



EGYPT, REBRANDED

Illusions of Prosperity and Liberty amid a Thwarted Revolution

By Jack Shenker

In mid-March 2015, I flew into Sharm El-Sheikh airport. The runway sits on a flat strip of sand between the Red Sea and the city’s “Ring of Steel” security wall, beyond which the Sinai mountain range, dotted with sunken canyons and high gardens filled with pomegranates, almonds, and mulberries, stretches for more than a hundred miles to the north. There were helicopter gunships circling low around the airport perimeter as I landed, and the highways from the airport were lined with Egyptian special forces units—balaclavas over their heads, black goggles over their eyes—baking silently in the desert heat. Large billboards were dotted around the town, featuring the word “Welcome” in English, alongside the logos of major Egyptian and multinational companies. At the International Congress Center, behind a series of military checkpoints, signs proclaimed “Egypt The Future” and flags fluttered in the wind.

Inside the center, corporate executives and Western politicians were slapping backs and breaking bread, leaving a trail of Danish pastry crumbs in their wake. Christine Lagarde, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, was there, and so was Sri Mulyani Indrawati, managing director of the World Bank. John Kerry, the U.S. secretary of state, gave a speech in the plenary hall, as did Tony Blair, Britain’s former prime minister, and Philip Hammond, the country’s foreign secretary; eighteen current kings, presidents, and heads of state were seated among the audience. High-level delegations from China, Russia, France, Germany, and Spain were in attendance, along with representatives from the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the African Development Bank. Senior bosses from Coca-Cola, Unilever, Siemens, Allianz, and oil giants British Petroleum, BG Group, and Total all took the stage at

◁ Scale model of proposed new Egyptian capital is displayed for investors, Sharm El-Sheikh, March 28, 2015. *Amr Abdallah Dalsh/Reuters*

keynote sessions. Lunch was sponsored by CI Capital, the after-dinner “cocktail fun party” by telecoms billionaire Naguib Sawiris. “The images that have been coming out of this part of the world have been, by the nature of media, unrepresentative of what’s happening on the ground,” Ahmed Heikal, founder and CEO of Qalaa Holdings, one of the largest private investment companies in the Middle East, told me. “We want to convey the normal, more representative part of the story, which is that Egypt is open for business.”

Four years, one month, and seventeen days since Egypt’s anti-Hosni Mubarak uprising erupted, the corridors of counter-revolution were busier and more convivial than ever. “Conferences like this change the image,” Sir Martin Sorrell, chief executive of WPP, the world’s largest advertising agency, explained to me in a side room off the main lobby. He had just got off a plane and was wolfing down some breakfast on the go; the conference schedule was frantic, and Sorrell—one of the main organizers of the event—was struggling to make all of his meetings. “It changes the atmosphere, it changes the perception, and given what’s happened to Egypt in the past four years, obviously the brand has changed and there’s a necessity to reposition it.” He ran through his company’s various attempts to woo President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi at the last World Economic Forum in Davos, and the network of public relations consultants and brand advisers that since then had been working around the clock to remarket both the Egyptian president and his country to the world. I asked whether Egypt’s current turmoil—the political violence, the terrorist bombings, the insurgency raging not far away from us in North Sinai—made stability and investment a difficult message to sell on the international stage. He gestured at the hubbub around us and smiled. “In a world where CEOs are trying to get top-line growth ... well, to put it very crudely, a ninety million population country doesn’t fall down from the sky very often,” he replied.

