

Could Protest Movements Topple Authoritarian Regimes in the Arab Region? The Case of Egypt

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History shows that the most important social events that happen in Egypt usually extend to other Arab countries. This trend has not yet manifested itself in the case of the protest movements that have shaken the country in recent years, but it is probably a question of time. The protests against the authoritarianism of the Egyptian government are, in fact, increasingly greater. The lack of liberties, as well as the injustices and abuses committed against the middle and lower classes, clash with the gradual organized resistance of Egyptian civil society. Given this situation, the government refuses to carry out reforms that are essential for the development of the country. But the protests continue to grow and, for them to yield results, they need the support of the Egyptian elites that must join the voices of civil society as soon as possible.

Why Egypt?

Egypt has at least one quarter of the population of the Arab region. Hence, quantitatively it is a prominent case. More importantly, however, Egypt has traditionally exhibited a *demonstration effect* on the entire region. Events in Egypt, good or bad, seem to have been copied in other Arab countries, normally with a time lag. Furthermore, many Arabs express the belief, rightly or wrongly, that the region is in bad shape because Egypt is suffering and consequently reform in Egypt will inevitably lead to reform throughout the Arab region. Egypt is for these reasons a prominent case study.

Egypt, a Brief Profile

Long recognized as the heart and pioneer of the Arab and Islamic worlds, Egypt has recently witnessed a change of fortunes. As a regional power, the Egyptian state seems to have opted for dependence on, even subservience to, dominant powers in the world and the region, the US administration and even Israel. Hence, its regional leadership role has been eroded recently and overtaken by oil-rich Saudi Arabia and even relative upstarts such as Qatar, not to mention the two relatively large regional Islamic powers: Turkey and Iran.

On the internal front, with a population of nearly 80 million, and in spite of the ruling

authoritarian regime boasting of a successful “economic reform” program, economic misery has been mounting for the ordinary masses. These are natural outcomes of a sinister cohabitation between despotic governance and runaway capitalism.

In the context of rampant corruption, structural unemployment has been on the rise and, as a result, poverty has been mounting, and inequality in the distribution of income and wealth intensifying, leading to acute societal polarization. Youths, a great majority of the population, have been subjected to a heavier dose of this economic misery. To add insult to injury the ruling authoritarian regime has adopted a strategy of increasingly restricting basic freedoms, and administering a steadily heavier dose of repressive police brutality, thus blocking peaceful avenues for reform.

Blocking the Benign Path to Reform

According to the *Arab Human Development Report* (AHDR3), the benign path to reform in Arab countries starts with an opening act that liberates civil society, in the extended sense, through total respect for the key freedoms of opinion, expression and association (freedom to assemble peacefully and to organize in civil and political society), the latter being the most consequential prerequisite of a vigorous and vibrant civil society.

Freedom of association is perhaps the essence of democracy. In the Arab region, freedom and good governance are goals to be attained through a precarious process of societal reform and the threat of a *one-time election* is ever present. Under these conditions, freedom of association is needed to guarantee a benign path to reform and to ensure that any majority that comes to power through elections will not undermine, or even annul, democratic processes.

The catch is that present authoritarian governance regimes are in fact the gate keepers to the legal and institutional reforms required to ensure respect for these three key freedoms. Developments in reality in the last few months have not given credence to the ruling authoritarian regime reforming from within and ushering in the legal and institutional reforms required to ensure respect for the three key freedoms. On the contrary, the authoritarian regime has shown determination to stay in power even if it means the destruction of the country. To attain this illusive goal, the regimes have been doing exactly the opposite. Legal and institutional changes, wrongly labeled “reforms”, were introduced to restrict key freedoms even further. In fact, the regime introduced constitutional amendments that embedded restrictions of freedom in the heart of the supreme legal document. When a slim, and carefully manipulated, margin of freedom of expression is allowed, freedom of association is kept severely rationed and subject to regime control. A heavy dose of managed media brainwashing and brutal police repression is then administered to quell popular discontent.

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We need to keep in mind that this regime has also failed miserably in the arena of development, inflicting untold miseries on citizens in the form of widespread unemployment, increasing poverty and worsening distribution of income and wealth, in an environment of rampant corruption, leading to escalating social polarization and political tension.

