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# The Upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia

## THE ROAD TO (AND FROM) LIBERATION SQUARE

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It is easy now to see why Egypt's revolution had to happen, and why President Hosni Mubarak's thirty-year reign had to end in the spectacular manner in which it did. Even the most casual observer of the Egyptian scene can recite from the expansive catalogue of ills that Mubarak had visited upon the land: a large and growing corps of angry young people with no jobs and no prospects; the repeated thwarting of the voters' will; crumbling public infrastructure whose sole purpose seemed to be supplying newspaper headlines about train crashes and ferry sinkings; corruption so brazen that it was often written into law; and daily acts of casually dispensed brutality, culminating in the June 2010 murder of a young man in a seaside town by the very police who were ostensibly charged with protecting him.

And then there was the matter of the dictator's age. In recent years, the octogenarian ruler's health had become a matter of state, and woe betide anyone daring (or foolish) enough to suggest that the president could be anything less than fully fit. In 2008, a court sentenced the journalist Ibrahim Eissa to six months in prison for "damaging the public interest and national stability" by publishing what it called "false information and rumors" about Mubarak's health. Yet despite the regime's attempts to present the leader as immortal, the specter of his eventual demise loomed over the political landscape. The regime never quite managed to convey the impression that it had planned for the day after Mubarak, that the ship of state would sail on undisturbed. There was an attempt—half-hearted and clumsy—to present Mubarak's second son, an international banker named Gamal, as the inevitable successor, but this did not sit well with the Egyptian street or, it seems, with the Egyptian military. The atmosphere of uncertainty brought with it a sense

of possibility—Egypt’s prodemocracy activists knew that there would soon be an opening in the country’s political fabric and that they would have to prepare themselves to take advantage of it.

And prepare themselves they did. We can locate the beginnings of the Mubarak regime’s final act in the 2004 founding of the Egyptian Movement for Change. This organization—whose unofficial moniker of *Kifaya* (Enough!) deftly encapsulated the national mood—gathered political activists and thinkers from across the spectrum to declare that Egyptians were fed up with the Mubarak regime and would not stand for Gamal’s inheritance of the presidency. Although the movement was fractious and its activities fitful, it made two great contributions to Mubarak’s eventual overthrow. These, as one Western diplomat described them, were to break the taboo against public criticism of Mubarak and to serve as the training ground for and gateway to political activism for many of the individuals who would lead the protests. Ahmed Maher, the young civil engineer who founded the April 6<sup>th</sup> Youth Movement, joined *Kifaya* in 2005 and recently acknowledged it as “the mother of all of the protest movements in Egypt.”

Maher’s use of the plural when referring to protest “movements” reflects the growing willingness of Egyptians in recent years to take to the streets to demand their rights. Judges have protested election rigging. Tax collectors have protested pay inequities. The poor have protested food-price increases. The scholar Joel Beinin has calculated that the last decade saw more than three-thousand labor protests. It is part of the genius of the April 6<sup>th</sup> Movement—a group of young Web-based activists who took their name from the date of a 2008 textile-workers’ strike in a Nile Delta mill town—that they were able to yoke labor’s newfound militant energy to the national drive for democracy.

And then came Mohamed ElBaradei. The Nobel laureate did not make the revolution, but he adopted it and was adopted by it. His refusal to play the regime’s games, to participate in its elections, to credit any of its claims of democracy, gave heart to the youth and heartburn to Mubarak and his lieutenants. Documents smuggled out of the now-defunct State Security Investigations arm of the Interior Ministry reveal the extent to which the regime was obsessed with the mild-mannered former UN bureaucrat, which in turn suggests that the president’s men knew better than most just how vulnerable they really were.

Given this combustible mix of a failing regime, an aging leader, and a people increasingly willing to confront both, one might conclude that the revolution was not only inevitable, but overdetermined. Yet those of us who study the region not only failed to predict the regime’s collapse, we actually saw it as an exemplar of something we called “durable authoritarianism”—a new breed of modern dictatorship that had figured out how to tame the political, economic, and social forces that routinely did in autocracy’s lesser variants. So durable was the Mubarak regime

thought to be that, even after Tunisia's President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was forced to flee in mid-January, the predictions of stability on the banks of the Nile continued to roll in. "Egypt is not Tunisia," became the refrain of the hour.

