

Egypt: The Continuing Legacy of the Mubarak-Sadat Regime

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Omar Suleiman's announcement on the 11th of February, 2011 of Hosni Mubarak's decision to step down and transfer his presidential authorities to the Military Supreme Council was a watershed event in the country's history. The unprecedented decision came amidst a popular uprising that had engulfed the country for 18 days. Adamant to put an end to Mubarak's thirty years of rule, millions of Egyptians from all walks of life staged sit-ins in public squares and workers organized strikes across the country demanding regime change.

Calling Mubarak an American and Israeli client sent shock waves across Western capitals, in particular Washington and Tel Aviv. The latter threw all its weight behind the ailing ruler and made it no secret that it was interested in prolonging his reign. Throughout most of the anti-Mubarak uprising, the Obama administration was reluctant to support the Egyptian people's cause and chose to side with Mubarak (1). The American and Israeli reactions reflected the high stakes that the two parties had in the confrontation between Mubarak and his people. During the last thirty years Mubarak had cemented the trilateral strategic alliance among the United States, Israel and Egypt initiated by his predecessor at Camp David, and had been a bulwark against radicalism. This went hand in hand with restructuring the Egyptian economy using the Washington Consensus as guidelines. Once again, this was a continuation of an orientation started under Sadat. Fearing that a regime change from below might replace pro-Western elites with groups more representative of the Egyptian people, albeit more critical of the United States' policies, successive American administrations looked the other way while Mubarak's security apparatus used American-made weapons to suppress peaceful pro-social justice and pro-democracy protests. Eventually Obama, however, opted to withdraw his support for Mubarak. In this respect, he was following in the footsteps of other American presidents who had decided to cease their support to longstanding allies once it proved to be too costly and ineffectual. The Shah of Iran and Philippines's Marcos are two examples that come to mind.

Four months after Mubarak's removal from power the following question begs itself. How much change has taken place in Egyptian domestic and foreign policies? It might still be premature at this point to propose *plus ça change plus c'est la meme chose* as an answer. Nevertheless, the policies adopted by the so called "Government of the Revolution" espouse unmistakable signs of continuity with the economic and foreign policies of the Sadat-Mubarak regime. The remainder of this article is divided into two sections, in addition to a conclusion. The first section highlights the main features of the political scene in post-Mubarak Egypt and in the process points to the continuity of the Sadat-Mubarak legacy. Next, I will be analyzing the reasons that led to this situation. I conclude by sketching what needs to be done to depart from the Sadat-Mubarak legacy.

The Political Scene in Post-Mubarak Egypt

Four phenomena stand out as the most distinctive features of the current Egyptian political scene. The first is the rising tension between the Military Supreme Council and the groups that have come to be regarded as the leaders of the popular uprising. The second feature is the uninterrupted protests driven by calls for social and economic justice. The return of communal violence is the third main feature, while the marginalization of issues related to the country's foreign policy constitutes the fourth.

The honeymoon between the Military Supreme Council (MSC) and the "Leaders of Tahrir" (LOT) was short lived. Before long reports about alleged military-police brutalities surfaced. These reports were vehemently denied by the MSC. However, it was clear that the gap between the two groups was growing as evinced by the repeated accusations of the LOT against the MSC for allegedly excluding them from decision making processes and for showing reluctance in bringing former senior officials to justice. The disagreement over the referendum on constitutional amendments held last March was the epitome of this

phenomenon. The LOT expressed strong opposition to the referendum and to the suggested elections' schedule. They demanded a new constitution instead, and called for parliamentary elections to be postponed. Nevertheless, the MSC insisted on holding the referendum as scheduled. The results were a clear disappointment to the LOT and a major victory for the MSC, whose plans were approved by 77% of the voters.

While the MSC and the LOT have competed over the authority to make decisions during the interim period, both, in addition to the Muslim Brotherhood, have agreed on condemning the mass protests organized by workers and civil servants all over the country. This is no surprise in light of the challenge these protests present to the three groups. As far as the MSC is concerned these protests project an image of instability that is likely to deter foreign investors whose funds are urgently needed, from the MSC's perspective, to jumpstart the Egyptian economy. When it comes to the LOT and the Brotherhood the stakes are even higher, for these protests have denied them the opportunity to claim to be the representative of the Egyptian street, an image that both have been attempting to cultivate. Most importantly for our purpose here, these protests are clear indications that for political reform to have any chance to succeed it has to be coupled with the redistribution of wealth. At this point it is worth recalling that the uprising that started at the end of last January was preceded by thousands of strikes over the last few years. In fact, it was laid off workers and striking civil servants who introduced public sit-ins to the repertoire of Egyptian political and social movements.