The authoritarian regime is seemingly convinced that this lethal combination will allow the continuation of the present regime forever. The lesson of history is that they are dead wrong! Their behavior is akin to the fran-



Cairo (Carmen Medina).

tic and violent seizures of an already slaughtered chicken in its “last breath”. Such acts of desperation might in fact be the death knell of these regimes. As these regimes continue to produce appalling injustices through impoverishment and repression, while blocking peaceful and effective channels to address them, they inevitably invite protest behavior.

Protest Movements

The extent and tempo of protest movements in Egypt of late has laid to rest the traditional wisdom on the political passivity of Egyptians. One estimate puts the number of protest movements

during 2007 alone at nearly 1,000, comprising 400 workers’ strikes, demonstrations and slow downs. Government employees have even participated in labor unrest, a development that would have been considered inconceivable a few years ago. In one famous government employees’ strike, thousands of men, women and children from government tax collection departments throughout the country camped behind the Prime Minister’s office for weeks on end in the middle of winter.

It is little wonder that the pace of protest movements in Egypt has taken all observers and students of society and politics by storm. What is the explanation? The lethal combination contrived by authoritarian governance

regimes to prolong their control over societies has finally worked against them. The injustice levied by impoverishment and repression has reached breaking point where the oppressed can stand to lose only their misery while collective protest becomes the *only* path of expression open to them. Authoritarian governance regimes could have committed suicide by devising this brutal and fundamentally inhumane strategy. The success of protest movements has been admirable. Another crucial demonstration effect! It is true that many of these movements adopted union, social or economic demands.

But these goals are political in essence in a country like Egypt and the social/political separation is spurious. Furthermore, what starts as “social” easily becomes “political” through accumulation of quantitative change turning into a qualitative transformation, as the recent experience of Latin America clearly shows! The epic achievement of the popular protest movement has been the emergence of the first Independent labor union, of tax collectors, in recent history against the express desire of the government. As the present political system, including the docile, officially sanctioned, opposition parties, proves increasingly sterile, setting up independent labor unions could pioneer the only effective path to grassroots political reform in the country.

Could Protest Movements become the Vehicle of Reform?

Probably, yes. However, to understand the contention fully, a few points of detail add insight. Protest movements have yielded a new breed of leaders on the ground, struggle-hardened, confident and with progressive social and political visions. An especially welcome development is the appearance of a new breed of women protest leaders, another progressive move considered unthinkable in Egypt a few years ago. In

fact, this protest leadership is in my opinion far more advanced on the path of political reform than the majority of intellectual and political elites in the country.

A sign of the extensive state of discontent in the country beyond the circles of active protest, ordinary citizens in quarters where protest sit-ins were staged tended to embrace the protesters warmly and even the security forces brought in to restrain them if needed tended at times to show passive support, bordering on respect and admiration.

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However, the authoritarian regime has of late tended to order police and even army troops, using excessive force, to tackle the dirty tasks of blockading even potential protest movements, as happened with the landslide calamity in Dweeka in the heart of Cairo; plundering farmers’ land for the benefit of investment projects of the ruling clique, or stopping Palestinians under the grossly unfair blockade from fleeing Gaza to Egyptian soil seeking basic medicines and foodstuffs, as well as preventing Egyptian civil society activists from providing aid to them.

This tactic might work for some time. Nevertheless, it could only buy authoritarian regimes a little additional time, and can never stop the march of history. However, perhaps the most important premise for the protest movements as a candidate for carrier of reform is its tendency to coordinate and build bridges within the protest movement landscape and the country at large. If the political and intellectual elites in opposition to the authoritarian regime exhibit the same tendencies, while rising to the level of strength and daring of the

leaders of the protest movements, a credible alternative to the present authoritarian regime could coalesce, hopefully ushering in a historical transition towards a society of freedom and good governance.

One especially important task that protest movements might not have the resources or the capacity to undertake is the formulation of solid intellectual visions for change and reform. If elites can deliver on that front and build bridges with the mounting protest

movements, the building blocks for the desired societal transformation leading to freedom and good governance could be put together.

However, a path of disaster could evolve if the authoritarian regime, in an act of historical stupidity, handles protest movements with excessive brutality, transforming the conflict into a violent and destructive one. Regrettably, the recent behavior of the despotic governance regime tends to raise the probability of this disaster scenario.