Democracy And Egypt: Two Dichotomies!

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Abstract: Democratic transition in Egypt has been discussed in worldwide literature. What was initially a promise of change in the norms of the theocratic state has finally gone back to the old days of dictatorial rule. A brief period of democratic rule was the byproduct of the 2012 free and fair elections. The successful government of the conservative political organization Muslim Brotherhood struggled to cope up with the contemporary socio-economic demands of a nation state. Morsi tried to strengthen his position by containing the powers of judiciary, but this move back fired. Massive protests engulfed Cairo and the inevitable happened. General Sisi stepped in and started another dictatorial rule. Egyptian politics has started allowing other parties and candidates to contest the presidential elections, but the levels of rigging are so high that a genuine participant ends up withdrawing his candidature leaving the field open to the whim of the dictators. The democratic norms of Egypt reflect the culture of an Arab state. Democracy takes time to flourish as its roots gradually transcend deep into the society. Egypt must abide by the rules of human rights including the rights to gather and free speech.

Index Terms: Orthodoxy, Secularism, Constitution, Democracy, Theocracy

1. INTRODUCTION

Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat gained massive unpopularity among the Egyptians when he signed the Camp David Accords with Israel on the behest of the United States of America. This peace treaty was regarded as a document of surrender by the masters of Pan-Arabism[1]. Hostility towards Israel in the Arab world has on the higher side after the wars of 1967 and 1973. Sadat’s death was an irony: he was shot dead by an extremist group posing as soldiers during their 1973 war victory’s celebration’s military parade in 1981. When Sadat lifted emergency in Egypt in 1980, Cairo’s foreign policy had already started enjoying an amiable relationship with Israel in general and USA in particular. After Sadat’s assassination, Hosni Mubarak, the vice-President stepped in as the new President of Egypt. Egyptians expected great policy gestures from him vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine, but what they witnessed was a re-imposing of the state of emergency that was only lifted once the events of Arab Spring unfolded. Mubarak was too shrewd to risk his stay in power by giving an ear to his own people and stand against the Washington-Tel-Aviv nexus. US became the sole super power after the dismemberment of the Soviet Union and its Middle-Eastern ally Israel was the most important country to the interests of Egypt. In his third decade of rule, he started distancing from the Palestinian organization Hamas when the latter established a government in Gaza in 2007. Mubarak went to the extent of closing the Egyptian border with Gaza. Freedom Flotilla was an international horrific experience where Egypt didn’t even allow humanitarian relief aid to go directly by its borders into Gaza[2]. Israel shot dead nine civilians in the Mediterranean Sea in international waters causing hues and cries, but the Turkish-Israel’s diplomatic disputes settled later on. After around two and half decades of dictatorial rule, Mubarak was persuaded by public pressure to allow multi-party presidential elections in 2005. But this allowance proved to be yet another dictatorial trick by the old man. He barred Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan ul-Musleemeen) from contesting the 2005 elections. When the elections concluded, Mubarak won his fifth six years’ term in office with a staggering 89 percent of the total votes. Tomorrow Party’s Ayman Nour came second securing a mere 7.3 percent votes. Securing the number two spot though with a magnanimous difference was enough to have him arrested on fraud charges. Eliminating opposition of any sort is a go to strategy for all the dictators. What is known as contesting in democracy is termed as dissent in a theocratic state.