Despite several attempts by the current minister of social solidarity to introduce some pro-popular class reforms, the overall orientation of the economic policies is thus far consistent with those that have been in place since the mid 1970s. As a matter of fact, the current minister of finance's statements against imposing higher taxes on the rich echoed the arguments made by his predecessor, an ardent believer in neoliberal policies. Another notable example of the continuity between the policies of the Sadat-Mubarak regime and those of the "Government of the Revolution" is the preferential treatment accorded to the business community. On one hand, the "Government of the Revolution" has gone to great lengths to create incentives for businessmen/businesswomen to invest in the country, including contemplating the idea of dropping criminal charges against those involved in cases of corruption; and the resumption of the activities of the Egyptian stock market was portrayed as a major national accomplishment worthy of celebration. On the other hand, the "Government of the Revolution" issued a law criminalizing strikes and sit-ins. Paradoxically, the current government owes its power to the very same techniques it banned.

Unlike the pro- social justice protests that were to a great extent peaceful, several recent incidents of communal violence shocked the country. They signaled the return of sectarian tensions that had declined during the anti-Mubarak uprising. The apex of these incidents, were two bloody clashes between scores of Muslims and Christians in March and May that resulted in the death and the injury of dozens. Communal violence has become frequent in Egypt since the religious revival in the 1970s. The Sadat-Mubarak regime contributed significantly to the sectarian tensions in the country. Actually, one will not be off mark to suggest that sectarianism was the undeclared ideology of the regime for many years, in particular during Sadat's presidency. Sadat declaring that he was a Muslim president of a Muslim state is one of the few occasions in which it surfaced. The same could be argued about Sadat insisting on being described as the "Believing President". These and similar discursive practices were mainly employed to mobilize support for Sadat among the conservative sectors of society in order to counter the opposition from the left to Sadat's abandonment of the social and foreign policies of his predecessor. In the process, these practices fanned the fire of sectarianism. While deeply alarmed by these clashes, the current government's reaction so far has been limited to organizing public meetings with public figures and religious leaders of both communities in order to foster national unity. Those

familiar with the history of communal violence in Egypt in the last forty years will be really hard pressed to find anything novel about this approach.

In contrast to the three phenomena discussed so far that have been strongly present in the political scene since Mubarak's removal, the fourth made its presence felt paradoxically through its absence. I am referring here to the absence of any serious appraisal of the Sadat-Mubarak regime's foreign policy, the repeated statements of Nabil Al Arabi about Egypt opening a new chapter in its foreign relations and the rapprochement with Hamas notwithstanding. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that the recent reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah brokered by the new Egyptian government was based on the principle of a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as reflected in Khalid Mashal's remarks at the signing ceremony (2) . Seen through this prism brokering such an agreement between Hamas and Fatah seems more like a continuation of Mubarak's policy. As a matter of fact, it signals more of a change in Hamas's official position than in Egypt's.

The absence of serious debates over foreign policy issues in the last four months is particularly curious for three main reasons. First, Mubarak's foreign policy was subject to constant critique in the last few years. Critics from across the political spectrum accused him of severely damaging Egypt's standing in the region as a result of him following what they perceived to be American dictates. The second reason is the hype that accompanied the appointment of Nabil Al Arabi as minister of foreign affairs shortly after publishing an op-ed stressing the need to reorient Egypt's foreign policy. His words resonated well with the desires and opinions of the majority of Egyptians, who according to a recent poll wants to annul the Camp David Accords, which is the third reason that makes the absence of debates about Egypt's future foreign policy so intriguing.

Several pundits have posited that such an absence was quite expected during transition periods and suggested that it was similar to what had happened in Eastern Europe in the 1990s. I beg to differ. Such an argument is based on an inaccurate reading of the revolutions in question which were driven by a strong desire to end Soviet hegemony, among others. Major shifts in these countries' foreign policies were also among the immediate consequences of these revolutions. In addition, such a reading is based on a skewed view that treats domestic and foreign politics as two separate realms and disregards the interaction between them. Below I will suggest a different explanation for this absence.

Revolution or Caesarism?

A better understanding of the current Egyptian political scene requires a closer look at the character of the anti-Mubarak uprising. It was first and foremost a spontaneous uprising that lacked both political leadership and a clear ideological orientation. The masses in the Egyptian squares and streets were driven and united only by their desire to end Mubarak's rule. They were so focused on this goal that no one bothered to suggest even broad guidelines for the morning after. Despite this shortcoming, the international media -and for quite understandable reasons- persisted in romanticizing these courageous public sit-ins. What the media missed, though, was that these sit-ins while clear testimonies to the resilience of the human spirit were also signs of the weakness of the uprising. It was clear that the protestors lacked the means to topple Mubarak on their own, even after the quick collapse of the security forces. They were waiting for a third force to intervene and end the stalemate. The rest is history.