### The Mirage of "Durable" Authoritarianism

At one level, the inability to see the impending revolution was born of human nature: We expect things that have happened in the past to keep happening in the future. A successful autocrat, like a basketball star, can come to be seen as having a "hot hand." But this alone cannot explain the failure. After all, practically every journalist who visited Egypt in the last few years seemed to mark the occasion by filing a piece warning of the regime's impending collapse. But we scholars of the country—none of us blind to the regime's failures and the people's misery—thought that we knew better. The predictions of regime failure had been coming in for so long that we had become inured to them. Mubarak had faced down assassination attempts, an Islamist insurgency, and near-constant economic crisis, and his regime's remarkable durability demanded explanation. But a side effect of our intellectual exertions was that the theories we generated to explain authoritarian survival also tended to predict it.

Beginning from the premise that authoritarian collapses usually begin when there is a rupture in the ruling elite, we began to ask whether the Mubarak regime had developed tools that somehow allowed it to manage such ruptures or avoid them entirely. Once we began looking for such tools, we found them. Scholars identified two pseudodemocratic political institutions in particular as containing the keys to regime longevity: the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) and the periodic elections to Mubarak's rubber-stamp parliament, the People's Assembly.

Both of these institutions were supposed to forestall elite conflict—the former by providing a forum for dispute resolution among the regime's core supporters, the latter by offering a means for the regime to distribute the fruits of corruption among those supporters without having to pick winners and losers itself.<sup>1</sup> There is much that rang true in these accounts. The ruling party, founded by President Anwar Sadat in 1978, had by the end become an unprincipled collection of political and economic elites, joining neoliberal businessmen with ambitious academics and veteran regime *apparatchiks* under the beneficence of Mubarak and his big tent. The party leaked prominent members from time to time, but the ambitious continued to flock to it. And elections to the People's Assembly, while often rigged, nonetheless saw actual and would-be regime cronies expend vast resources to run for office, secure in the knowledge that those who locked up (or bought up) the most votes would be more than reimbursed in the form of preferential access to state resources.

It is entirely possible, even likely, that the Mubarak regime would not have held on for as long as it did without these mechanisms for securing and maintaining elite loyalty. But these institutional underpinnings of durable authoritarianism were far flimsier than previously thought. Once the demonstrations began, the ruling party collapsed almost immediately. Ahmed Ezz, the steel tycoon whom the government-controlled newspaper *Al-Ahram* had celebrated as “the man behind the sweeping win by the ruling party in the recent parliamentary elections,” and the party’s whip in parliament, resigned after only four days of protests, with the party’s entire executive committee following a week later. Mubarak seemed to forget about his party entirely, preferring to rely on the security apparatus. Party *apparatchiks* complained to me that at the height of the crisis the president and his son were practically incommunicado. When the party finally did manage to muster some anemic counterdemonstrations on February 2 (the revolution’s ninth day), they were notable only for having included armed camel drivers whose principal effect was to inflame the youth further. Parliament was similarly useless. Speaker Ahmad Fathi Surur’s sole contribution to regime maintenance was to declare weakly on the third day of protests that “matters are in safe hands—the hands of President Hosni Mubarak,” before disappearing from the scene.

The marginalization of the NDP and parliament during the regime’s death throes should not surprise us. Neither was capable of repelling the tens, then hundreds of thousands of protesters who flooded central Cairo’s Liberation (Tahrir) Square and the streets of other Egyptian cities. In the face of so much popular unrest, the mechanisms of regime cohesion mattered little. What counted was the regime’s ability to mete out violence, and this was something that no ruling party or rubber-stamp legislature could do.

Much has been and will be written about the military’s decision not to bring the full weight of its might to bear against the protesters. Robert Fisk has reported that the top brass gave their field commanders orders to fire, but that these were refused by loyal sons of Egypt who would not shed the blood of their countrymen.<sup>2</sup> (But then, one must explain the military’s subsequent willingness to fire on protesters in Tahrir Square on April 12 and in front of the Israeli embassy on May 15.) The military’s own explanation for its restraint is that it was born of patriotism and belief in the legitimacy of the revolution. (But then, again, one must explain the armed forces’ strangely neutral position between the protesters and the regime’s thugs during the particularly bloody confrontations of February 2.)