Although Muslim Brotherhood (MB) wasn’t allowed to field candidates in any constituency in the 2005 elections, still their affiliates and like minded people performed better than others. Brotherhood’s affiliation was seen as a step towards forming an alliance against the presidency of Hosni Mubarak. But in the 2010 presidential elections, Egyptians witnessed a rigging by the security apparatus never seen before. National Democratic Party better known as the party of Mubarak or NDP secured around 95 percent of the seats: Mubarak’s absolute insult to the merits of free and fair elections had sowed the seeds of dissent if not a revolution in the minds of the Egyptians. During the protests, disgruntled youth displayed their anger in different ways. The Tunisian regime changing seed was implanted by the self-immolation of a vegetable seller by the name of Mohamed Bouazizi. The same incident was emulated in front of the parliament in Cairo. Tahrir Square protests went hand in hand with the incidents of suicides. Although the Egyptian people were facing serious economic hurdles leading to high levels of poverty throughout the country, still the protests that attracted a huge number of people were largely based on the government’s inability to provide its citizenry basic democratic rights like the rights to free speech and social liberty[3]. The self-immolation’s tragedy’s Egyptian version happened on 17 January, 2011; world’s attention suddenly moved towards Cairo anticipating another Tunisia in the making. Things got intensified just after ten days on the 27th of January: the former head of IAEA (International Atomic Energy Commission), Mohamed ElBaradei, had appeared in Cairo on the side of the protestors. Even before the start of the Arab Spring, he was renowned for his contempt for the Mubarak regime[4]. He was an Egyptian by nationality and a peace maker by reputation; he was undoubtedly a man with an international reputation. The joining day of former IAEA’s head was Thursday on the calendar. The very next i.e. Friday, Egypt witnessed huge clashes between the police and protestors.
after the conclusion of Friday prayers. The regime reacted according to the expectations by disrupting the phone and internet services followed by imposing a curfew; Army moved in to tackle the dispersed crowds. Mubarak’s fate was writing on the wall. He realized it as well and addressed the nation on television calling it a day. Once the government was dismissed, Omer Suleiman who was posted as Director in the General Intelligence Service, was crowned with the title of the Egyptian Vice President[1]. He was close to Mubarak as his post suggested and shared similar views on democracy to that of Mubarak. What is important to note here is the level of resistance shown by the dictator. Only the government in the Egyptian Parliament was dismissed not his prestigious presidency. A man who used to run Egypt and its institutions with an iron fist became so politically miserable that he begged to stay in power for eight more months till the end of his tenure in September, 2011. Obviously the opposition didn’t get tricked by such an unusual offer. Mubarak just after a week on the 6th of February had to have talks with the representatives of the opposition parties including the Muslim Brotherhood. Suleiman after just five days announced the resignation of Hosni Mubarak. Matters were left to the opposition parties to devise a plan and introduce democratic norms and policies via functional parliament in Egypt.

2. CROSSIDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE
When President Hosni Mubarak flew to Sharm el-Sheikh leaving power after three decades, the Egyptians celebrated, but this celebration soon turned into an apprehension about the future of Egypt. Only Mubarak had left; his institutions and bureaucrats were still in strong shape. Amr Hamzawy participated in the dialogues between the two opposite groups i.e. the Islamists and the liberals; he represented the latter. His representation became even less when he sided by the group calling to respect the results of referendum held for a public approval for constitutional amendments. Most of the secular leftists challenged the merits and results of this referendum[5]. He believes that the failure of a democratic transition in Egypt primarily had two reasons. As mentioned, Mubarak ran the country on a set pattern for around three decades: generations are born and bred during such a lifetime; his grip on the Egyptian economic, social and military affairs was deep rooted and this transition needed time and a powerful democratic set up to flourish. An empire turned state that had never tasted the flavor of democracy was suddenly exposed to populism and vibrant youth slogans. The representatives of all the parties conducted meetings and tried to find a way to get through the security apparatus of the former regime. Things were fine till then although no one was sure about the future of governance in Cairo. The secularists suddenly became cautious about the intentions of the rightist party Muslim Brotherhood and its alleged links with the Mubarak’s era military establishment[5]. MB and the SCAF (Supreme Council of Armed Forces) decided to conduct the referendum just a few months after the departure of President Mubarak. The proposed changes to the Egyptian constitution were restricting the terms of the President to two (four years each), forming a commission to draft the new constitution and the judicial supervision of the parliamentary elections. Drafting of the new constitution was to take place once the parliamentary elections were held and a representative government was formed. To the surprise of the liberal secularists, around 80 percent of the voters voted in favor of these reforms/ amendments. Suddenly, the ideological divide between Brotherhood and the secularist parties widened as the latter started feeling tricked by the establishment playing the conservative card. What was to become a cross-ideological government purely based on democratic norms turned out to be a disaster politically mishandled by the opportunists in both the camps? Around half of the 45 million eligible voters participated in this referendum. The debate that encircled the Egyptian politics was about the civil (secularist)-religious discourse in the post-elections Egypt. The country could have created history had it managed a coalition government made up of opposite ideologies, but the internal rift and big egos had burnt all the stairs to a political agreement. Siding by the forces of Mubarak for political gains obviously didn’t do justice to the spirit of the revolution. Eventually, the political inexperience and the childish yet hardcore differences made a common zealous Egyptian witness a golden opportunity gone missing. Mohamed El Baradei’s efforts also went in vain when he met several representatives from the opposition parties including the Muslim Brotherhood. He was a hope for the democratically ill-nourished nation to help the Egyptians formulate a system where smooth transition of power from one political party to another was made possible, but things never materialized for the people and Egypt further slanted towards poverty and a despotic rule. Egyptians in an attempt to oust Morsi from power unintelligently chose the worse among the two evils i.e. General Sisi. Trusting him was one mistake; the thought of fomenting another rebellion cum revolution to oust the General if he acted like a dictator was the bigger mistake. Even weak democracies should have a go to let the democratic norms breath in a country like Egypt[6]. President Morsi realized that governing and winning elections were two different chapters of the same book, so his earnestness to remain in power also contributed to his downfall. Had he completed his term in office, new elections would have allowed a better candidate or party to replace him. But the Egyptians behaved strangely. They didn’t understand the concept of a revolution. It is an indigenous process of rebellion where lives are lost and careers compromised: they didn’t stand for decades against President Mubarak, but expected too much from President Morsi in such a short span of time. Even amendments in the constitution could have become null and void either by the courts or by the new government. This myopic fervor gave opportunity to the Mubarak’s era dictatorially trained military General named Abdul Fattah Al-Sisi to overthrow a democratic regime on an invitation by the liberal segment of the society. Even the weakest of the third world countries have opposition parties who had performed poorly when in power, but the people still look towards them when in a situation like the 2012-13 Egyptian protests. But inviting a military general to assume power is not only akin to corrupting the institution of armed forces of that country, but it also tells us about the roots of democracy there. Cairo no doubt has to start from an absolute zero when it comes to establishing democracy at the grass root levels. Though it discerns itself from the kingdoms, but wearing a branded suite instead of a national
robe does seem to be western fashioned, but it does not have to do anything with democracy.

3. EGYPTIAN YOUTH: CHASING A MIRAGE
When a country experiences a revolution being inaugurated by the youth, it demands a post-revolution role for these youth in reforming the country and its institutions. But Egypt never had anything to offer to its revolutionary youth. Ahmed Maher, an engineer and a human rights’ activist, initiated the April 6 movement against the government. His efforts against dictatorships were appreciated at the international level when his name was nominated for the prestigious Nobel peace award. His efforts against the Mubarak regime started in 2008: despotism connects Mubarak and Sisi as the latter’s intent of arresting thousands of anti-Mubarak protestors in 2011 holds testimony to the sentence of 3 years’ jail to Maher only to be extended for a 3 years’ probation period. This unusual restriction on the activist’s life binds him to spend 12 hours (6 PM to 6 AM) in a police station[7]. When activists are barred from travelling abroad or show up in a public gathering against the regime or are even killed by the security apparatus, then a country with democratic norms must question the process of justice prevailing in Egypt. But sadly this hasn’t happened. People in the West at times consider Middle-East unfit for democracy and the policy of one man’s ruling party dealing with the foreigners suits the so called western democracies. Amidst all these biased debates, the biggest sufferer is obviously the institution of justice since despotic regimes might quell a rebellion with brute force, but they won’t be able to provide justice to a common citizen with a complaint against a person from the government. Like any other dictator, President Sisi uses jargons and flamboyant vocabulary when addressing to the suppressed concerns of the general public about the excessive expenditures on new Presidential palaces; “I will make more since they belong to the people of Egypt” was his unchallenged monarchical answer. The Egyptian economic troubles are just ballooning and these concerns about the lavish expenditures do hold some water since Egypt in on an IMF (International Monetary Fund) program and has devalued its currency (the Egyptian pound).

