

## Egypt: Autocracy, Theocracy or Democracy?

*By Dr. John Bruni*

**E**gypt 2012 is a disaster waiting to happen. After the downfall of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, the ‘Arab Spring’ that engulfed Egypt, quickly turned into a ‘Summer of Discontent’. Today the only organised political opposition in Egypt, (the largest Arab country by population at 82 million), is the theocratically minded Muslim Brotherhood. Other secular political groups that opposed Mubarak were incapable of forming powerful and popularly appealing parties and certainly were in no position to win over the only real political power in Egypt – the country’s military.

This political situation was illustrated in the ‘two-phase’ Egyptian presidential elections held in May and June. The military fielded its own candidate, former air force officer and Prime Minister under Mubarak, Ahmed



Shafiq. The Muslim Brotherhood fielded its own candidate Mohammed Morsi.

But in a surprising twist, on June 15, the Egyptian Supreme Court dissolved the democratically elected, and Muslim Brotherhood dominated parliament, making any new president solely dependent upon the good graces of the SCAF leadership, not a power in his own right. Whoever is called as president on June 24, will effectively be

controlled by SCAF. Crowds are already keeping vigil in Tahrir Square and the likelihood of violence erupting once the new president is called, is high.

The problem with Egypt is that it cannot simply let domestic political processes evolve at the ballot box, as should be the case were people allowed to follow the path of Western democracy. Egypt sits at the centre of a strategic maelstrom.



Along its northeastern flank lies its old foe Israel. Having fought 3 major wars with Israel (1948, 1967 and 1973), peace and the restoration of its sovereignty over the Israeli-occupied Sinai Peninsula came at the cost of signing and maintaining the 1978 Camp David Peace Accords. This treaty has been the foundation of Israeli-Egyptian ties ever since, largely due to the fact that the Egyptian military was encouraged, by the US, to turn into a praetorian guard for the sitting Egyptian President. While the Camp David Accords were deeply unpopular among Arab states, pan-Arab jihadists, Arab nationalists and socialists, and even a good

proportion of the Egyptian people, the treaty did have and still has many benefits for the Egyptian military. So long as the border with Israel remains demilitarised, the Egyptian military has access to vast amounts of US dollars, US military technology, and US intelligence. This Faustian pact, however, precluded Mubarak's Egypt from taking a leadership role in the Arab world (at least not one that publicly declared Israel an enemy state). Arguably, Mubarak and his



supporters believed that sacrificing Egypt's more belligerent national ambitions was certainly a price worth paying because it ensconced them in power, and enabled them to plunder Egyptian wealth, suppress anti-government groups (real or imagined) and through this, control the Egyptian body-politic. While Mubarak sat at the apex of this structure, an unedifying changelessness pervaded – changeless and timeless as the pyramids themselves. Political change, whether temperate through various secular parties, or religiously based through the Muslim Brotherhood, was seen as an existential threat to Mubarak's power and system of governance because no other political party was so wedded to the status quo with Israel. And, since no one in Egypt could guarantee that an opposition leader would not try to exploit the ever-unpopular Camp David Accords, Mubarak's international backers in Washington and Tel Aviv turned a blind eye to the Egyptian president's anti-democratic behaviour.

While the ouster and subsequent trial of Mubarak that followed the Arab Spring was a time for celebration, few commentators in the West understood or foresaw that Mubarak's system of governance was much more adaptable to changing conditions than met the eye. The head of the snake might have been cut off, but the body survived. It was as though the Egyptian military had a 'plan-B' in case of such a contingency. They quickly moved away from open association with the Mubarak years but in actual fact, except for a few cosmetic changes, still represent the past that they profited from. To some Egyptians, especially those who were comfortable with the old regime and who were unhinged by the potential for radical changes that the Arab Spring promised, a return to past ways is a welcome relief. People might not be represented well at the political level, but they could go about their business so long as they left politics alone and had no true aspirations for their country. This sullen conservatism will, for the time being, keep SCAF's (silent) foreign supporters happy. In their eyes a break in Egypt and Israel's relations remains unlikely in the foreseeable future. It will also mean that a return to a moribund political structure will curtail any form of national, social, economic and political evolution. If this prevents another ruinous Middle East war, perhaps this outcome would be the lesser of two evils. But the problem is that the Egyptian people, through the Tahrir Square protests that brought down Mubarak, have opened themselves to dreams of a different Egypt and this will be hard to quash now

that the idea of political change is sweeping over this ancient land.

