

Political Reform in Egypt

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Political reform in Egypt is not a new issue. In fact, a large number of Egyptian documents, even governmental ones, shows that reform has always been high on the agenda. The difference between the Egypt of pre- and post- January 25 2011 is that reform is now real, at the top of the agenda, indeed a *sine qua non* for Egypt's post-revolution transition – hopefully a transition toward democracy.

A former student who went to study for her PhD in the US wrote me two letters, one four years after the other. Unintentionally, her two letters carry significance with regard to this paper on political reform. In her first letter, in 2008, she expressed frustration with her graduate political science program. Such a program, she asserted, focuses too much on 'democracy theory' and especially electoral behaviour, with its statistical tables, public opinion surveys and rational choice assumptions. Her second letter arrived three weeks ago and was a volte-face from the first. I could see that her absorption of the political analysis toolkit has advanced enormously as she moves towards finishing her PhD thesis. But more importantly, it is the situation on the ground in Egypt and the Middle East as a whole that pushed her to reconsider and see her studies of democracy and elections as relevant. Even before the path-breaking presidential debate in Egypt on 10 May – a first in the region – she came to see the immediate application of what she had previously considered abstract 'democracy theory' and 'electoral behaviour.' In this respect, the 25 January Revolution has been a milestone, a consequential event separating the 'before' and the 'after.' But the road to political reform is still long and full of challenges, and even occasional setbacks.

This paper is organised in two parts. The first part situates the political reform objective in its present context; one that shapes both the functioning of this process and determines its outcome. The longer second part centres on the general debate and the political reform agenda. Three principal items of this agenda are singled out:

(a) The type of political system in the making; (b) The role of civil society organisations and evolving state-society relations; and (c) The role of SCAF ,the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces – the actual holder of political power – and the problem of civil-military relations. The paper's general conclusion pulls the threads together and raises questions regarding the future of political reform in the post-Arab Spring context.

The Revolutionary Context of Present Political Reform

At the time of writing, thirteen months after Mubarak's fall, Egypt has gone through four cabinets, with several reshuffles, a total of 42 ministers, and four major bloody clashes which bore signs of civil war (e.g. Maspero, Mohamed Mahmoud, Port Said Football, and Abbasiyya). The clashes left almost three hundred dead, more than two thousand injured and led to hundreds of arrests and considerable material damage, including a fire that destroyed the Scientific Complex building containing the famous work *Description de l'Égypte*, prepared in the late eighteenth century by the scientists that accompanied Napoleon on his famous French Expedition to Egypt. Many have started to find the price of the 25 January Revolution too high financially and in terms of their daily security. Others, however, believe the fight for the expected political reform is very much worth the time, energy and material already paid, as Egypt "in-

itiates a new history” for itself and perhaps for the region. The anatomy of the “political reform in the making” supports this view.

As mentioned above, political reform is at present at the top of the agenda in Egypt and all over the region as a result of the new context of a tsunami of mass protests. These protests have, to date, brought down four regimes in: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Other regimes are fighting for their survival, such as Syria and Bahrain. Even those regimes not suffering from civil wars – such as Morocco, Algeria, Jordan or Saudi Arabia – have started to feel the heat and are now seeing the writing on the wall. While Morocco, for instance, presented a full-fledged plan for constitutional reform, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, on his return from medical treatment in the US, offered his people a grant of \$36 billion for housing and employment. Similarly, Jordan’s King Abdullah has changed his cabinet many times in the last few months and Algeria’s Bouteflika declared his intention NOT to be a candidate in the coming presidential elections. Let us not forget, Mubarak declared his NON-candidacy for presidential elections only in the heat of mass protests and just a few days before he was forced to step down completely. Because of its demographic and cultural weight as a pivotal state, events in Egypt constitute a landscape of the Arab world as a whole and have a snowball effect across the region. The 10 May presidential debate is an example. Millions of Arabs, from Yemen and Bahrain to Algeria and the Sudan, invaded coffee shops to watch the debate alive. Coffee shops overcharged for their beverages, a common practice reserved for major football matches. Briefly, what happens in Egypt has a significance that goes beyond its borders. It has a regional spill-over, a contagious effect. This is why the analysis of reform experiences in Egypt – both successes and setbacks – certainly informs us on this country, but could also help us to understand reform prospects in the region as a whole, especially in the context of the heated upheavals.