The way things have been unfolding since last January resembles more Gramsci's notion of caesarism than the scenario of a victorious popular revolution. Gramsci argued that caesarism emerges when neither the progressive forces nor the reactionary forces locked in a conflict manage to defeat their opponents. Instead "they bleed each other out mutually" which allows

a third force to intervene “subjugating what is left of both”. In distinguishing his notion from Marx’s Bonapartism, Gramsci referred to two forms of caesarism: a progressive type and a reactionary kind. The ultimate criterion to decide the type of caesarism one is facing at any given historical moment is “to see whether in the dialectic ‘revolution/restoration’ it is revolution or restoration which predominates, (3)” advanced Gramsci.

Interestingly enough one of the members of the MSC alluded to caesarism in an interview last March. In the context of drawing a comparison between the July Revolution in 1952 and the anti-Mubarak uprising, he highlighted the fact that it was the leaders of the revolution who seized power in the first incident while that was not the case in the second. He went on to explain that the army had taken over before Mubarak stepped down and was particularly keen to stress that the MSC’s legitimacy did not rest solely “on the revolution and that it is rather derived from the nation, the revolution and the [1971]constitution.” (4) Other members of the MSC repeatedly denied taking sides in political and social disputes and coached their rhetoric in universalistic terms, a discursive practice typical of Caesarism. (5) It is the clash between the MSC’s self-image as the ultimate guardian of the country on one hand, and the LOT seeing themselves as being imbued with revolutionary legitimacy that entitles them to decide the future orientation of the country on the other hand, that constitutes the root cause of the repeated tension between the two groups. This tension is unlikely to wane any time soon.

The final verdict on the type of caesarism that the MSC presents is not out yet. This is primarily due to the fact that the various political forces, in particular those who were always regarded as radical critics of Mubarak, have yet to articulate their visions for the future. It is the MSC’s reaction to these plans that would determine whether it belongs to the category of Napoleon I or that of his namesake. But what has been keeping the Muslim Brotherhood and the left from presenting their visions?

It goes without saying that the current moment is the highest point in the Muslim Brotherhood’s career. A few months ago the state- run media used to refer to them as “the banned group,” today its leaders are courted as the future rulers of the country. By the same token, the Brotherhood faces today some unparalleled challenges. For starters, they no longer will be able to mobilize support simply by raising lofty slogans such as “Islam is the Solution.” Starting with the coming elections they will have to translate their grandiose slogans into concrete action plans. As they know this is a daunting task by any standard. That is probably the reason they have decided to limit their ambition for the time being to only a “fair” share in power, rather than taking the entire pie for themselves. The Brotherhood is quite aware that if it were to assume power-even through free elections- each of its moves would be closely scrutinized by antipathetic Western powers that would wish them the same fate as that of the Hamas government in Gaza or of the FIS in Algeria. Domestically, if the anti-Muslim Brotherhood slogans in the May 27th demonstrations are any indication it is quite unlikely that non-Islamist political forces would cooperate with them, which would make the more conservative factions of the Islamist camp their only possible political partners. Such a partnership would only intensify their isolation both internationally and domestically. Most importantly, it could put them on a collision course with the military. Based on the record of their previous confrontations with the military under Nasser one can easily see why the Brotherhood would not be interested in such an outcome. This also explains why staying on good terms with the MSC rather than demanding radical changes has been one of the top priorities of the Brotherhood during the last four months. In the same vein, the Muslim Brotherhood’s opposition to extending the interim period stems more from a desire to see the military return to its barracks as soon as possible in order to avoid any confrontation with it, than from their appetite for power.

Another major challenge that the Brotherhood has been facing since last February is the increase in the number of prominent defectors from the group. In addition, many among the rank and file, especially from the younger generations, have voiced their concerns about the decision making processes within the group and their opposition to what they perceive as authoritarian tendencies of the leadership. One can actually argue that more cracks have appeared in the group's public image over the last four months than during the last four decades.

Regarding the left, the popularity of both the Pan-Arabism and the Marxist currents in Egypt has been in decline since the 1990s as a result of a myriad of factors. These include Sadam's invasion of Kuwait, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the rise of the Islamists, internal fighting and lack of charismatic leadership. Therefore, the Egyptian left, unlike its counterpart in South America, has failed to stage a comeback, despite the devastating impact the neoliberal policies had on the lives of the majority of Egyptians. Instead, many prominent leftists have over the last two decades adopted a rhetoric more in line with liberalism than with the views historically associated with the Egyptian left. This trend has continued in the last four months much to the dismay of the leftist youth and workers who have been actively raising anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist slogans for the last few years. The splits in the ranks of the left, as attested to by the numerous leftist parties that have been formed recently, has severely affected its capacity so far to present a coherent political program and limited its ability to influence public debates about policies.