A more likely possibility is that the military’s refusal to back Mubarak was in part a function of its jealousy over the rise of the NDP and the latter’s eclipse of the military as the fount of political authority. In this telling, the NDP was less a source of Mubarak’s strength than a cause of

his downfall. The country's last four presidents may have been military men, but it was a virtual certainty that the next one would be a man of the ruling party. Although military spokesmen now love to trumpet the armed forces' opposition to Gamal Mubarak's rise and to the various corruptions of the regime's cronies, the truth is that this stance may have had little to do with support for democracy and clean government, and much to do with the urge for continued preeminence.

Elections, too, may have hurt as much as they helped. The sweetheart deals that accrued to ruling-party parliamentarians probably made them more loyal to the regime, but at the price of the loyalty and good will of the Egyptian people. Anticorruption, after all, was one of the bywords of the revolution, and the current venom against Surur—who was forced to resign as speaker and as of this writing is under investigation for ill-gotten gains—is an indication of the extent to which parliament came to be seen as an abode of swindlers. And it is not just the graft of parliamentarians that aroused public fury—it was the brazenly corrupt manner in which they were elected. The seven elections of the Mubarak era were all stage-managed to generate victories for the ruling party, and the regime's various electoral manipulations served only to remind the people of the regime's lack of regard for them or their will. The parliamentary contests of late 2010 were particularly egregious—it is worth noting that there was greater opposition representation in Ben Ali's last parliament than in Mubarak's—and sparked the season of protests that ended with Mubarak's downfall. There is no better indication of the extent to which Egyptians had become estranged by elections than the preternaturally low turnout—23 percent in 2005 and 25 percent in 2010, and this according to the regime's own (usually inflated) figures.

But even as elections were alienating the silent majority, they may have been activating the young people who would help to craft the revolution. Egyptian opposition parties were often said to be wasting their time and resources by playing the mug's game of elections, but many of Egypt's young activists got their start in these parties and their political campaigns. The youth of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), who helped to defend the protesters of Tahrir against the regime's thugs, deployed tactics that they had learned defending MB voters, candidates, and activists against those same thugs during election times. Other, more secular-minded protest leaders had been part of the doomed 2005 presidential campaign of leading liberal and Al-Ghad (Tomorrow) Party founder Ayman Nour or members of the Democratic Front Party. Opposition parties may not have brought change directly, but they helped to prepare those who would do so.

These reflections on what the revolution in Egypt teaches us about our understanding of authoritarian regimes and their durability are of more than merely academic interest. They suggest that autocracies are inherently unstable, that their persistence rests primarily on their abil-

ity either to mute popular grievances or to suppress collective action spurred by those grievances, and that small events (such as the self-immolation of a fruit seller in a dusty Tunisian town) can upend the seemingly settled order of things and cause a seemingly apathetic population to bring down a seemingly unshakeable regime. They also suggest that academics, like autocrats, court peril when they focus on elites and ignore the people. Moreover, it may be that “limited liberalizations” in autocratic regimes are not as limited as we think. In Myanmar, we rightly view the military’s recent “civilianization” and reintroduction of elections as nothing more than a sham. But the lesson of Egypt may be that such shams often contain within them the seeds of their own destruction. Samuel Huntington, it turns out, may have been right to say that “liberalized authoritarianism is not a stable equilibrium; the half-way house does not stand.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Back to the Barracks?**

It may, of course, be premature to say that Egypt’s autocratic regime has fallen at all. Though many of us have been calling what has happened in Egypt a revolution, it remains a fact that, as of this writing in early June 2011, the country is being governed by a military junta not unlike the one that seized power in 1952 and inaugurated the autocratic era from which Egyptians are now trying to extricate themselves. At the most basic level, then, whether or not Egypt can be said to have undergone a revolution depends on how sincere the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) is being when it promises to midwife a transition to democracy. There are grounds for doubt.

