

# Eluding Normalcy: Egypt's Political Situation

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During the 18-day revolution in 2011, an Egyptian actress became the focus of social-media mockery as she ardently complained of her suffering from the interruption of restaurant delivery services. Four years later, the incident seems less caricature.

Alongside the massive revolutionary upheavals, a significant trend among public attitudes in Egypt has arguably reflected a growing need to restore 'normalcy' and 'order,' not only related to the day-to-day functioning of people's lives, but regarding economic welfare and a lost sense of security. In pragmatic terms, this drive has translated into a growing primacy of conservative political trends among the population, whose political choices account for major developments and political milestones over the past four years.

This was the context for the close contest of the 2012 presidential elections (just a year after the revolutionary upheaval) between the 'statesman' of the time, General Ahmed Shafiq, and the narrowly elected Muslim Brotherhood figure Mohamed Morsi (whose victory was made possible by the support of revolutionary forces antagonistic to the Mubarak regime, and hence to General Shafiq).

One year later, in the run up and, more specifically, aftermath of 30 June 2013, this conservative tilt has been accentuated under the influence of several factors: dis-

illusionment over the possibilities for change; the 'negative' experience of the short-lived Brotherhood rule; the rise in violence and terrorist incidents after Morsi's ousting; dire economic conditions; and a highly turbulent regional context with decidedly negative demonstration effects. As a consequence, the quest for order and the consolidation of the 'State' is almost a greater priority in Egyptian politics today than democracy.

In terms of political process, the current situation tends to be categorised as a 'failed transition,'<sup>1</sup> a phase of 'autocratic restoration,' an attempt to try to make sense of the post-3 July political developments in Egypt that overthrew the Brotherhood's rule through mass popular protest and with the aid of the military. Incidents and indicators of current democratic regression and retreating hopes are not wanting.<sup>2</sup> There are plethora explanations as to the reasons that brought about this state of affairs; some attribute it to the domineering power of the military, their strategic or corporate interests and organisational creed. Others put more emphasis on the choices and alliances of a fragmented and satellite political elite, the weakness of a viable political alternative other than the Islamists, while the rise of Islamist violence in the aftermath of the Brotherhood rule has certainly not been conducive to a smooth transition.<sup>3</sup>

In the same vein, Aly El Raggal argues that, whether regarding the armed forces (the dominant political power) or the Muslim Brotherhood (the most viable political force), hierarchical structures and a process of socialisation focused on loyalty and obedience and a mistrust of 'others' have led to a stifled public do-

<sup>1</sup> Nathan BROWN, "Tracking the Arab Spring: Egypt's Failed Transition," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24, No. 4, October 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed ABD RABOU lists 13 indicators of democratic regression in his critical article: *What Has the President Done in One Year?* (in Arabic). These include an overemphasis on the role of the presidency, patrimonial politics, prevalence of conspiracy theory, over-securitisation, disregard for the Constitution, among others. [www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=24052015&id=6fe3d13f-d64c-4ff3-be9b-4694c9456f10](http://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=24052015&id=6fe3d13f-d64c-4ff3-be9b-4694c9456f10)

<sup>3</sup> For a survey of post-Morsi Islamist violence: Ahmed Kamel EL-BEHEIRY (ed.), *Cairo Index: Measuring Stability in the Middle East, Stability in Egypt 2013-2014*, (In Arabic) Cairo: Regional Centre for Security Studies, 2015.

main, and the new values of plurality advocated in the 'squares' had no solid social 'carriers' or means of support to survive and thrive.<sup>4</sup> This explanation touches on the social basis of the political situation, which, despite having an indirect impact, is nevertheless significant.

### The Quest for Order

Underlying and fuelling the current political situation is a conservative 'moment' that seeks to reclaim the 'State' and a clear preference for order and economic recovery. Public opinion surveys have shown a growth in this trend over the past four years. In the beginning, directly after the 25 January revolution, the Arab Barometer surveys showed considerable concern over economic welfare and regarding security matters among the Egyptian population.<sup>5</sup> A look at the more recent World Values Surveys on Egypt reflects the consistency and, arguably, escalation of these concerns and sheds light on their political repercussions.<sup>6</sup> General trends show a fatigue and mistrust of revolutionary change, as people cling to the State as a guarantor against chaos, especially in a region of fragile and failing states, and prioritisation of economic and security issues.

The data on Egypt show that more than 70% of people surveyed considered politics either important or rather important, while close to 100% considered religion important (94%) or rather important (5.7%). Almost equal to the percentage of interest in politics was the prevalence of unhappiness among Egyptians, with 44% feeling not at all happy and 30% feeling not very happy. A telling development is the dwindling of social capital and trust with almost 80% of surveyed Egyptians believing that people could not be trusted, and that you need to be very careful. Moreover, active membership in intermediary institutions, whether political, religious, philanthropic, professional or labour unions, is very weak and does not exceed 0.3%, while membership in political parties hovers around 1.5%.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, not only are actual threats of a lack of order, or chaos, perceived, but these 'fears' and

threats are accentuated by mistrust, and a lack of intermediary associations and bonds around which positions could be articulated or clustered. This is a typical situation where the State is resorted to and held onto as a guarantor or shield against chaos.