Fruits of the Strongman Era

Over three days, “Egypt The Future”—or the Egypt Economic Development Conference, to give the event its full name—attracted nearly 2,000 delegates and tens of billions of dollars’ worth of foreign investment deals. New investment and bankruptcy laws, timed to coincide with the conference, offered investors new incentives and protections including special dispute-resolution mechanisms to shield their operations from the Egyptian courts and permission to abandon privatized projects without penalty. As part of the legislation, state officials were granted the right to sell, rent, and dispose of public property for investment purposes by direct order, without having to carry out a public tender, and to do so for free; both state officials and investors were given blanket immunity in relation to the handling of public funds. New

tax cuts and fiscal exemptions for corporations were announced as well. Diplomatic approval was universal. “They seem to be taking the right steps in a lot of different directions,” declared a representative of the U.S. State Department. “Egypt has been able to demonstrate its sheer commitment to transforming its own economy through the right policies, through the right regulatory reforms, as well as presenting the right set of investment opportunities,” beamed Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, minister of state in the United Arab Emirates.

This was a national coming-out party for the planet’s most ancient country as it outgrew its moody adolescent years of revolutionary upheaval and finally embraced the modern world. Special pullout supplements and customized content packages associated with the conference ran in all the major Egyptian newspapers, as well as the *Wall Street Journal*. When attendees weren’t applauding the various Gulf monarchs who had funded “Egypt The Future,” or ransacking the lavish refreshment tables, they were firing up the specially commissioned “Marketplace” smartphone app, a sort of neoliberal Tinder where “leaders and game-changers” could arrange to come together for “brain dates.” Around the coffee dispensers and bilateral breakout spaces, there was an all-pervading buzz of positivity and freshness, as if an economic strategy centered on foreign direct investment, GDP growth, and autocratic military rule had never been pursued before. If the weekend had come with a soundtrack, *The Lego Movie*’s “Everything Is Awesome” would have been an appropriate choice. El-Sisi said Egypt was on “a path to the future” and received a standing ovation; to enthusiastic cheers, Christine Lagarde declared that “the journey to higher growth has already begun.” From exile, the surviving leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood issued press releases insisting that Egypt “is not for sale,” seemingly forgetting that exactly the same business elites had been flogged to and fawned over by Mohammed Morsi as well. “The government of current President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has embarked on an ambitious economic reform agenda,” concluded *Foreign Policy* magazine, citing constructive meetings between the Egyptian investment ministry and American multinationals such as Exxon, IBM, and Kellogg. “These, then, are the fruits of a return to the strongman era of Egyptian politics.”

At the conference, no one talked much about the other fruits of that era: the “virginity tests” and the protest law, the thousands of political prisoners behind bars, the ninety detainees who were killed in state custody in Cairo alone the previous year, and the police stations now so infamous that locals had dubbed them “graves of the living.” It would have felt impolite, even unseemly, and anyway some of the websites detailing the violence—including that of Human Rights Watch, which has labeled El-Sisi’s assault on the Rabaa Al-Adawiya protest camp one of the largest state massacres of demonstrators in history—were blocked on the conference WiFi. “I think those are

political, not business questions ...” said Jeff Immelt, the CEO of General Electric, when he was asked whether there was a tradeoff between democracy and economic “stability.” “Frankly speaking, I’m not at all competent on that,” said Richard Attias, the conference producer, when I raised the issue of Shaimaa El-Sabbagh—the young mother and poet shot dead by security forces a few weeks earlier as she attempted to lay a wreath of flowers in Tahrir Square. “I think you should ask the local authorities. ... It is not by excluding a country from the global community that you will help them solve their internal deep issues.” Blair insisted that Egypt needed “efficacy” and “leadership,” and praised El-Sisi for understanding the modern world. “Look, I’m absolutely in favor of democracy and I think that, in the end, all countries as they develop will go to a situation in which the citizens elect the government,” he said from the stage. “But I also think you’ve got to be realistic sometimes about the path of development, and that sometimes you will have a country [with] not what we would call 100 percent Western-style democracy, but on the other hand is going in a direction of development that’s really important.” A few days before Blair’s speech, the Egyptian government hanged the first of more than seven hundred Islamists sentenced to death since El-Sisi assumed the presidency.

