

Cyclone

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Marking a decade to the Arab Spring:
The turmoil that changed the Middle East

A Decade to the "January Revolution": The Return of Military Hegemony and the Stability Paradox in Egypt


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The events of January 25, 2011 in Egypt had come as a surprise both in magnitude and dramatic outcome, for they ran contrary to the assessment shared by most academic and intelligence research bodies whereby Mubarak's authoritarian regime was stable. The "genie" was out of the bottle in Cairo, and soon spread to other Middle Eastern countries. The Arab public overcame the fear barrier, flooded the streets in unprecedented numbers, and demanded to have economic and political rights while advocating for a profound change in the relationship between state and citizens.

A decade later, the so-called "January Revolution" has failed to realize the liberal-democratic vision at the heart of the Arab Spring (at least in its initial stages), and has not been able to translate the "revolutionary moment" into a fundamental change in the political system, national priorities, and reassignment of power in Egypt.

The military coup performed in July 2013 was led by the defense-institutional establishment that sought to regain control of Egypt, and had, in effect, marked the end of the "January Revolution". The old-new regime countered all manifestations of

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opposition – whether Islamic or liberal – and instilled deep in the collective Egyptian mind a narrative whereby national stability precedes individual liberties, as well as the realization that anarchy, not democracy, was the alternative to the current regime.

A rude awakening: A popular revolution (2011) and military coup (2013)

The "January Revolution" embodied a unique historical moment during which the Egyptian public came together to alter the national set of priorities to promote the establishment of a political system founded on democratic principles. The "domino effect" that began with the Tunisian revolution (December 2010) served as an outlet for the deep rage that seethed for many years among numerous factors in Egyptian society.

The widespread public protest was inspired by several phenomena that exacerbated in Egypt throughout recent decades, primarily: the regime's arbitrary infringement upon human rights; the overt and profound corruption in the political and economic systems; the growing class and economic gaps; the ongoing unemployment and financial hardship, especially among the younger generation; and public concern over Mubarak's son inheriting the presidency, leading to the creation of a non-monarchial ruling dynasty.

The government's collapse granted dominance in the public sphere to the Muslim Brotherhood. The movement seized the opportunity, leveraging its organizational power to winning the elections. When the political vacuum was created upon Mubarak's resignation, the Muslim Brotherhood remained the most organized power in Egypt politically, and the one with the most profound public hold. And, indeed, its candidate, Mohamed Morsi, won the June 2012 elections, defeating the security-political establishment's candidate, General Ahmed Shafik.



Morsi's term in office consisted of incessant conflicts with the "Deep State" bodies, particularly the defense, legal, and religious establishments. This harsh reality demonstrated the price of electing the Muslim Brotherhood to the Egyptian public, as well as the movement's inability to take control effectively. The fear that the Muslim Brotherhood will take over the state establishments and entrench themselves in it while seeking to change its nature prompted the army to take action. On July 3, 2013, the defense forces took over the state with the support of widespread popular protests against the Muslim Brotherhood's regime, and ousted Morsi. During the transition to new elections, Minister of Defense Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who had been appointed by Morsi, established himself in the defense, political and public systems, and was officially appointed as president after winning 96% of votes in the May 2014 elections.

The old-new regime was determined to prevent another popular revolution. Shortly after his appointment, al-Sisi diligently overpowered the Muslim Brotherhood in particular and Egyptian civil society organizations in general. This development began in August 2013, when the security and armed forces stormed public protest centers promoting Muslim Brotherhood activity in Cairo, first and foremost the **Al-Rabia`a Al-A`dawiya** Square, which became a traumatic symbol for all movement activists in the Middle East. 817 protestors were killed in this action, and thousands arrested, among them senior Muslim Brotherhood officials. In September of the same year, the movement was outlawed and its assets confiscated, and in December 2013 it was named a terror organization, forcing its activists to hide underground.

The political overpowering promoted by al-Sisi was directed at other civil society organizations too. "The Protest Law" passed by the Egyptian government in November 2013 prevented the public from promoting a protest against the regime in an expression of the government's turning its back on the "January Revolution" vision, and the "State of Emergency Law" abolished following the "January Revolution" was renewed, thereby enabling the regime to use arbitrary force against civilians perceived as a threat.

The financial distress as a strategic challenge

al-Sisi emphasized the need to advance far-reaching reforms to the Egyptian public in an attempt to prevent the state from going bankrupt. The plan he presented when first entering office included raising taxes and cutting back on subsidies in the energy field, while promoting mega-projects designed to lower unemployment and ensuring steady income. al-Sisi sought to stabilize the Egyptian economy by encouraging the private sector and international investors, expressing willingness to minimize bureaucratic barriers and provide grants.

The reforms succeeded in stabilizing the macro figures of the Egyptian economy, renewing its growth, encouraging investors to become active in Egypt again, and shrinking unemployment. Until the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in March 2020, success was noted in almost every set parameter: the annual budgetary deficit dropped significantly after the president's first term in office (from 10.9% to 5.6%); growth in GDP was rising consistently; the scope of unemployment was down to 7.5%; and the foreign currency reserves tripled.

However, Egypt's fundamental problems had not been resolved while the reforms were being implemented, and to a great extent, were even exacerbated. Among them: an uncontrolled demographic growth rate (at this time there are some 104 million people living in Egypt); water and energy issues; dilapidated infrastructures; a high rate of illiteracy due to gaps in the education system's activity, and large numbers of children and teens entering the work force; government services of a poor quality (particularly health, education, and welfare); profound corruption; and cumbersome bureaucracy.

The pandemic forced al-Sisi to face a health crisis of historic proportions, and what is worse, it threatened to exacerbate Egypt's economic state in such a manner as to jeopardize the regime's stability. The world recession expected due to the pandemic, and its implications on the Egyptian economy, honed the realization that the financial threat is the Egyptian government's largest existential challenge. To date, Egypt has managed to contain the health and financial crisis, and avoid a sharp recession, but it is estimated that it will suffer a slowdown in economic activity in 2021 that will manifest itself in less growth, export and personal consumption, and an increase in budgetary expenditures. According to the International Monetary Fund, unemployment is expected to soar to 11.6%, and 32.5% of the Egyptian public is expected to find itself below the poverty line.

Conclusion

Looking back a decade, there is an almost unbridgeable gap between the vision that accompanied the "January Revolution" and the current state of affairs. The worsening portrait of the Arab Spring has gradually illustrated the cost of instability to the Egyptian public both domestically and regionally, paradoxically strengthening the defense establishment's ability to concretize a ruling hegemony while employing comprehensive, systematic oppression.

Ten years after the 2011 events, Egypt is still clearly suffering from the same fundamental issues that accompanied it when the Arab Spring erupted, some of which have even been exacerbated. Yet both the exhausted Egyptian public and the old-new ruling system are currently being driven by the traumatic memory etched into their minds. This memory is channeling all powers in Egypt toward the shared understanding that, at this stage, the current hardship is still the lesser of all evils, for the alternative could lead to chaos and destruction.

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