Revolution or Evolution?: Egypt's Turbulent Transition

Michael Shkolnik
Security and Defence Officer
United Nations Association in Canada
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Amid the celebration and hope for a new Egypt, we are witnessing a reemergence of civil society in Tahrir Square, still demanding that the military return to the barracks a year later. The ongoing revolution is a complex process, as different sectors of the Egyptian population continue to compete for influence. In the country's first fair elections, the Muslim Brotherhood and the hard-line Salafi party achieved an astounding 38% and 29% of the Parliamentary seats, respectively.[1] Egypt's Islamists now officially dominate the country's new legislative body, which recently hosted its inaugural session. Barred from political life for decades, the Muslim Brotherhood had essentially served as Egypt's most legitimate NGO, providing payments and services to neglected sectors of society. The election results naturally cause concern to the military and secular members of the population, fearing that this Parliament would infringe on women's and

religious minorities' rights. Similarly to Iran's Islamic Revolution, Egypt's liberal segments of society initiated an uprising, only to witness the hijacking of their cause. After patiently waiting, the Islamists seized the opportunity to emerge from underground, taking over key demonstrations and effectively engaging various sectors of a disgruntled populace to achieve astonishing electoral success. The Islamist parties' victory has facilitated a confrontation with the ruling military council that is reluctant to surrender its significant economic and political power.

The military has historically represented the most powerful institution since the 1952 coup that ousted the monarchy, producing the country's four subsequent presidents. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has engaged in a strategic campaign to maintain its authority over Egypt by attempting to influence the composition of the body tasked with drafting the nation's constitution. The military argues that a Parliament dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood is not representative of the Egyptian people. But what is more manifest political representation of a population than a freely and democratically elected Parliament?

Developments in recent months illustrate the challenges facing Egypt to protect key sectors amongst the population throughout this turbulent transition process. The security forces' raids on the offices of at least seventeen NGOs in a single day were unprecedented, even under Mubarak's reign.[2] These measures are typical of authoritative regimes in the region that actively seek to consolidate power and control. This paints a bleak picture for the future of civil society in Egypt. In addition, the sectarian tension plaguing the Christian Copts has forced many of Egypt's large religious minority community to seek emigration. Furthermore, the demeaning reaction against peacefully demonstrating women, embodied by the infamous video depicting soldiers stripping and beating a female protestor unconscious, continues to reinforce concerns on the future status of women. It is clear that the initial hope for the respect of human rights and democratic reform is suffering from severe setbacks.

The events that led to Mubarak's demise cannot be characterized as a 'revolution.' A revolution entails a transformation in societal structures and the streamlining of political institutions, as a new social contract between the population and government is fashioned. What occurred in Egypt on January 25, 2011 was a popular uprising that led to regime change enforced by an internal military coup. The real revolution is unfolding before us, embodied by the crucial struggle between the military and the Islamists.

If the military emerges victorious, they will remain the pre-eminent institution that dictates Egypt's projection, essentially sustaining the status quo with accommodating revisions. But if the Islamists succeed in drafting a constitution according to their ideology, then the extent to which their interpretations of Shari'a law are imposed on society will determine the magnitude of a true revolution. The question remains: will Egypt maintain its secular character headed by an Islamist oriented party which can draw inspiration from the Turkish model? Or will they witness a social upheaval that resembles the theocratic construct of post-1979 Iran? Perhaps the Egyptians can fashion a unique, middle ground social contract that effectively reconciles democratic principles and Shari'a law; referencing the Islamic texts in a manner that respects fundamental human rights.

From Morocco, Tunisia, likely Libya and Yemen, Islamist organizations are making unprecedented gains, emphasizing the new role religion will play in these respective societies. These recent political victories reinforce existing trends in Erodgan's Turkey, a Hezbollah dominated Lebanon, Hamas ruled Gaza, Wahhabist Saudi Arabia, and a radically fundamentalist Shi'ite Iran. Islamist extremists are increasingly infiltrating the opposition forces in the battle for Syria. Now with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi parties attaining overwhelming success, Islamism, to varying degrees, has officially emerged as the dominant political ideology of the new Middle East. The outcome of Egypt's political crisis will define the trajectory of the region and to what extent this 'Arab Spring' has evolved into an 'Islamist Winter'. As the largest and most powerful Arab country, the developments that transpire in Egypt will have unparalleled ramifications for the future of the most volatile region on earth.

Endnotes:

[1] Kessler, Oren and Reuters. "Egypt's Islamists dominate new parliament." 22 Jan. 2012. The Jerusalem Post. http://www.jpost.com/LandedPages/PrintArticle.aspx?id=254583

[2] BBC News. "Egypt Unrest: NGO offices raided in Cairo." 29 Dec. 2011. BBC. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16357795