Main Components of the Political Reform Agenda

Though the reform agenda is overcrowded, it all echoes Nkrumah’s words: “seek thee the political kingdom and the rest will follow.” The primacy of the political aspect (i.e. the number of presidential man-

dates, integrity of parliamentary elections, sharing of political power instead of a monopoly by the governing NDP...) had become an issue long before Mubarak’s fall, and might even have been a contributing factor. In my own small personal library, a sample of books and articles on Egypt in the last ten years shows eleven books and as many as 55 articles in academic journals, not counting hundreds of media reports and articles. Much of this writing was produced by professors or academics worried about the evolution of Egypt’s political system, although some analyses even came from members of the influential Policies Committee of the governing National Democratic Party (NDP). This committee was headed by the President’s son, Gamal and, rather than serving as a shadow cabinet, was indeed deemed to be the real governing power in Egypt. Though the present agenda integrates some of these past elements (e.g. the presidential term and duration), it prioritises three basic elements:

The Type of Political System in Egypt

Traditionally, the Egyptian political system gave power to the Head of State, with a gesture of consideration to the Parliament and parliamentarians. Parliamentary participation manifested itself, officially, during the monarchy, but disappeared in the republican system. The result is that power became concentrated in the hands of the President and his cronies. He became the new Pharaoh. Before Mubarak, Nasser held the power for sixteen years and then Sadat for eleven. They left their posts only when they died. Mubarak stayed for almost thirty years, and was ready to continue for another mandate even at the age of 83. The debate now aims to limit the President’s mandate to two six-year terms, impose the nomination of at least one vice-President and limit the President’s extensive powers. A minority view wants to go as far as establishing a parliamentary system where the President could govern but not rule. However, in the present political debate, this view cannot prevail. Rather the emphasis is on limiting presidential mandates to two-terms and making the President accountable and his rule much more transparent. Though there is an attempt to counter-balance presidential omnipresence and powers, Egypt’s dominant political culture and its traditions are not ready to marginalise the President. Related to the type of political system – presidential,

parliamentary or in-between – are other major aspects that have to be considered. These include major issues such as the separation of powers, including an independent legislative and justice system. Though not yet explicitly detailed in the constitutional debate, the political reform plan should also include unbiased, if not completely independent, media. Though overlooked, this last point has been crucial in maintaining governmental control – if not repression – of citizens. Governmental control meant that the media carried the President’s news (or that of members of his party and family) as top items, even if he were receiving season’s greetings from members of his own cabinet. The media acted as the right arm of the executive power, its machine of brainwashing and ‘soft violence.’ This history of media control is why there is a call at present to simply abolish the Ministry of Information and National Guidance. A caveat is relevant here: we should not imagine that the privatisation of mass media – which occurred during the last few years of Mubarak’s regime – is the solution. Experience shows that those who established their own satellite stations were cronies of the regime, or at least its collaborators – voluntarily or not. In addition, private owners have their own agenda and media outlets are bound to reflect this, unless constitutional rules are explicit and enforced regarding ‘independent’ media.

All these issues are the subject of debate as Egypt goes through the process of drafting its constitution. The system is malfunctioning under a ‘temporary’ document of ‘constitutional principles’ hurriedly prepared and voted for a month after Mubarak’s downfall, in March 2011. Though the composition of the committee tasked with writing it was itself the subject of controversy, the document was approved with 78% of the popular vote. It is supposed to be the basis of the new constitution drafted by a 100-member constituent panel, but the composition of the latter has also been fiercely debated. The Parliament, with its two-thirds Islamist majority, took upon itself to set up this panel from within its ranks, angering other political forces which accused the Islamists of ‘hijacking’ the constitution’s drafting process. Moreover, some members who were invited to participate ended up boycotting the first meeting and many insisted that the constituent panel had to reflect “all shades of Egyptian society” and not power relations within the People’s Assembly. In this state of deadlock, SCAF intervened and sent everybody back to square one: to negotiate the composi-

tion of the panel with at least 50% of its membership from outside the People’s Assembly.