4. ECONOMIC CONCERNS
Cairo has been loaned 12 billion US dollars by the IMF [8] to restructure its economy, but IMF lending is as unpopular in the struggling economies as selling their national pride since these structural adjustments include privatizations of under-performing national assets like the national airlines and the national oil companies; removal of subsidies and heavy taxation burden the lower and middle classes to an absolute limit. After the successive removals of the two Presidents i.e. Mubarak and Morsi, the new military leadership took refuge in restoring the economy by acceding to the demands of the IMF. Egyptians living below the line of poverty in 2015 were 28 percent that rose to 33 percent in 2019 after the soaring of prices of every day commodities. These conservative statistics are provided by the military controlled economists; World Bank puts this figure at a staggering 60 percent. The 2019 protests against the economic corruption by the Egyptian military and its megaprojects were sparked by the exiled actor and businessman Mohamed Ali [8] whose videos clearly mention a reason to believe in staging protests against the brutal regime. Had the Egyptian people being well fed and sheltered by the regime, they repeating their non-democratic history wouldn’t have cared about the form of government ruling Egypt. But extreme poverty, joblessness and a repression to speaking one’s mind in public or on internet ignited the concerns of an already infuriated and hopeless nation. Though General Sisi also enjoys some public support especially from the people who hold prestigious positions and are well paid, still the majority of the Egyptians are witnessing their revolution fading away in the dust of history. Still people talk about the Arab Spring, but once Sisi amends the constitution like any other regional despot allowing him unlimited terms in office, historians will write about Egypt in decades of dictatorships by Mubarak and Sisi; the one-year term of the deceased and disgruntled Morsi might shine as a period written by the protestors and sworn in as the result of a democratic election. So, the 2019 protests are a test of defiance of the people of Egypt and the military government. The Salafist oriented Muslim Brotherhood won 47 percent of the total seats and formed a government in 2012[3]. Since the group was considered a marginalized set of people from the main community, no one expected them to win the elections. Years of political alienation, victimization and a social boycott by the Egyptian secularist elite, it was time for the Brotherhood to avenge all these injustices. The drafting of constitution was quick; Brotherhood was blamed to ignore the norms of democracy while “trying to infiltrate the Egyptian state institutions” for future political maneuvering[9]. Since it was previously a banned organization that believed in esoteric religious beliefs, the liberals and even the moderates became wary of the democratic future in Egypt. When the Egyptian economy was in absolute stress and the government was supposed to have an IMF bailout package, it wasn’t prepared to make the necessary financial arrangements mandatory for a loan. Instead it was debating the demerits of alcohol, veil and pornography. When Egypt required a political party with a team of experts to bring the country on the road to reforms, it hosted a conservative group of people whose political aptitude didn’t go beyond the matters of piousness and the anti-feminist discourse. It was like having a painter playing tennis in the final of the Wimbledon. Conspiracy theories also emerged once President Obama demanded protection for Morsi after he was deposed by Sisi. This alleged or illusionary link between Obama and Morsi strengthened General Sisi chances of winning over the public opinion. People also accused the Americans of dividing the Egyptian nation over Israel: although Morsi under the patronage of the Brotherhood had championed the Palestinian cause, still Sisi managed to trick his own people in assuming him to be their savior. The removal of President Morsi took away with it the remaining hopes of a democratic transition in Egypt. People don’t like to mutter the terms of elite i.e. socio-economic benefits, financial inclusion and the index of ease of doing business. Such connotations are of no use to a person who doesn’t have a suitable amount to eat at day or a shelter at night. Changes in the Egyptian society do have their cost; people living below the line of poverty feel the most of such pain. The contemporary struggling Egyptian of 2019 might often have had thought about Hosni Mubarak staying in office for another decade. Democracy at
times does seem to be a stranger to the Egyptians but Mubarak’s Vice President Omar Suleiman’s 2011 blatant statement that “Egyptians were unfit for democracy” [9] closed all the chapters of a possible misunderstanding. Structural economic adjustments are made in an IMF program; democracy needs a societal restructuring where all the state institutions must work under a strong constitution that derives its power from the true representatives of the common people. Democracy in intangible, but it’s results could be felt in countries like Canada and the United Kingdom. No dictator can stop the UK from the undoing of the Brexit; no force has been used to halt or affect the Scottish independence referendum. These examples refer to mature democracies. Middle-Eastern states would take decades if not centuries to reach these levels of mature democracies. But they have to start from today to reap the fruits of democracy decades later.