Business Titans and Domestic Elites

Blair, Attias, and Sorrell are part of an interconnected grid of high-level country branding specialists tasked with helping El-Sisi’s regime reshape Egypt’s image in the international arena. The event was put together by Richard Attias & Associates, a strategic consulting firm owned by Sorrell’s WPP that shares its London headquarters with Global Counsel, the lobbying outfit run by former Labour minister Peter Mandelson, who publicly campaigned on behalf of Gamal Mubarak when the revolution first began. Mandelson is also a chairman and international representative of the financial consultancy company Lazard, who have been hired as economic advisers by El-Sisi’s government; his close ally Blair has advised El-Sisi too, as part of an Emirates-funded consultancy program. Among Global Counsel’s clients is British energy giant BP, whose chief executive Bob Dudley was, alongside Blair and Sorrell, another star turn at the conference. “You can almost feel the economic engine of Egypt starting to rev up,” claimed Dudley in a keynote speech, after announcing a new \$12 billion BP investment package. “We are very pleased to be part of that.”

Country branding is a fast-growing industry. States have always attempted to market themselves as tourism and business destinations; now though, governments—especially ones tainted with a reputation for human rights abuses—can call upon a vast array of dedicated, global consultancy experts, fluent in what Bell Pottinger, one of the largest players in the business, calls “the dark arts” of identity management, in

order to refashion themselves. A great deal of effort is made to keep these practices secret; the details or even mere existence of contracts between national governments and public relations firms are often not publicly disclosed, and journalists attempting to report on them have found themselves the target of legal action. Undercover investigations and leaked documents have revealed that Bell Pottinger, which counts the Mubarak regime among its former clients, seeks to exploit privileged access to Western political leaders for lobbying purposes, massages Google search result rankings and the content of Wikipedia pages, and places favorable opinion pieces and country supplements in prominent news outlets in order to serve their clients' agendas. Media manipulation is a key tool in the armory; an internal report on the company's services for Belarus—the country known as “Europe's last dictatorship”—following a parliamentary election in 2009 in which every single seat was “won” by the president's supporters, includes recommendations from Lord Bell on how to “seize the strategic initiative and turn the international news coverage away from the fact that no opposition candidates were elected, and that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe reported the count as ‘seriously flawed.’” The rebranding of nations is now such a major business sector that it even has its own league table, providing rankings of which countries are on the rise or fall.

The job of country branders is to select certain national values and narratives—commercialized heritage, low-wage and placid workforces, strong governments with a friendly attitude to neoliberal reform—that are intelligible and attractive to global capital, and to steer them to the foreground; collective expressions of national identity that conflict with the PR “hymn sheet” are sidelined or suppressed. Through this prism, every aspect of a nation's common memory and culture is assessed according to its usefulness in generating revenue and political legitimacy for the ruling forces, rather than any role it might play in fostering a sense of community within the country concerned. In Egypt's case, the marketing message at the Economic Development Conference was clear: with ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) on the march and the region destabilized by extremism, El-Sisi was the only man who could simultaneously protect Egypt from imminent collapse and open the country's resources up to ever greater levels of financial speculation and appropriation; under his supervision, the thorny issue of mass revolutionary uprisings could be safely left to molder in the history books.

Meanwhile, there was more palatable historical imagery for delegates to enjoy. In the congress center's main lobby area, between stands for investment banks and property developers, a large multimedia display from the Bibliotheca Alexandrina—a modern iteration of the Library of Alexandria, supposedly the ancient world's greatest ever depository of knowledge—projected stirring images of Egyptian pyramids, temples, and tombs to complement the corporate ambience. A nearby timeline of