This debate over the composition of the constituent panel shows the state of state-society relations and the need for its ordering in the new revolutionary context. The controversy over the constituent panel, its paralysis, and then SCAF’s response show where real power lies at present in Egypt, which will be addressed once we have dealt with the more general state-society relations. It brings to the fore the issue of civil-military relations as a principle basis of political reform.

Role of Civil Society Organisations and State-Society Relations

Even if the form of governance is still in transition, one thing is clear: state-society relations have been fundamentally reconstructed, in both conception and practice. Tahrir Square has gone from a place of mass demonstration to foretell a new political microcosm of different state-society relations. There is no longer the possibility of governance purely by command: order from above and obedience from below. In fact, in some instances we are reaching the other extreme of an absence of authoritative decisions and guidelines. The political vacuum has been filled by a multitude of strikes, sit-ins, traffic blocks, highway blocks and even encroachments on public and private property. These excesses might be a reflection of attempts by ‘counter-revolutionary’ forces to abort the revolutionary process. But the excesses also reflect the fluid context and attempt to put state-society relations on a new footing after a long period of repression – what I call the pressure cooker hypothesis – with its lid finally blown off. At the intersection of these state-society relations is the role and function of civil society organisations (CSOs).

Though quantitatively Egypt’s CSOs have prospered over the last 30 years or so, reaching approximately 24,600 organisations by 2007 (Kandil in Korany 2010, 49), their impact has been much less than their quantity would lead us to believe. Part of the explanation of this quantitative/qualitative gap is inherent to the context and mode of functioning of these CSOs. The major obstacle to CSOs’ effectiveness is the government’s restrictive policies and intent to control. In the wake of the 25 January revolution, this is no longer the case.

In fact, Tahrir Square and its impact could not have

happened without a new breed of CSOs. These appeared outside the mainstream of traditional political parties and even well-established (or co-opted) CSOs. For instance, the Kefaya movement that prospered after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and especially on the occasion of (pseudo-)constitutional amendments in 2004, is a good example. Its middle-aged leadership served as a training arena for young activists. But these activists soon went on to establish their own organisations: e.g. 6th of April or We are all Khaled Said – a reference to a young activist arrested and killed by police in Alexandria in 2009. These youthful CSOs were the nerve-centre that mobilised the protest movements that finally brought down Mubarak. This new breed of CSOs permeate today's talk shows and have given rise to many presidential candidates' campaigns, from the moderate Islamist Abdel-Moneim Abou-El-Fotouh, to new and younger revolutionary candidates such as Hamdeen Sabahi or Khaled Ali. They are fuelling the establishment with a new political party, Al-Doustour, founded by Nobel-Prize winner Mohamed El-Baradei (former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency – IAEA).

Many more profited from the disappearance of restrictions to establish themselves. However, the government's control habits are dying hard, and they reappeared vigorously regarding the, often foreign-based, financing of the CSOs.

Foreign financing, especially by US organisations such as Freedom House, was magnified and linked to the "penetration of Egypt" and "threats to national security." Media campaigns multiplied, headed by the Minister of Planning and International Cooperation (a remnant of the Mubarak days) and fuelled by insinuations from SCAF. A few of these US organisations' headquarters were invaded by police and some of their personnel were detained pending their trials. All of these events occurred amidst rising tensions over the rights and duties of CSOs in the new Egypt, which were being threatened by "foreign plots and national agents."

Suddenly, these foreign agents were released and allowed to leave Egypt on a special US plane. This incident – known in the local media as 'foreign financing' – does show the confusion regarding the role of CSOs. In many cases, the public mind still associates many of them with the 'outside,' mainly because most of their financing is foreign-based and still lacks full transparency. The basic role of CSOs and state-society relations is still unclear, and awaits

the presidential elections and the institution of a new civilian President.