The first ground is political. The military currently enjoys a kind of impunity in Egyptian political life, operating above civilian control. As Michele Dunne notes, the army’s budget has been considered a “state secret and therefore not subject to parliamentary oversight.”<sup>4</sup> It is possible that the SCAF’s enthusiasm for democracy would be dampened if the generals expected it to put an end to this particularly congenial arrangement. In fact, Major-General Mamdouh Shahin, assistant minister of defense for parliamentary affairs, recently called for any new Egyptian constitution to protect the military from the “whims” of elected officials, and declared that military affairs should remain out of bounds in any new parliament.

The second ground is economic. The military is a major manufacturer of everything from foodstuffs to petrochemicals to kitchen supplies. Analysts have pegged the army’s share of the Egyptian economy at anywhere from 5 to 40 percent, although hard numbers are hard to come by. It is worth noting that in mid-2010, the Ministry of Military Production announced the total output of its fourteen factories during the previous fiscal year as 4.3 billion Egyptian pounds (approximately US\$750

million, or a little more than a tenth of 1 percent of Egypt's GDP). Yet this figure—if it is to be believed—almost certainly fails to capture the entirety of the military's economic portfolio, which also includes land holdings and service-sector enterprises. Whatever the precise size of the military's holdings, it stands to reason that it would want to protect them from grasping politicians who could be tempted to meet popular demands for redistribution by dipping into the army's coffers.

The third ground is geopolitical. The military values its relationship with the United States and the peace with Israel—things about which most potential claimants to Egypt's democratic future are decidedly ambivalent. For example, though none of them advocates war with the Jewish state, politicians from across the political spectrum—from Islamists to secular leftists—appear united in their desire to revise the Egyptian-Israeli relationship. The MB's supreme guide, Muhammad Badi, recently declared that the new Egyptian parliament (once one is elected) should revisit the terms of the Camp David Accords. Hamdin Sabahi, a popular former member of parliament and potential presidential candidate, told an Egyptian newspaper in January 2011 that “people are unhappy. They want better living conditions. They want to say no to the U.S. and Israel.” Even Ayman Nour says that the continuation of the treaty must be put to a popular vote. As if to prove that these politicians have their fingers on the pulse of the street, thousands of Egyptians protested outside the Israeli embassy on May 15, provoking the military and riot police to respond with force and mass arrests.

Given its jealously guarded political autonomy, its economic interests, and its relationships with Israel and the United States, it is hard to see the military embracing unfettered democracy. At the same time, it is clear that the generals have little stomach for the business of day-to-day governance. Policing the streets, protecting religious minorities, setting economic policy—these are not the core competencies of the men with guns. Instead, the military prefers to reign but not quite rule—maintaining its economic prerogatives and freedom from civilian oversight while controlling (or at least setting the parameters of) Egyptian foreign and defense policy, but otherwise letting elected politicians run the show. It is a delicate balancing act, and other countries—Pakistan, Sudan—have failed to pull it off. Optimists may hope that Egypt can achieve the so-called Turkish model, but this can easily devolve into stretches of ineffectual civilian government punctuated by numerous “corrective coups.”

### **Crafting the New Republic**

In the meantime, the SCAF continues to try to engineer its preferred outcome, to steer Egypt between the Scylla of democracy and the Charybdis of military government. But the project has come perilously close to failing. In fact, Egypt's prodemocracy forces are today

embroiled in a season of internecine conflict that can be traced to one of the SCAF's first decisions in power—to suspend the 1971 Constitution. From the SCAF's standpoint, this was a necessary decision. After all, the protesters wanted change. If the constitution's rulebook had been followed after Mubarak's departure, then Speaker Surur would have become president, ruling until the middle of April, when a new presidential election would have been held. The NDP-dominated parliament would have remained in place, and the popular desire for change would have gone unfulfilled. This was clearly a nonstarter. But there was self-interest at play, too. The 1971 Constitution, after all, contained no provisions for military rule.

But the suspension of the constitution also stoked fears that the military was settling in for the long haul. In order to allay them, the SCAF announced the selection of a committee of eight jurists whose task would be to amend the existing constitution so as to facilitate a rapid transfer of power to an elected, civilian government. The committee produced a set of amendments that strengthened judicial oversight of elections, limited presidential terms, opened up competition for the presidency, and eliminated some of the most egregious presidential powers. The most important amendment, however, was one that stipulated that the newly elected parliament would have six months to select a hundred-member constituent assembly that would then have another six months to craft a new constitution and put it to a popular vote.