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Questions regarding personal and collective objectives in the same survey also reflect a prioritisation of economic concerns. In a question on what the aims of the country should be for the next ten years, the first priority was a high level of economic growth for more than three quarters of respondents, while making sure the country has strong defence forces was the first choice of 14.3% of respondents. An outright preference for order that requires no further interpretation is evident as almost 58% of respondents chose restoration of order in the country as their first and foremost aim (if they had to choose according to the question's wording), while giving people more say in important government issues claimed a meagre 5.6%, protecting freedom of speech 6.4%, and 30% opted for bread and butter issues, proclaiming their personal aim to be checking rising prices.

The same trend is seen in an opinion survey by the Baseera Center on the most significant events of 2014, in which the Suez Canal mega project was the first choice for respondents with 32%, followed by the Presidential elections and Sisi's victory with 21%, and in third place was the change in the 'bread distribution system' which 5% of respondents rated as a major development of the year.<sup>8</sup>

The source of legitimacy of the regime thus lies mainly in restoring the grip of the State, prospects for economic welfare and growth within, renewed prestige and a niche for Egypt's regional role amidst rising nationalism.

<sup>4</sup> Aly EL RAGGAL, "A Turbulent Public Domain and Besieged Democracy," *Democracy Review*, No. 57, April 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Gamal Abdel Gawad SOLTAN, Ahmed Nagui QAMHA and Sobhi ASILAH, *Public Opinion Report on the Most Important Political and Social Issues in Egypt*, Arab Barometer Project, June 2011, [www.arabbarometer.org/country/egypt](http://www.arabbarometer.org/country/egypt)

<sup>6</sup> World Values Survey (2010-2014), Egypt 2012, 18.4.2015, [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> [www.baseera.com.eg](http://www.baseera.com.eg)

## Anomaly Prolonged

The dilemma of the current 'moment' is that, despite the fervent pursuit of normalcy and order 'at all costs,' which seems to shape the political performance of the regime and a wide social support base, forms of anomaly persist and order still seems elusive. According to a new composite index surveying and measuring incidents of violence and social disruption since 30 June 2013, violence has persisted. Foremost amongst forms of violence measured by the report are incidents targeting the security apparatus, especially in the 18 months following 30 June, which totalled 204 and claimed the lives of 522, 60% of whom were police officers and 40% members of the armed forces. Although incidents of army and police targeting remain to date, these peaked in the months that followed 30 June.<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy that 50% of these incidents/casualties took place in Sinai; the main seat of violence against the army, while 11% took place in Cairo.<sup>10</sup> Another indicator is the rise in sabotage of police possessions and public facilities (especially electricity), explosions, which accelerated since mid-2014 according to the report, and, to a lesser degree, violence targeting Copts, their homes, churches or possessions. Other indicators of the index refer to acts of protest, especially by the Muslim Brotherhood and their proponents or sympathisers in general and among youth and students, which have shown a tendency to decline over the period.<sup>11</sup>

Protests or violent and terrorist incidents could have been viewed as outlying incidents had the political situation been normalised on other fronts. However, viewed through the prism of 'political process,' major institutional blocs are still lacking, further manifesting a lack of 'normalcy' in Egyptian politics, even on such a formal level. The delay in undertaking the final aspect of the road map envisioned a few years ago, namely the continued absence of a legitimate legislative entity, or in other words, a Parliament, is testament to this situation. Although the post 6/30 regime stressed its willingness to democratise and, to this

effect, put forward a road map of political processes that included a constitutional referendum, presidential elections and parliamentary elections, two years on and Egypt remains without a legislative or representative authority since the dissolution of the Shura Council in July 2013. Yet even prior to this, Egypt had not had a 'proper' legislative authority since the Supreme Court dissolved the People's Assembly a few days before Morsi's election. The Shura Council (the higher parliamentary chamber), which assumed a legislative role under the transitional provisions of the 2012 constitution, drafted under Brotherhood rule, was discredited because of its extreme structural weakness and low electoral turnout, which undermined its legitimacy. For the first time since the 1950s, Egypt has had no legislative body for an entire year (2014), and in the 52 months since January 2011 the country has had a representative legislature for only six months.<sup>12</sup>

Parliamentary elections, which were scheduled to be held in two rounds between 21-22 March and 6-7 May 2015, were delayed after the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC), in March, ruled the electoral constituencies law to be unconstitutional.<sup>13</sup> Prospects for upcoming elections or their implications for the political transition in Egypt are not very promising in light of the apparent weakness of political parties and their vulnerable and ever-changing electoral coalitions.

## Conclusion

To sum up, the current political situation in Egypt, which favours order, economic recovery and enhancing the prestige and grip of the State, depends largely on 'delivering' on all fronts as a basis for legitimacy and consolidation. Delivering on economic goals seems to be the most promising aspect of the current formula and its main reason for remaining in place in the near future. However, scenarios regarding long-term political trends or prospects for democratic transition remain very fluid.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmed Kamel EL BEHEIRY (ed.), *Cairo Index: Measuring Stability in the Middle East, Stability in Egypt 2013-2014* (In Arabic), Cairo: Regional Center for Security Studies, 2015, p. 12-14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ahmed ABD RABOU, *The Absence of the Legislative Body and the Future of Politics in Egypt*, Arab Reform Initiative, May 2015. [www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/20150518\\_AbuRabou\\_formatted%20final\\_0.pdf](http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/20150518_AbuRabou_formatted%20final_0.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> The court found the law violated Article 102 of the constitution which stipulates that equal representation among voters in all constituencies must be guaranteed. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/124469/Egypt/Politics-/Egypst-parliamentary-elections-back-to-square-one,.aspx>