modern Egypt's "milestones" included references to economic liberalization reforms in the 1990s and 2000s, but no mention of the massive protest movements that swept Mubarak, the architect of those reforms, from power. In Sharm El-Sheikh, marketing professionals were offering the world a commodified Egypt: an old Egypt, where things used to happen under the stewardship of the pharaohs, and a new Egypt, where things were going to happen under the stewardship of global business titans and domestic elites. Egyptians themselves, then and now, remained inert, or invisible. It is instructive to discover what this fantasia Egypt, so beloved by the international community, looks like; to see which kind of people are brought into focus and given a voice, and who is pushed to the edge. In the run-up to the conference, as part of the national rebranding program, an expensively produced music video was commissioned by the Egyptian government to draw investors and tourists from the Gulf region. Entitled "Egypt Is Close," the video depicts a visitor from the Gulf wandering around an immaculate Cairo, where prominent Egyptian celebrities—dressed in the traditional garb of the humble Egyptian—glow with delight at successive opportunities to serve the visitor some coffee, take him on a felucca ride, or drive him around in a taxi. Actual Cairenes, who would have been cleared from the streets and kept behind well-guarded barriers to enable filming to take place, are nowhere to be seen; there are no *'ashwa'iyat* (informal settlements) residents, inhabitants of the non-city, in the video, nor any of those who have spent the past few years tearing up downtown Cairo's paving stones—all replaced and polished for filming, of course—to hurl at the security forces. Such Egyptians occupy the places where the camera lens grows fuzzy, where no one would notice if you slipped out of shot altogether. The message for any potential foreign visitor, as the cartoonist and critic Andeel has observed, is that Egypt is close and cheap, that everybody there is poor, and if you come and visit you'll feel like a king by comparison. "The video is humiliating and embarrassing, and it's an extension of a low vision for what making a living and sorting things out means in the minds of those who decide how Egyptians will live," Andeel writes. "If this country's foreign policy is going to totally rely on begging and aid, and if the people living in it are not going to have a say in who's going to rule them or plan for their lives, it's even more miserable that those who decide everything will also decide the image and reputation of their subjects, as well as the channels through which their relationships with the surrounding world will happen."

"Don't Lead Us Astray"

Mubarak Country, Egypt as imagined by those who believe the old ways must hold firm, now lives on through the leadership of President El-Sisi; its vision of "Egypt The Future," on sale at the Sharm El-Sheikh conference, is one in which Revolution

Country—those spaces and minds where new ways of thinking predominate—is beaten back into smaller and smaller pens, with any ineradicable remnants carefully screened off from public view. But although the state’s practices today involve much that is familiar from Mubarak’s days, they are not identical, for the simple reason that the Egyptian people themselves have changed so profoundly. The exclusionary model has never been entirely static; it has always had to shift and adapt to maintain supremacy, at no point more so than with the start of the revolution. Since January 2011, Egypt’s citizens have propelled themselves unstoppably onto the political stage: time and again, and against the odds, they have made their presence and autonomy felt by brazenly contesting different variants of regime power, in the streets and in their communities, from Mubarak to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to Mohammed Morsi. At every turn, voices have suggested that this time, with this leader, the revolution must really be over; at every turn, those voices have eventually been proved wrong. It is because Egyptians have been so stubbornly resistant that Egypt now, caught in its moment of flux between the old and the new, is being ruled by a system that is more subtle than textbook authoritarianism: it is tyranny blended with a façade of proto-democratic features, a language of authority that echoes authoritarian Nasserism but at the same time sits comfortably with Western notions of liberal modernity. El-Sisi’s state constantly invokes “the people”; it has to, because the people will not go away. But to reconstruct those people in order to ensure they pose little danger to the neocolonial model, the regime has been forced to find new ways to try to deactivate them and deprive them of meaningful democracy. Here, the window-dressing of Western procedural democracies—as well as the many dysfunctional elements of such systems, which collectively ensure that sovereignty is never truly displaced from the top—has proved exceedingly useful.

