

# Egypt's 3G problem

By Rabab el-Mahdi

## ■ Executive summary

Egypt is facing a crisis of governance, governability and governmentality, of which the recent ouster of Muhammad Mursi is merely a manifestation. The question the country faces is not one of who governs or how they come to power, but, rather, how to govern. The ousting of Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood defies the simplistic binary of coup d'état versus revolution, since it had elements of both. At root it resulted from a new wave of popular upheaval in which organised state forces capitalised on public anger. Currently a post-2011 revolutionary process is seeking new forms of governance and governmentality through an unorganised mass movement, while non-democratic forces, including the military, Mubarak supporters and the Muslim Brotherhood, are undermining this unorganised popular movement and attempting to channel it in order to maintain non-democratic arrangements, whether behind an Islamist or pseudo-secular facade.

Since the huge crowds of Egyptians turned out on June 30th 2013 demanding early presidential elections, the main debate has been whether the ousting of Muhammad Mursi took place through a coup or a popular uprising. While construing it one way or the other has specific implications, in this particular case the binary choice (coup or revolt) fails to capture the complexity of the current Egyptian political reality. Unfortunately, sticking to basic political science terms to characterise and define complex socio-political events is the wrong approach, akin to trying to measure air pressure by using a ruler or scales. The revolutionary upheaval that started in Egypt in 2011 cannot be measured in terms of a linear democratic transition yardstick, which overemphasises procedural considerations (i.e. regular free and fair elections) at the expense of substantive demands for justice, equity and freedom.

Hence, trying to establish whether what happened was a military coup or a popular revolt detracts from the essence of what occurred, because both aspects were present: there was a military intervention, but it hinged on popular protests and not vice versa. However, such debates and framings are also misleading, since they ignore or obfuscate the essential features of Egypt's ongoing challenge.

The core of what happened is a crisis of governability, governance and governmentality (what I call the 3Gs) and not simply a struggle between an elected president and the military. This prolonged crisis has been a key feature of Egyptian politics since January 2011 and will continue to be so until a new formula for governance (i.e. quality of government) and governmentality (i.e. how to govern) is reached.

### **An eroded state**

While many would like to think of the Egyptian January 25th (2011) Revolution as the end of Mubarak's rule, it more accurately marks the end of the 1952 political order, which depended on a flexible formula of co-optation and coercion with some nationalist undertones. From Nasser to Sadat and finally Mubarak, this formula was applied successfully, despite the different alliances and rhetoric that each president depended on.

The ousting of Mubarak marked the end of the applicability of this formula, but failed to replace it with another. Declining financial resources over the decades preceding Mubarak's fall meant that co-optation through clientalistic networks was not sustainable and had reached its end.

Similarly, the inability of the security forces to put down the protests of January 2011 exposed the limitations of the system's coercive arm. Over the following two years successive governments, first under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and then under the elected president, Muhammad Mursi, have attempted in vain to restore this order.

Many reasons are usually cited to account for Mursi's decline, including his issuing of a constitutional declaration in November 2012 that would have allowed him to rule by decree, unchecked by any other authority (legislative or judicial); using extreme force against protestors in Port Said governorate and Cairo; appointing members of the Muslim Brotherhood to key executive positions; and excluding all non-Islamist political forces, all of which are used to explain the huge turnout on June 30th 2013.

However, these actions were actually only symptoms of a core syndrome in which Mursi opted for the same mode of governance and governmentality that his predecessors followed, i.e. a closed clique of power holders (the Muslim Brotherhood instead of the National Democratic Party) that attempted to buy the allegiance of the security forces (the police and the army) and the business elite. In other words, during his year in power Mursi sought to restore the same order that led to the demise of the Mubarak regime. This order lacked transparency, popular participation in decision-making and accountability. By the end of Mursi's year in power the country had proven to be ungovernable: the security apparatus was in mutiny, the business elite were openly defying the regime and millions of Egyptians were protesting on the streets.

Whether the military had stepped in on July 3rd to dispose Mursi or not, it was clear that Egypt was experiencing a crisis of governability prompted by the president's attempts to utilise a mode of governmentality that ended with Mubarak. Like the SCAF, the Muslim Brotherhood under Mursi tried to restore the Mubarak state (in terms of its processes and institutions) without understanding that its pillars had been eroded and that January 25th was the manifestation of this erosion, not its cause.

### **A revolutionary process oscillating between reformative forces**

Beneath the vehement identity-based struggle between the Islamists and non-Islamist forces is a very deep class divide and crisis of governmentality that makes governability impossible without structural changes. What Egypt is facing is not a crisis about who governs (Islamist or not) or how they come to power (through elections or a coup), but, rather, about *how* to govern.

