the hundreds of thousands of jubilant Egyptians who had gathered since the morning in Tahrir Square, and to the tens of millions in Egypt and across the Arab world watching the event live on TV—captured the symbolism of the moment. The group, which only eighteen months earlier was considered illegal and the sworn

enemy of the republic that had ruled Egypt for over six decades, had ascended to the apex of power. It seemed that political Islam had, after many decades, succeeded in taking over Egypt, the largest, most populous, and strategically most important country in the Arab world.

But there was one more narrative—that of the first republic. The pillars of that power structure, and especially the military, noted that the overriding demand of the broad social segments that had lent their support to the January 2011 protesters—most notably the labor associations, farmers groups, and many constituents in the lower middle classes and the poor—was not the "fall of the regime." It was the removal of President Mubarak, and the return of (some sort of) social equality. They sought relief from their rage at the corruption and blur between power and wealth that had characterized the last decade of Mubarak's reign, their dismay at the attempt to bequeath the country from father to son, and their frustration at the lack of any national project for more than twenty years.

While the activists—and the key powers in Egypt's political Islam—saw the 2011 uprising as a tsunami that would sweep away the existing political order, the pillars of the first republic recognized it as an opportunity to rid their power structure of the ills that had afflicted it in the last decade of President Mubarak's rule. A new generation within the republic, and especially in the military, believed that the demand of the widest social segments in the country was not the demolition of the power structure that had controlled Egypt since 1952, but rather its reform. They also believed that they, this younger generation inside the republic and mainly inside the military, could, and should, lead that reform.

This narrative was not an illusion; it resonated with major segments in the Egyptian society, ones that indeed did not reject the first republic but abhorred the sorry state in which Mubarak had left the nation. Some nostalgia was also at play. The groups that had lived through the 1960s reminisced about "Nasser's good old days" and "the years of dignity and social cohesion," about the times "when being Egyptian instilled pride." This nostalgia was, at best, selective remembrance. As the poet Mahmoud Darwish once described his feelings about exile: "My memory erased the dust, the heat, and the crowded streets, and retained only the look and smell of the lemon trees." And yet, that nostalgia imbued the narrative of the first republic—and the project of resuscitating it—with immense momentum.

The Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power, meanwhile, faced difficult challenges. Once in office, the group soon found itself the target of growing anger. Many observers argue that this was because the Brotherhood failed to meet the socioeconomic goals it had set for itself. But economic mismanagement cannot fully explain the anger.

Wide social segments in Egypt, especially in the urbanized middle class, had acute suspicions regarding the Brotherhood's ultimate goal. The group's new rhetoric was hardly convincing to millions of Egyptians who have grown, over several decades, wary of political Islam in general and the Brotherhood in particular. Millions believed that the Brotherhood was systematically working to Islamicize the state and the society, and that, the new Morsi administration was embedding all major and strategic state institutions with Brotherhood members whose allegiance was not to the Egyptian state but to the group. Several events exacerbated that suspicion. But the rushed and exclusive process through which the December 2012 constitution was drafted and ratified significantly heightened these fears. Suddenly, Egypt—one of the oldest countries in the world and with a powerful, entrenched, and unique national identity—seemed on the verge of adopting a highly Islamic charter that huge social sectors, even among many pious Muslim Egyptians, felt at odds with the tenets of Egypt's historical experience and social fabric.

Return of the Generals

The ascent of the Islamic identity might not have been so problematic—especially to the upper middle classes—in other Arab countries where Islam, throughout many centuries, has been the sole defining characteristic of these societies. But in Egypt, Islam—as a frame of reference, an identity, and a major social component—has always existed alongside Arabism, Mediterraneanism, Levantinism, Christianism, and pharoahism. Egyptian Islamism also seemed different to what political Islam appeared to be presenting. Over many centuries, Egypt has developed its own unique type of Islamism, one that has adapted to the tranquil life of the country's agrarian society. And so the perceived Islamization, that the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood had come to represent, seemed for millions of Egyptians to be a fundamental threat to the Egyptian way of life. Millions felt a need to assert—and defend—"Egyptianness."

But the battle against the Brotherhood was also about preserving prerogatives and major economic interests. The Brotherhood's coming to power heralded a conspicuous attempt to transform Egypt's political economy. The new business-oriented leaders of the Brotherhood, and other economic power centers in Egypt and the Gulf close to them, seemed to be rapidly increasing their market shares in various economic sectors, such as banking, construction, real estate, transport, and retail. That threatened financial concentrations of power that had, for decades—and especially in the last ten years of Mubarak's rule—commanded dominant and highly lucrative positions in the Egyptian economy. Another factor fueling the anger was the Brotherhood's organizational structure. The group's hierarchy had, over the

past six decades, allowed it to withstand successive (and at times brutal) attacks from the first republic. But as the group came to power, this hierarchy seemed to many Egyptians, and especially to the sprawling and influential administrative arms of the Egyptian bureaucracy, to be a parallel state. The notion—and fear—that the Brotherhood was taking over Egypt was significantly amplified.