The amendments were put to a popular referendum on March 19, and passed with 77 percent of the vote, amid record—although still rather low—turnout of 41 percent. Islamists were pleased with the outcome, believing that it offered a clear roadmap out of military rule and to a new parliament and constitution. Others, including every major candidate for Egypt's presidency—from Ayman Nour to Amr Moussa to Mohamed ElBaradei—decried it. They argued that a new constitution should come *before* elections (which, they feared, were poised to bring an Islamist majority). And though the result of the referendum should have settled this debate, it merely intensified it. As of this writing, more than ten weeks after the referendum, liberal politicians continue to call for a constitution first, then elections. On May 27, thousands of Egyptians took to the streets to press this demand. The MB argued that the the protesters' appeal was at odds with the will of the voters expressed during the March referendum. Calls to depart from the timetable set by the referendum, the Brothers said, were undemocratic.

Of course, the MB's exquisite sensitivity to democratic niceties would carry more weight had the group not countenanced an even greater violation of the voters' will immediately following the referendum. One could have been forgiven for expecting that, once the amendments passed, the existing Egyptian constitution would have been reactivated. This, after all, is what the Egyptian people were led to believe. The bal-

lot paper referred specifically to Articles 75, 76, 77, 88, 93, 139, 148, and 189—numbers that only make sense as part of a larger document. Yet the SCAF—perhaps realizing that it could not reanimate the 1971 Constitution without facing the same legitimacy problem that caused it to suspend it in the first place—decided after the referendum to scrap the existing constitution entirely. What has taken its place is an interim “constitutional declaration” that includes not only the referendum-approved amendments, but 55 other articles never put to a vote. Not only was this move of questionable legitimacy, but the interim document—as Nathan Brown and Kristen Stilt have shown—actually contains fewer mechanisms for parliamentary oversight of the executive than did the previous charter.<sup>5</sup> And yet the Muslim Brothers—who today accuse their opponents of trifling with the will of the people—viewed the SCAF’s high-handed decision with serenity.

The quarrel among Egyptian opposition forces over the *timing* of the new constitution could be a preview of the conflict that will ensue when they are forced to discuss its actual substance. Constitution-writing processes are inherently turbulent, involving arguments over fundamental values. The nature of the economy, the extent of individual rights, legislative-executive relations, and the role of faith in matters of state all have to be settled. It is not clear that the fragile Egyptian political fabric is ready for this. By making the writing of a new constitution issue number one on Egypt’s post-Mubarak political calendar, the SCAF may have bequeathed the country an even greater challenge than the unseating of Mubarak.

The issue of religion will be particularly fraught. The 1971 Constitution (like the interim charter) guarantees that the “principles of the Islamic *shari’a* constitute the main source of legislation.” Secularists understandably would prefer no mention of Islamic law, whereas Islamists would prefer a far more robust and specific one. Deputy Prime Minister Yahya al-Gamal recently proposed splitting the difference and declaring Islamic law to be “a major” as opposed to “the main” source of legislation, but was met with calls for his dismissal by Islamist groups including the MB. Christians—who make up 10 percent of Egypt’s population—are understandably alienated by the Islam-specific language. Naguib Sawiris, a Christian billionaire and the founder of a new political party, has argued for tempering that language with a provision allowing non-Muslims to be governed by their own religious laws—a proposition that some see as divisive. One of the old constitution’s advantages was that it did not resolve these questions to anyone’s full satisfaction. Now these issues will have to be refought.

### The Islamist Challenge

The SCAF, in an attempt to soothe the liberals, has convened a National Accord of all major Egyptian political and social forces (from

political parties to soccer clubs) and tasked them with generating basic principles for the new constitution in advance of the parliamentary elections. This idea has merit—Jamal Benomar, writing in these pages, has argued that if you cannot write a constitution before you have elections, then agreement on basic constitutional principles prior to elections is the next best thing.<sup>6</sup> The MB, however, has refused to take part in what it views as an attempt by secularists to usurp the authority of the parliament that will be elected in September.