In the meantime, it was SCAF who decided that foreign agents from CSOs could leave the country. SCAF was mainly mindful of relations with the US, but its actions also show where the real powers to make decisions lie in today's Egypt.

Civil-Military Relations

In July of this year, Egypt will be celebrating the 60th anniversary of the 1952 coup that transformed Egypt from a hereditary monarchy to a republic. For many, these last sixty years showed that Egypt, to different degrees, is a militarised society. Egypt's four presidents were all from the military.

After the 1967 debacle and the military's attempt to rehabilitate itself and take over from Nasser, Egyptian presidents attempted to restrict the army's 'involvement in politics' and protected their power from military encroachment. The 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty gave the different presidents the occasion to 'professionalise' the army and make it "lean and clean." With both Sadat (1970-1981) and Mubarak (1981-2011), the internal security apparatus saw its power rise at the expense of the army. In the six-year period 2005-2011, official budget expenditure on the army rose by 63.0%, but rose in the police by three times as much: 181.2% (Ministry of Finance, official budget: different years). Finally, it was the army, through its twenty-member Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), that ousted Mubarak, and took power on February 11 2011.

Since then, events show that SCAF is in the driving seat – almost solely – appointing cabinets and even directing the police. For instance, on August 7 2011, the head of SCAF "Field Marshal Tantawi swore in 15 new governors, 11 of whom were new to the post – the new governors were appointed rather than elected – many of them were military figures and/or members of the old regime and none of them were young, female or Copts" (Wikipedia, downloaded 26/1/2012).

Some analysts suspect that the army's intention to keep power goes beyond the transition period and that it is actually busy planning future control – not necessarily of civilian authority but over and above it. General Mamdouh Shahin, a member of SCAF, declared in May 2011 that under the new constitution, Egypt's military should be given "some kind of insur-

ance ... so that it is not subject to the whim of a president." Another reflection of the military's intention to protect their complete autonomy, even their primacy, is the Sellami Document (former vice-premier) of late 2011 on "the Future of the Political System." The controversy that ensued the leaking of the document revealed that the army insisted not only on keeping its budget away from civilian control, but also wanted to enjoy veto power in issues not necessarily of a military nature. In response to the protest, SCAF has declared repeatedly that it intends to transfer power as soon as the presidential elections are decided – probably by June 2012. In fact, and failing exceptional circumstances, SCAF will keep its promise – willingly or not.

The problem, however, for Egypt's political reform and its future system is not SCAF's formal transfer of political power. The real issue is the military's intention to be the supreme king-maker. It reflects a conviction of itself as "the embodiment of national will" and Egypt's salvation with a concomitant anti-transparency mind-set, mode of governance by command, and insistence on keeping even its non-military activities/privileges out of any civilian supervision/control. For instance, it is no longer a secret that the military is practically an economic empire. In 2009, it earned some 1.8 billion Egyptian pounds (almost \$300 million) and sales in the military production sector reached 3.6 billion pounds (or \$600 million) (*Al-Ahram*, Oct. 29, 2009). The military also controls a significant share of the real estate sector. Moreover, their 'vast empire' touches other key economic areas, including food stuffs (subsidised bread production lines and baking ovens; various types of red and white meat; recycling of biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste – 118 facilities); and the supply of refined gas and fuel via 'Wataneyya' gas stations (ICG: 2012).

In December 2011, to help the government out of an acute financial crisis, it lent it \$1 billion. One can only guess at the true extent of the military's assets if they can dispense with a loan of this magnitude.

In addition to the 'power of the gun,' which is a characteristic of all military organisations, these economic resources are huge elements of power, especially in the fluid context shaping the future of the transition. These power resources – military and economic – could be translated into solid control of what we could call 'deep Egypt': the country's governing bureaucracy and sub-national institutions. Recently, *Foreign Policy Magazine* called it "The Egyptian Re-

public of Retired Generals," since, upon retirement, a senior officer "becomes a governor of a province, a manager of a town, or the head of a city neighbourhood. Or he might run a factory or company owned by the state or the military. He might even manage a seaport or large oil company. This privileged group holds almost every high position in the State (*Foreign Policy Magazine* May 9, 2012).