The cautious approach of the Muslim Brotherhood and the disarray of the left allowed the liberals to dominate the political debates during the last four months. As a result these debates focused on the merits of the parliamentary system over the presidential and the preferred timetable of the future elections, while reevaluations of the Sadat-Mubarak regime's economic and foreign policies were pushed to the margins. This comes as no surprise since the differences between the liberal forces and the former president were limited primarily to political reform. While liberals did in the past express their discontent with the corruption that marred the privatization of the public sector under Mubarak, they never objected to the principles of neoliberalism. Quite the contrary, they often criticized what they described as the slow pace of privatization. In the same vein, they never articulated any opposition to the main tenets of the former president's foreign policy. Egyptian liberals in general tend to be supportive of the alliance with the United States and of a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It is the framing of public debates in liberal terms during the last four months that has contributed more than any other factor to maintaining the economic and foreign policies of the last forty years.

In this respect it is important to keep in mind that this was accomplished despite the weakness of the liberal political parties which are not in much better shape than those on the left. Yet, the influence of the business community and the Human Rights NGOs made up for this weakness. It goes without saying that the business community was the main beneficiary of the Sadat-Mubarak regime's policies and that it has an interest in limiting the change in Egypt to a change in personnel while maintaining the same policies. Thanks to its control of the so called "independent" media, i.e. those that are not state-run or owned by political parties, the business community has succeeded so far in pushing public debates in that direction.

Human Rights NGOs have contributed their share in promoting a liberal discourse in Egyptian society in the last two decades through their focus on advancing principally civil and political rights. This helped in creating the impression that political reform was not only the top priority but also the panacea for all the problems of Egyptian society. Most of these NGOs are funded by American and European donors that enabled them to build strong networks of activists. Thanks to the generosity of their donors, many of these activists enjoy a

much higher living standard than the majority of the Egyptian population. Thus it is unperceivable that they would support any change in the country's domestic and foreign policies that would jeopardize the continuation of this funding.

The influence of the business community and the Western funded civil society, in particular the Human Rights NGOs threatens to limit the change in post-Mubarak Egypt to the establishment of polyarchy while reproducing the social and economic injustices and perpetuating American hegemony. This will constitute a repetition of what happened in Haiti and the Philippines, just to mention two examples, after the removal of their pro-American dictators. (6) This would be a sorrowful end to one of the most romantic uprisings in recent history.

Conclusion

The foregoing is animated by a perspective that emphasizes the interplay between domestic and foreign politics. It holds that the foreign policy of any given state at any point in history reflects the existing equilibrium among the various social forces and institutions in that state. In turn, that state's foreign policy contributes to preserving and reproducing this particular domestic balance of power. In the case of Egypt, Sadat's crackdown on the more radical elements in the Egyptian regime on the twenty third anniversary of the Palestinian Nakba signaled the beginning of a new orientation in Egyptian domestic and foreign policies. This new course took shape in 1974, the year that witnessed both the adoption of the Open Door economic policy and the disengagement between the Egyptian and Israeli armies in Sinai; and was finally crystallized in the Camp David Accords. Since then Egypt has aligned its foreign policy with those of the United States and Israel and has restructured its economy in the manner mentioned above. Throughout Mubarak's 30 year presidency, Egypt had become locked into this alliance and into the Global Capitalist System as a result of the emergence of new political and business elites and institutions. Unlike their counterparts in the 1950s and 1960s, these are pro-American and see in Israel not only a good business partner but also a reliable ally against "extremist" forces in the region. The gap between the views expressed by Egypt's current minister of foreign affairs in an article published shortly before his appointment in which he charted a roadmap for a new foreign policy, including suggestions to annul agreements with Israel, and his inability to pursue these plans once in office is illustrative of the effect of this institutional lock-in.

Breaking out of this straightjacket will take more than just removing Mubarak from office. It requires the formation of a new historical bloc that adopts a democratic discourse that stresses social justice and transcends the limitations of polyarchy. Most importantly, it necessitates that this bloc charts a new course for the country's economic development that does not leave the Egyptian masses at the mercy of the caprice of the Global Capitalist System and its domestic representatives, or allows its foreign policy to be taken hostage by foreign investors and donors. Such an economic course would constitute the foundation of a new Egyptian foreign policy that would be independent of, but not necessarily antagonistic to the United States. Only then would it be possible to put the legacy of the Sadat-Mubarak regime to rest.

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Resources

(1) See for instance Biden and Clinton's following comments
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/jan-june11/biden_01-27.html
http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20029923-503544.html

(2) <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/DFC8D333-C88E-4676-9504-23FE843F27F9.htm> (3) Gramsci, Antonio (1971)

Selections from the Prison Notebooks, New York: International Publishers, p.219

(4) <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/360471>

(5) See for instance <http://www.ahram.org.eg/Investigations/News/67777.aspx>

(6) Robinson, Williams (1996) Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press