Given that the recommendations of the Accord are not binding and that the country's best-organized political force has rejected it out of hand, it is hard to see the Accord achieving anything. It therefore seems—barring another surprise from the SCAF—that the real fight over the constitution will come at the ballot box in September. Liberal and secular Egyptians, fearful of a sweeping victory by well-organized Islamists, are not likely to succeed in their calls for delaying elections. The Brotherhood, for its part, has tried to allay fears of Islamist domination by announcing that it will compete for only a portion of the seats. Yet that portion has been going up. In February, Badi announced that the MB would seek only a third of the seats, but last month the Brotherhood's new political party announced that it would seek half. (At the time of this writing, the Brothers are still standing by their decision not to field a presidential candidate.)

Recent polling data shed some light on the MB's likely electoral fortunes. A telephone poll of 615 Egyptians conducted between March 9 and 20 by the International Peace Institute found that 38 percent of respondents viewed the MB somewhat or very favorably, but only 12 percent said that they would vote for the MB in the upcoming parliamentary election. A Pew Research Center poll of 1,000 Egyptians conducted between March 24 and April 7 found that 75 percent rated the MB somewhat or very favorably, while 17 percent declared that the MB should lead the next government.

These figures are consistent with past MB performance. In the 2005 elections that gave the MB a fifth of the seats in parliament, the Brothers ran only 160 candidates, enough to compete for slightly more than a third of the seats. They won somewhere between 2.5 and 3 million votes out of 8 million cast. The number of eligible voters in that election was approximately 32 million. To put it another way, the Brothers were supported by around 30 percent of actual voters and less than 10 percent of eligible ones. But we should not read too much into these numbers, generated as they were by an electoral process riddled with fraud and voter intimidation, and conducted under a majoritarian, candidate-centric electoral system that magnified the MB's organizational advantages.<sup>7</sup>

In any case, hand-wringing over the MB's electoral fortunes may be beside the point. Islamist representation in the coming parliament will not be restricted to the Brothers, and will include parties and groups

whose electoral weight and commitment to democracy remain unknown. There has been a proliferation of Islamist parties and political actors in the post-Mubarak landscape, from the moderately Islamist Wasat party, to the Renaissance Party founded by breakaway MB members led by Abd al-Munim Abu al-Futuh, to Salafi groups such as the Salafi Preaching Society and the Supporters of Muhammad's Path—the latter of which has declared its intention to form a political party. Secularists must worry about more than just the MB.

How many votes would the broader Islamist bloc get? It has been argued that the 77 percent of Egyptians who voted “yes” in the recent constitutional referendum are a reflection of the Islamists' voting strength, since all Islamist groups supported the amendments and campaigned hard for their passage. Egypt's largest and oldest Islamic charity, the Legitimate Association for the Cooperation of the Adherents of the Book and the Path of Muhammad, ran an ad on the front page of *Al-Ahram* on March 16 declaring it a religious duty for Muslims to vote for the amendments. After the vote, Muhammad Hussein Yaqub, a popular Salafist preacher, declared the result a victory for the faith and is reported to have announced, “That's it, the country is ours.”<sup>8</sup> But just because Islamists supported the amendments does not mean that everyone who voted yes is an Islamist (the NDP, which would be dissolved by court order in mid-April, called on its members to vote yes). Moreover, as with referenda elsewhere, yes votes are probably best understood as popular endorsements of the current rulers (in this case, the SCAF).<sup>9</sup>

All of which is to say that we do not know how powerful the various Islamist groups are or will prove to be come September. What we do know is that Islamists of all stripes will do their best to convince tradition-minded Egyptians that the coming election is about who gets to draft Egypt's constitution, and thus about whether or not the country will retain its Islamic identity. If a religious cleavage takes hold in Egyptian politics, we may have the SCAF and its insistence on constitutional innovation to thank.

