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About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

The “Bearded Elites” and the Sad State of Egyptian State Institutions

by *Silvia Colombo*

Twenty months into the people’s revolution in Egypt that toppled Hosni Mubarak’s autocracy, it is difficult to find the vibrant hope and joyful expectations shared by thousands of people in early 2011 in the streets, in discussions, and in official declarations, when some risked their lives yearning for freedom and justice. Fatigue has gripped the Egyptian transition, threatening the derailment of democratization and making more likely a second revolutionary wave. A number of factors seem to point in this direction. Economically, the country is approaching the edge of the abyss, and social frustration is giving rise to growing tensions. The new ruling elite seems to be plagued by disputes outside and divisions inside. At the same time, some troublesome elements of the old state institutions have remained unchanged.

The next few weeks will be crucial for the future of Egypt. The establishment of a truly democratic polity will not only depend on skillfully designed institutional arrangements, but also on the ability and willingness of the current president and government to bridge some divisions and mend conflicts. In the complex Egyptian

transition, the role of the transatlantic partners will be crucial in furthering democracy and in defending people’s expectations as long as they remain committed to democratization and avoid sliding back into the old stability-first politics.

A Lack of Vision to Address Socio-Economic Problems

When President Mohamed Morsi was elected in June 2012, with an undeniably narrow victory compared to the landslide triumph of the Freedom and Justice Party in the parliamentary elections of December 2011-January 2012, he was saluted as the champion of the struggle against corruption. He signaled the unequivocal departure from Mubarak’s socio-economic policies that had favored corrupt crony capitalist networks without trickling down to the average Egyptian. After the election, Morsi promised to tackle the problem of traffic jams and street garbage, which make the life of most Cairo residents a nightmare. Furthermore, the poor — over 25 percent of the population¹ and, according to

¹ “Poverty Sparks New Unrest in Egypt,” *IPS*, October 18, 2012, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/10/poverty-sparks-new-unrest-in-egypt/>

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some accounts, the biggest constituency of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists² — were in dire need of bona fide measures that would improve the quality of staple foods. To date these problems, which tend to create disorder and increase tensions among the population, have not been solved, despite the enthusiastically received speech delivered by Morsi in Cairo Stadium on October 6, 2012, touting various successes in the provision of basic services since his election in June.³

The slogan of the Tahrir Square revolution, “Bread, Dignity, and Social Justice,” seems to have remained a dead letter, while the broader macro-economic picture continues to deteriorate, with foreign reserves plummeting from US\$36 billion in October 2010 to \$15 billion in October 2012 and a budget deficit rising to \$28 billion. Negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a \$4.8 billion loan have sparked many controversies from leftists and liberals concerned with the imposition of a new oppressive conditionality, on one hand, and Salafists who used to oppose the IMF loan on pious grounds on the other. Next to this, the current government has not yet disclosed its economic policies. It has balked at the removal of fuel subsidies, recoiled at restructuring the tax system, and placed a ceiling on public sector wages.

It is true that expectations have risen so high and problems are so serious that any government would have had enormous trouble addressing them. This, however, does not detract from the fact that the current Islamist-led government does not seem to possess the necessary expertise and vision to tackle the situation. The lack of expertise can be partly explained by the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood, the cradle of the new Egyptian political elite, has been trained for decades to work as a nongovernmental organization and to criticize the previous governments on the basis of Shari’a law. Now they claim to be learning by doing, yet have neither the appropriate means to diagnose the situation nor clear policies to deal with it. Nevertheless, this dismal situation could have been improved if the current government had shown some willingness to compromise

and accept advice from other forces. Their inexperience with politics and a certain degree of arrogance have so far prevented Islamists from reaching out.

Power Struggles Outside, Cleavages Inside

What is taking place in Egypt today could be described as a gradual process of “Ikhwanization” — from *Ikhwan*, the Arabic word for the Muslim Brotherhood — at the societal as well as state institutional levels. In the past four months, ten governors have been removed and substituted with officials who are close to the Muslim Brotherhood; some 50 editors-in-chief of the main newspapers and news outlets have also been replaced. The struggle for power has found its best expression at the level of the upper echelons of state institutions. Despite the manifold and inconsistent rumors circulating about the relation between the Islamist-led government and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), it seems that Morsi has had to renegotiate the deal with the military in the attempt to ratchet down the confrontation between the two most powerful institutions of the country, i.e., the military and the president. Morsi knows perfectly well that the military represents his best ally since, as history teaches, both institutions have always aimed at maintaining the status quo and have found ways to support one another by dividing power between them.