Indeed, the monopoly of such political and economic resources – and their supervision or transparency – could make civil-military relations and the security sector reform the top items on the political reform agenda.

At the time of writing, the first round of presidential elections has just come to an end but without official results announced yet. Unofficial results, however, foresee the second round – in June – between two front runners. One is from the Muslim Brotherhood, in fact the head of its political party: Freedom and Justice, and the other is from the old regime, in fact he was the last Prime Minister of Mubarak and his former student at the Air Force Academy. Egyptians are facing a dilemma, for it looks for the pessimists as if the 25 January Revolution never took place. Though exaggerated, this view could only be refuted if the process of political reform, now very much at the top of the agenda, succeeds in being carried through.

The Egyptians' dilemma, notwithstanding what is positive for the prospects of political reform, is that for the first time in 60 years the people in the street feel that their choice makes a difference. Talk shows and Cairo Salon discussions indicate this 'feeling of ownership'; that they can actually shape their country's future. They also proved their political involvement in last February's parliamentary elections by bringing in as many as 81.2% who had never been MPs before.

However, many believe that the new parliament, with more than a two-thirds Islamist majority, is indeed a change, but in the wrong direction. For instance, rather than a step toward gender equality, there are proposals for its regression. Moreover, the new parliamentary majority is attempting to monopolise the emerging political process rather than share it, even changing their former promises along the road with a new Islamist presidential candidate as front-runner. Political expediency is being replaced by political domination.

The proverbial man and woman of the street also reformed the system by forcing those competing for

the top position – presidential candidates – to appeal to the layman through a presidential debate. This appeal to ‘popular vote,’ instead of guaranteeing its +90% beforehand, is a first in Egypt and even the Arab world. A change in Egyptians’ socialisation and culture has already been initiated: the President is no longer a pharaoh or semi-god that does not have to appeal to his ‘subjects.’ Such restructuring of political culture is an important prerequisite of any real process of political reform.

These competing outcomes of embryonic political reform show that Egypt is indeed at an important intersection. Though the outcome of political reform is not yet clear, the analysis of the process itself could tell us who the main actors are, their agenda and their means to shape the outcome in the post-January 25 context.

Conclusion

In part one, this paper began its analysis by situating the political reform objective in its present context; one that shapes both the functioning of this process and determines its outcome. The longer part two focused on the general debate and the political reform agenda. Three principal items of this agenda were singled out: 1) the type of political system in the making; 2) the role of civil society organisations and evolving state-society relations; and 3) the role of SCAF, the Supreme Council of Military Forces – the current holder of political power – and the problem of civil-military relations. The paper analysed different views and interactions among the different political forces, old and new. So, what conclusions can be drawn?

Because the outcome of political reform is still incomplete, this paper focused on the ‘process in the making.’ Such an approach made the analysis much more dynamic and closer to what is occurring ‘on the street.’ The outcome of the present political reform process will be influenced, if not determined, by the post-January 25 revolutionary context, which not only has led to a plethora of new political forces, but also to these forces meeting one another without restrictions. It is part of what I call the pressure-cooker lid being blown off.

Because of this tense period in Egypt, it is easy to be disappointed and frustrated with the slow pace of

reform and even pessimistic about its future outcome. But the paper argues that, although Egypt’s process of political reform will be long and challenging, it is on the right track. It has already racked up some achievements, for instance by specifying the crucial agenda items and demonstrating how the process could proceed. Moreover, the political arena is now full of new political forces which have a stake in their country’s future and are active in promoting and carrying out this agenda. There is a new sense of belonging on the part of the man/woman on the street. This last aspect is a prerequisite for any balanced State-society relations and workable social contract, the very essence of political reform. The importance of these initial achievements is that they inform us about the assets/liabilities of the map of political reform and its process. Such mapping and its process are key for the future of Egypt and, given the geo-cultural/demographic weight of this country, for the Arab region as a whole.

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