### Out with the Old?

Although retaining the 1971 Constitution (at least for a time) may have had its upsides, it is easy to understand why this move would have been unpalatable (even as most Egyptians seemed willing to accept it). The country had undergone a revolution, and revolutions require the elimination of old orders and the erection of new ones. Symbols of the old regime needed to be torn down, whether these were documents, institutions, or people. This yearning for a clean break with the past was behind the protests that on March 3 brought down the cabinet of Mubarak's last prime minister, Ahmed Shafiq; the storming and subsequent dissolution of the Interior Ministry's State Security Investigations Ser-

vice on March 4; and the April 7 “Friday of Cleansing” protests that culminated in the disbanding of the NDP and the military’s acquiescence in the arrest of Mubarak, his wife, and his sons.

Today, a number of NDP leaders and former Mubarak ministers cool their heels in prison, awaiting trial on charges ranging from corruption to torture to murder. Former interior minister Habib al-Adli—a man responsible for gruesome violations of Egyptians’ human rights—was sentenced on May 5 to twelve years in jail for money laundering, and is currently standing trial for ordering the use of deadly force against the January 25 protesters. On May 22, a police officer was sentenced to death *in absentia* for slaughtering twenty Egyptians during the demonstrations. These punishments are not simply emotionally satisfying, they help to obliterate the culture of impunity with which high government officials—and the security forces in particular—have operated. They remind all in the new Egypt that the lives and property of citizens are sacred.

But the wider the net of justice is cast, the higher the potential political costs may mount. Military leaders, for example, may worry that handing over power could subject them to the same treatment that Mubarak is now receiving. Businessmen, many of whom benefitted from the Mubarak regime’s turn toward crony capitalism, may withhold investment out of fear of prosecution and expropriation. As Adam Przeworski has noted, one of the challenges of democratic transition and consolidation is convincing potential spoilers that their chances under democracy are better than their chances if they try to subvert democracy.<sup>10</sup>

That such subversion is taking place is the conventional wisdom in Egypt. The months since the revolution have seen multiple clashes between Muslims and Coptic Christians, including church burnings in the Giza village of Sul on March 5 and the poor Cairo neighborhood of Imbaba on May 8. On May 4, extortionists touched off a gunfight in downtown Cairo that wounded more than sixty people. Egyptians attribute recent acts of violence to sinister counterrevolutionary forces that, according to Deputy Prime Minister Yahya al-Gamal, are drawing on funds provided by businessmen associated with the old regime and manpower furnished by veterans of the old state-security forces. It is impossible at this remove to know how accurate al-Gamal’s charges are—but even if there is no grand conspiracy to foment disorder, the Interior Ministry and the police have certainly approached the task of restoring order with an unusual degree of hesitancy.

This should not surprise us. The Interior Ministry was for thirty years both the guardian of public order and the boot of the regime on the necks of the Egyptian people. Inducing it to take up the former of its two roles with vigor may require Egyptians to give up the dream of prosecuting too many people for being part of the latter role. And time is running out. Without a functioning security apparatus, the September parliamentary

contests can be expected to turn bloody. As unappetizing as it sounds, getting Egypt to democracy may require allowing those whose job was to protect the old system to take on the job of protecting the new one.

Of course, only Egyptians can decide whether they will be best served by seeking justice or by making sure that all players—including elements of the old regime—feel that they have a place in the new system.

### **Making Democracy Durable**

It is not just elements of the old regime that must see benefits in the new system; so too must the average Egyptians whose support for democracy will be critical to its endurance. In 1954, as Gamal Abdel Nasser (then vice-chairman of the military junta that had seized power two years earlier) dueled with the more democratically minded President Muhammad Naguib, the former was able to mobilize workers to march through the streets yelling, “Down with democracy!” Nasser could do this not because the workers were stupid, but because their only experience with so-called democracy, under the constitutional monarchy of King Farouk, had been marked by high unemployment, poor working conditions, and low pay. We may think that democracy enjoys unshakable legitimacy in the world, but nothing tests democratic commitments like an empty stomach.

And the number of empty stomachs in Egypt is mounting. Economic growth has slowed to around 1 percent (down from more than 5 percent the previous year). On May 16, the SCAF warned darkly of economic calamity, with a 25 percent drop in Egypt’s foreign reserves, a complete halt to foreign direct investment, and more than \$40 million dollars a day in lost tourism revenue. According to the SCAF, 70 percent of Egyptians now live below the poverty line, inflation hovers around 12 percent, and a quarter of the workforce is unemployed. The SCAF has urged Egyptians to get back to work, but its February decision to outlaw labor strikes failed to do much more than intensify suspicion of the military’s sincerity about democracy.