The outcome of the confrontation between the Brotherhood and the pillars of the first republic was never in doubt. The state controlled all levers of power in the country, from cooptation to coercion. But the anger that was mounting against the Brotherhood allowed the state to genuinely represent its struggle with the Brotherhood as meeting the aspirations of broad segments of the population. On June 30, 2013, millions of Egyptians returned to Tahrir Square and filled streets throughout the country demanding, initially, early presidential elections, and later, Morsi's removal from office. Three days later, armed forces commander General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi announced that Egypt's military had suspended the constitution, ousted Morsi, and installed an interim president until new elections could be held. After only a year in power, the Brotherhood was out, and once again vilified as an illegal organization. The state institutions of the first republic, which had commanded the country for the past six decades, led by the military, were back on top.

Could the first republic achieve its goal of ridding itself of the ills that had led to such decay in the last decade of Mubarak's rule? Popular support for the state's institutions, and mainly the military, coupled with the massive esteem with which El-Sisi is held, gives the first republic strong momentum to resuscitate the fervor of a rising nation, and leverage nostalgia for the Nasserite dream. El-Sisi announced in March that he would be a candidate to become Egypt's next president, and he is expected to win. The authorities have an opportunity to put forward a new national project that taps into the aspirations and imagination of wide social segments. Such a dynamic has been sorely absent from Egyptian politics for almost four decades.

Nearly all the key financial interests in the country—which control a significant percentage of the Egyptian economy—as well as the country's most popular media outlets, support the return of the first republic. This means that the dominant narrative in the country is, and will continue to be in the medium term, favorable to the current authorities. And despite the reticence that has characterized how various international stakeholders reacted to the removal of the Brotherhood and the return of the first republic, these international players will continue to support the country. Given the chaos in the eastern Mediterranean and the potential turbulence in Libya, the most influential regional and international powers want a stable Egypt—especially if the threat of jihadism continues to spread in the region. And Gulf powers—mainly Saudi Arabia and immensely rich Abu Dhabi—for various

strategic (and domestic) reasons will continue to lend extensive economic support to Egypt at least in the short to medium term.

These factors could allow the first republic to cement its return to power. And while the current attitude of the authorities is highly assertive, over time it is likely to advance beyond seeing only vassals and enemies, and slowly move the country towards a pluralistic political milieu, one that retains the republic's prerogatives, but that major social segments find acceptable.

There is, however, another scenario that could lead to very different outcomes. As a result of economic reforms undertaken in the past two decades, the private sector has for the first time in half a century become the largest employer and provider of investment capital. So a large minority of Egyptians are now urbanized middle-class professionals, with economic stakes to protect and aspirations to materialize. They not only expect, but will demand, a say in how their future will be shaped. And irrespective of the carrots and sticks that the first republic can use, these demands—because of the scale of this rising middle class—would neither be co-opted nor crushed.

The socioeconomic challenges facing Egypt could lead to two different outcomes. Egypt faces grave problems regarding its food bill, energy architecture, water resources, in addition to systemic and perilous youth unemployment. Major investments in infrastructure and a huge potential in logistics and tourism could create millions of jobs. But state capital is lacking, sovereign debt rising, Gulf support will prove temporary, and the state has very limited resources to meet the needs of a society dominated by semi- and unskilled workers. Egypt will have to affect major reforms to attract international—and domestic—private capital. This will inevitably lead to the liberalization of certain sectors, an evolution in the country's regulatory framework, and to the appearance of networks of economic interests whose operations would be vital to the economy. Gradually, this would significantly improve the country's competitiveness and would affect a slow but steady growth in the country's middle class. The result would be the emergence of a multi-polar power structure.

Egypt's demographics—and the culture of young Egyptians, the forty-five million who are under thirty-five-years-old—could augment this scenario. This generation is connected to the world, opinionated, daring, and commercially and socially entrepreneurial. No central power will be able to control this major social segment for any significant period of time. This is already conspicuous. Despite the immense popularity that the powers of the first republic, and especially the military, currently enjoy in Egypt, the society's young are clearly disenchanted. Youth participation in the January 2014 referendum on the constitution was conspicuously low. Social media is awash with bitter humor that tells of the sour mood of the most

active social segment in the country. This means that the young's dynamism could accelerate the dilution of power-centralization and the rise of plurality.

But there is another scenario. The sourness that many young Egyptians feel could rapidly evolve into anger if the economic and security situations deteriorate. This could fuel social unrest, at a time when polarization is entrenched and significant social groups—including the sizable constituencies that support political Islam—feel marginalized or threatened. In this scenario, the immense popularity that the powers of the first republic enjoy would disappear and large social groups could once again take to the streets. And again, anger will give rise to aspirations, and to a new beginning. There will be novel possibilities; they could lead to that elusive happy ending, or to another crushed dream.