Apart from inflation of daily commodities, unemployment and an ever high poverty, General Sisi has had other concerns to address to. May it be the construction of a new capital, building new palaces or executing inmates belonging to the Brotherhood faction[10], the brutal tactics employed to retake the Presidential seat in 2018 included buying up private media houses to broadcast a pro-Sisi pre-elections’ coverage. He managed not to allow any pro-public famous personality to contest the presidential elections. Ahmed Shafik was a former Air Force general (he also became the Egyptian Prime Minister for just over a month during the transition period in 2011) who had participated in the 2012 elections where he performed well, but couldn’t defeat Brotherhood’s Morsi. The public discontent with the Sisi policies and their respective impacts on the Egyptian lives by the year 2018 had given Shafik a perfect opportunity to defeat the dictator. But two hurdles kept him waiting: these elections were not going to be a replica of the free and fair 2012 elections since Sisi had planned them according to the 2014 rigged pattern (Sisi took 96 percent of the votes; wasted votes came at number two); Shafik was forced to pull out his candidature only to be confirmed by his advocate in a tweet on twitter. Egypt’s sham democracy presented Sisi yet another opportunity to run over other candidates; it is he who decides that who is eligible enough to contest against him. What a mockery of parliamentary elections!

5. CONCLUSION

Egypt is one of the oldest and riches empires to have ever existed. Its mythology and war tactics predate all the three Abrahamic religions i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Comparing the contemporary Egyptian Republic (1922 to 1952 to 2019) with the empire it was (3100 BCE to 30 BCE), Egypt like any other nation state is a geographical boundary ruled by a constitution that on paper provides its citizens certain rights. But things have never been democratic in the Arab world’s most populous country i.e. 100 million people. Egypt after the creation of Israel in 1948 was considered as the most effective power to counter the power of the Jewish state on behalf of the entire Arab world if not the entire Muslim world. It fought the two famous wars of 1967 and 1973 with Tel-Aviv (Jordan and Syria were also defeated in the 1967 war by Israel), but things started to change after the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978, a Jimmy Carter’s effort to broker a peace deal between the arch rivals. Egypt’s President Anwar Al-Sadaat and the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin were unanimously awarded the Nobel peace award in 1978. After Sadaat’s assassination, Hosni Mubarak, his Vice President assumed the charge. Egyptian sudden policy shifts away from the Soviets and into the camp of the United States made Cairo the second highest recipient of the US aid after Israel. But all these economic gains went parallel to a death of democracy in Egypt. After the advent of the Arab Spring, people saw a bright ray of hope, but the revolution couldn’t remove the undemocratic norms from the system. When Brotherhood secured 47 percent of the total parliamentary seats in the 2012 elections, Morsi was worried about the powers of Mubarak era’s judiciary. In an attempt to stop them from decreeing against his government, he tried to limit their intervening powers. Egypt’s economic crisis worsened as the country was trying to secure an IMF loan. But the structural reforms required for such a hefty loan (12 billion dollars) were nowhere to be seen during Morsi’s Presidency. As expected by the history of Egypt and by the mood of revolutionaries, the Egyptians demanded a change of fortunes that were immediate not subtle resulting in the overthrow of Morsi by General Sisi. He was a man of the Mubarak’s era and mindset. People who had protested strongly against the Mubarak regime were also put behind bars. The Egyptian military’s involvement in its politics has disregarded the concept of democracy. These generals haven’t allowed the flower of democracy to flourish in the gardens of Egypt. The statement that democracy is not made for the Egyptians or Egyptians are not made for democracy surely disrespect both of them i.e. the representative institution of democracy and the credentials of the Egyptian populace.

6. REFERENCES


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