Along Egypt's western flank is Libya. The end of the Qaddafi era is still playing out within that country. Large chunks of the country's arid southern hinterland is ungovernable while the National Transitional Council remains unable to take its eyes off developments along the thin Mediterranean strip that forms Libya's urban and developed 'spine' linking the country's two largest cities – Tripoli and Benghazi. Tribal factionalism has filled the void left by Qaddafi's long-standing autocracy. Recently Tripoli's international airport was occupied by a tribal militia. Fighting between rival tribes is not uncommon on the streets of Tripoli and Benghazi. Qaddafi loyalists still roam some of Libya's rural towns and villages, but, with the Colonel dead, his family scattered, and his heir apparent arrested on war crimes charges, the days of Qaddafi autocracy are over. Unfortunately the days of Libyan democracy are a long way off too. Instability in Libya is both a challenge and an opportunity for Cairo. At stake are Libya's oil and gas fields. As Libya is a small country, populated by only some 5 million people, a weak and divided Libya may pose a challenge. Jihadists based in Libya can readily move across the shared, long and porous border between Libya and Egypt to attack Western interests, or to simply rattle the public's confidence in SCAF governance. Libya, lacking a political centre of gravity, might be open to overt or subtle Egyptian pressure aligning the interests of Tripoli with the interests of

Cairo in a way that would never have been imagined under the former nationalist Qaddafi regime. If handled correctly, Cairo might well gain 'preferred access' to Libyan oil and gas, two critical resources that resource poor Egypt needs in order to fulfil any future strategic ambition. No doubt, as the political situation in Cairo is still unclear, strategic manoeuvrings of this order of magnitude are a little beyond the more immediate concerns of stabilising Egypt's politics within the confines of Cairo.

In the south, Egypt faces the ongoing crisis of the two Sudans. The short conflict between the countries in April over the Heglig oil fields demonstrated the fragility of relations between newly independent South Sudan and Sudan. An escalation of this crisis would certainly not be in the interest of SCAF or the new Egyptian president. As Sudan is a fellow Muslim country with a dictatorial president (and war criminal) at its helm – Omar Bashir – SCAF might feel obliged to lend some covert assistance to the government in Khartoum if for no other reason but to ensure that Sudan keeps its transport lines open to secure Egypt's food imports. The fact that Bashir has yet to rename his country 'North' Sudan, which now it technically is, is perhaps illustrative that the Bashir regime might not believe that the newly separated South will remain permanently out of Khartoum's reach.

Add to this a sense of continuing crisis over the ownership of water resources of the Nile basin, which essentially irrigates and

quenches the thirst of eleven African countries: Burundi; Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); Egypt; Ethiopia; Eritrea; Kenya; Rwanda; Sudan; South Sudan; Tanzania & Uganda – we see that Egypt's strategic position, especially to its south, is pretty grim. In the absence of a dynamic and innovative approach to break the multitude of local and international feuds over water, the best that Egypt can hope for under a SCAF dominated government is to maintain the status quo. This might mean no immediate improvement, but also no immediate deterioration.

In the end, this far from complete picture of Egyptian internal and external problems shows that the way forward for Cairo will be fraught with complex challenges, challenges that only an inspired and innovative leadership can tackle. Considering that so far SCAF has only shown itself good at preserving power, unless something dramatic happens to change the very nature of politics in Egypt, the Egyptian people will be left with a stultified, conservative base, which promises nothing and Egypt's leadership aspirations within the Arab world will remain an untapped potential.

#### **Following Images Accessed 24/06/2012**

SCAF Presidential candidate Shafiq image:

<http://en.rian.ru/images/16284/69/162846949.jpg>

Muslim Brotherhood Presidential candidate Morsi image:

<http://suffragio.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/morsirunoff.jpg>

Egypt map:

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/4b/Egypt\\_\(orthographic\\_projection\).svg/250px-Egypt\\_\(orthographic\\_projection\).svg.png](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/4b/Egypt_(orthographic_projection).svg/250px-Egypt_(orthographic_projection).svg.png)