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2 Marina Ottaway, *Slow Return to Normal Politics in Egypt*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 26, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/10/26/slow-return-to-normal-politics-in-egypt/e750>

3 “Morsi Highlights 100-Day Achievements in Speech,” *Egypt Independent*, October 7, 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/morsi-highlights-100-day-achievements-speech>

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Structurally, Egyptian society is deeply stratified. Conflicts and disputes, originating from the previous authoritarian “divide and rule” practice, have neither softened nor been managed through pluralism and free and fair ballots. On the contrary, they have intensified following the empowerment of the Freedom and Justice Islamist party during the past ten months. Today, the main dividing line is between Islamists and secular/liberal forces, which prefer to call themselves “civic forces.” This political cleavage runs through society and is crystallized in the struggle between the government and the opposition. The constitution-making process is not immune to this. One of the major limits of the Constituent Assembly currently in charge of drafting the new Egyptian Constitution — the second assembly, after a first one was declared illegal in April 2012 — lies in the irreconcilable rift between these two groups, which so far has prevented the assembly from furthering the goals of the revolution by proposing a draft that represents a true break from the past. Quite telling is the fact that in the harsh struggle to define the new “identity” of the country, e.g., the highly debated Article 2 about Shari’a principles as the main source of law, the Al-Azhar Institution’s position to keep the article as it was in the 1971 Constitution has gained the supreme scholarly Sunni authority a place in the civic camp, as opposed to the Islamist-led conservative attempt to modify the article in the direction of increased restrictions.

Not only are the Islamists blamed by the civic forces for not engaging or seeking a dialogue with them, but calls for greater democracy are also being heard within the Muslim Brotherhood itself. An interesting trend is the deepening cleft between the old guard and a younger generation of Muslim Brothers, who call for better representation inside the movement and the party, and question the old ways of doing things. Other conflicts inside the Salafist Nur Party also show that the political engagement of Islamist movements has come at a cost and that divisions are as much within the Islamist front as between them and the civic forces. Internal developments could soon start eroding the strength of these organizations from within, while they are busy occupying positions of power.⁴

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The Resilience of the Deep State

The process of Ikhwanization has so far provided the Islamist-led government and the president with a comfortable position of authority, which is unrivaled in the history of the movement. At the same time, however, it has increased the burden of responsibility and the risk of losing the trust of the people if the situation deteriorates. To run the complex state machine, the new rulers still need the unchanged, deeply rotten and corrupt state institutions, which have not been touched by the revolution and the ensuing transition. Only the thin upper layer representing the leadership of the ministries, the governmental bodies, the bureaucracies and the assemblies has been changed with the removal of the old cadres and the (skilled) technocrats of the Mubarak era. The mammoth and dysfunctional state institutions are still in place and are occupied by the same people, who tend to do things in the same old way.

Healing the Egyptian institutional decay represents a much greater, longer-term challenge of the transition, something that cannot be addressed after just one round of democratic elections or by the new “bearded elites” alone. When most people in Egypt today claim that things were better before, meaning under Mubarak, they do not have in mind the sad condition of state institutions, but the long queues to buy low-quality bread, the mountains of trash in the streets, and the chronic traffic snarls. Tackling these problems and improving the everyday life of Egyptians require addressing

⁴ K. Al-Anani, “End of the Salafist Utopia,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 1120, October 25-31, 2012, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2012/1120/op4.htm>

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long-standing issues of institutional decay, which, in turn, call for far deeper and truly democratic changes. The establishment of democracy is the precondition for addressing corruption, inequality, and exclusion. What we observe today is the growing risk of derailment of the transition process and of a second revolutionary wave that can be ascribed to the continuation of the status quo and to the lack of vision of the current elites in power. The transatlantic partners have an interest in a sustainable democratic evolution of the Egyptian transition. They should assist this process first and foremost by remaining fully committed to the core principles of democracy and their consistent implementation in their relations with those in charge of leading the Egyptian transition. It is not time yet to sit back and relax. The stakes are too high.

About the Author

Silvia Colombo is a researcher in the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme at IAI. She holds a master's in Near and Middle Eastern Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and is currently a Ph.D. student in comparative politics at Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane in Florence.

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