Given this gloomy picture, there are two temptations to which any democratically elected Egyptian government could succumb. The first is to deal with unemployment by padding the state payroll. Since the revolution began, more than half a million temporary government employees have been put on permanent contracts with full benefits, and in May the Finance Ministry announced that it was poised to provide two-million new job opportunities (although not all of these were in the public sector).<sup>11</sup> Today, workers protest to demand the reversal of Mubarak’s privatization initiatives, and it is easy to imagine candidates for political office making concessions to such demands.

The second tendency is to return to a kind of old-fashioned but still-popular Nasserist development strategy. This would involve not only

reversing Mubarak-era privatization measures, but embarking on new large-scale, state-led development projects—as if to match the dramatic refashioning of Egypt’s politics with an equally dramatic reshaping of its economy. Thus, in April 2011 the government of Prime Minister Essam Sharaf announced its plan to undertake a “Desert Development Corridor” megaproject that involves a 2,000-kilometer superhighway in Egypt’s western desert running from the border with Sudan to the Mediterranean, with water diverted from the Nile to allow new “urban communities, industrial plants, and agricultural farms” to bloom.<sup>12</sup>

But neither the dole nor grand development schemes are likely to solve Egypt’s deep economic problems. Expanding the public sector may make a dent in youth unemployment, but experience has shown that such gains will be hard to sustain. Similarly, massive state-driven projects may stimulate the economy in the short term, but they may also waste scarce resources and generate unforeseen and potentially catastrophic environmental consequences. As James Scott has noted, high-modernist, top-down schemes that emerge fully formed from the brains of individual geniuses (in the superhighway’s case, Egyptian geologist and NASA scientist Farouk El-Baz) are almost always inferior to small, incremental experiments built on local knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

The success of democracy in Egypt will ultimately rest on the success of the country’s economy. The relationship between democracy and economic development remains a subject of dispute, but we do know that the two are correlated, and that no democracy has ever failed at a per capita GDP above that which Argentina enjoyed on the eve of the bloodless coup that toppled President Isabel Perón in 1976.<sup>14</sup> In constant 2005 dollars, Argentina’s 1976 GDP per capita was approximately \$11,500. Today Egypt’s is just under half that. This is not the place to review theories of democracy and development—although some might argue that Egypt’s lack of a sizeable middle class renders it bereft of democracy’s civic and cultural underpinnings. A more modest claim is simply that, just as poverty and unemployment were important drivers of the protests that brought down an autocratic government, so too could they drive protests against democratic ones.

Where does all this leave us? It is easy to be pessimistic about Egypt’s prospects. But just as we failed to predict revolution in Egypt, so too will we likely fail in our attempts to foresee Egypt’s fortunes after the revolution. The Egyptian people, after all, have more than amply demonstrated their ability to confound the predictions of experts. What is clear is that where Egypt leads, other Arab countries will (try to) follow. Egypt has long been the cultural and intellectual center of gravity of the Arab world, and the stakes of the Egyptian transition are high. If the country manages to become a functioning democracy, one could imagine every election there becoming a focal point for fresh protests in Syria or Saudi Arabia, with the people of each yearning for their own

version of the democracy that eighty-million of their fellow Arabs enjoy. But if Egypt's transition detours into chaos, Islamist extremism, or economic collapse, its neighbors may consider themselves fortunate to dwell under the lugubrious stability furnished by the strongman.

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## NOTES

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4. Michele Dunne, "Evaluating Egyptian Reform," Carnegie Paper No. 66, Middle East Series, January 2006.

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8. See "Prominent Egypt Salafi Proclaims Victory for Religion in Referendum," Al Masry Alyoum English Edition, 22 March 2011, [www.almasryalyoum.com](http://www.almasryalyoum.com).

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12. On the proposed superhighway, see [http://faroukelbaz.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=22&Itemid=34](http://faroukelbaz.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=22&Itemid=34).

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