Regular elections, strict consensus around an ever tighter embrace of markets, the careful curation of what sort of collective activity is seen as reasonable and what sort of protest is illegitimate, the balancing out of “individual rights” with a broader context of national stability and security: all these are now entrenched features of post-Mubarak Egypt. They enable Egypt’s rulers to adopt some of the terminology of revolution—sanitized revolution, that is, where resistance is subordinated under the logic of capital and unsanctioned forms of mobilization are rejected—and thus to differentiate themselves from the hated figures of the past, while at the same time framing Egypt’s development arc as something recognizable and benign to the international community. And yet these features are married to a discourse of chauvinistic hyper-nationalism and rigid social conservatism designed to turn individuals against one another and encourage citizens themselves to denounce any solidarities that might undermine the state. “Take care when you are demanding your rights, take care, don’t

lead us astray with you,” El-Sisi warned in a speech in early 2015. “I’m not saying protesting is rejected, no. I’m just saying we have given protests a certain standing that is, appreciated, but those ninety million want to eat, drink, live, and feel secure about their future.” He went on to admit to some “violations” of human rights by security forces. “We do not approve of them,” he said, “but this is an exceptional stage in Egypt’s history.” It was a nuanced performance, combining a veneer of legal equality and freedom with an old-school articulation of division and threat. Protest is not rejected, it even has a certain standing—but then again, potential terrorists are everywhere; phone numbers and photos of dissenters will be posted on government-run Facebook pages to encourage public shaming and vigilante discipline; journalists will be imprisoned; in the interests of national security, parties participating in parliamentary elections will be encouraged to band together and form a unified list to avoid any risk of adversarial politics. Voluntary servitude to despotism will be harnessed from below, as well as imposed from above. And capitalism, through it all, will be presented as the pathway to agency, prosperity, and liberty; not a theory to be questioned, but a reality to be accepted and lived within. At the Sharm El-Sheikh conference, El-Sisi’s real message to the world was that even when a revolution was thrown at it, the state was able, ultimately, to survive and thrive. His promise was that after half a decade of turmoil and missteps, the custodians of the old ways had figured out the answers—and foreign partners could rest easy once again.

So it was that delegates at “Egypt The Future” were treated to projections of the country’s Pharaonic ruins at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina stand, instead of being shown pictures of the obelisk inscribed with the names of more than a thousand martyrs killed by the state, which revolutionaries once built and erected in Tahrir Square. This was why they were able to enjoy “authentic” Bedouin dance performances in the foyers of their five-star hotel resorts, while real Bedouins, whose tribal land was appropriated by the state in partnership with multinational companies many years ago to facilitate the Sinai tourism boom, were stuck on the wrong side of a twelve-mile security fence; why the Bedouins of Dabaa, who demonstrated a more radical concept of sovereignty and a more potent understanding of resistance than the one on offer here when they stormed the government’s nuclear reactor site, were nowhere to be seen on the conference shuttle bus. Delegates could watch Bob Dudley, chief executive of BP, give a major speech at the conference, yet they heard nothing from the people of Idku, a small community just east of Alexandria, who have spent years fighting off an attempt by BP to build a gas processing plant there on a beach used by local fishermen. “This is our land, where our parents and grandparents are from,” one Idku resident said in a campaign video by media collective Mosireen, which went on to highlight BP’s commercial dealings with dictatorial regimes in Azerbaijan, Algeria, and Angola

and its alleged complicity in the actions of Colombian paramilitary death squads. “As long as we’re here no one can come and take it over.” After cutting roads, occupying construction sites, and holding massive rallies, the people of Idku succeeded in driving BP out in 2013; they won national support from Egyptians for whom memories of the Mubarak regime’s flagrant gas export corruption scandals—when Egypt’s natural gas reserves were sold abroad at below-market prices while Egyptians themselves were burdened with rising energy bills and frequent power cuts—remain painfully fresh. “British Petroleum is an agent of, and I know this sounds harsh, of looting ... of looting this natural gas for the benefit of European nations,” says Saad Al-Shalaby, a citizen of Idku involved in the campaign against BP. “How should I allow you to come and divorce me from my land? . . . What sort of tyranny is this? What sort of imperialism is this?” “Egypt The Future” is a professionally marketed brand for a country in which inconveniences like the people of Idku are not supposed to trouble Bob Dudley, or any other delegate, ever again.

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