Governmentality, understood as the art of governing and statecraft, is the main question that Egypt currently faces.

This involves the process constituted by institutions, procedures, strategies, reflections and tactics that permit the exercise of this quite specific, albeit very complex form of power that operates on and via an entity called the "state".

On the one hand, whether on February 11th 2011 or July 3rd 2013, the military intervention was an attempt to maintain the system as is, to curtail further rooting of a revolutionary process and to pre-empt changes in governmentality. In both instances, sacrificing the head of state served to ensure that the state itself was left untouched. And while the state in terms of its apparatuses and structures was (and remains) too weak to be restored, governmentality – i.e. the processes and modes by which the state governs – was the main target of attempts to save it.

On the other hand, an ongoing revolutionary process is under way that is prompting a change in governmentality. This is why even the two most conservative forces, the Islamists and the military (now arch-enemies) repeatedly resorted to appeals to the "popular will" and called for mass demonstrations to demonstrate this "will". Both groups have opted for some form of nationalist populism (Islamist and Egyptian, respectively) and have called on popular participation at key moments as means of demonstrating their power and because mass participation became an important and necessary element in Egyptian politics. Interestingly, on the last Friday of July 2013 the head of the military, General 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, called on Egyptians to fill Tahrir Square in order to demonstrate the popular will to combat "terrorists" (aka Islamists). Two years earlier, on the last Friday in July 2011, Tahrir Square was full of Islamists calling for a "Friday of the popular will" to send the SCAF – which was in charge at the time – the message that they (the Islamists) were the only force to be reckoned with.<sup>1</sup> While both the Islamists and the military have received fluctuating grassroots support, they are equally suspicious of and averse to popular participation and hence tend to use it only as a means to strengthen their own relative weight in waging a political struggle for power, now that controlling state institutions does not suffice for governability.

What further complicates matters is that the popular desire for a different form and content of government is not organised and is poorly articulated in terms of specific demands. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood and the non-Islamist statistes, the revolutionary force is still based on spontaneity and lacks collective leadership and organisation that can translate its energy into a workable political alternative.

### **Conclusion**

Despite a long history of political theory debate over whether democracy is a process or a set of values, the ousting of Muhammad Mursi in one of the waves of revolutionary

<sup>1</sup> Dubbed by the media as Kandahar Friday, the Islamists mobilised after a disagreement with other political forces on how to proceed with the writing of the constitution. This was a key moment, since it was the first time that Islamists had demonstrated openly against non-Islamist forces.

upheaval in Egypt attests the limitations of procedural democracy and minimalist definitions of the concept. The deposition of Mursi – an elected president – after only one year of his term in office in ways very similar to how Mubarak was deposed after thirty years in office is not an end to democratic transition as such, as many would argue, but testimony to the fact that procedural democracy cannot suffice. In other words, being the first elected civilian president of Egypt, as Mursi took great pleasure in calling himself, is insufficient protection against popular wrath if that president fails to deliver on democracy's substantive components in terms of its maximalist definition, i.e. freedom, equity and justice.

However, this does not mean that the emerging order is or will necessarily be more democratic in the deeper sense. Rather, the current ruling arrangement in Egypt after July 3rd 2013 is a contradictory one that includes agents of the old political order (pre-2011) and a weaker representation of the more democratic revolutionary order. The competing world views that these groupings represent will continue a struggle that cannot be decided to the latter's advantage without the proper organisation of pro-revolutionary forces on the ground.

Nothing can save Egypt short of organised forces that express multiple grassroots interests and can channel these interests into the making of the political process itself and not just use "the masses" selectively at particular

junctions – which has been the populist undertaking of various nationalists, including the Muslim Brotherhood and the military. This entails much more than merely casting a ballot or changing presidents. Egyptians need a new form of deliberative participatory democracy that transcends mere representation and an organised political force that can push for this alternative. Meanwhile, the international community should shift its attention away from its attempts to label what happened in Egypt and consequently from its reductionist approach to this revolution as a linear democratic transition. But both Egyptians and concerned observers worldwide should pay close attention to respect for human rights and the democratic ethos in the broadest sense of the term. Egypt is no exception to the fact that attempts at codifying extra-legal practices on the pretexts of emergency situations and "national security" have swept the world since the events of September 11th 2001. By using the Muslim Brotherhood's violent practices and popular wrath against its rule, and with the military at the helm of power, Egypt could be descending into a spiral of further codifying and normalising repression under the rubric of the "war on terror". Clear and aggressive attempts are under way not only to restore the police state, but also to reinstate a "winner-takes-all" political formula. Preventing the further re-empowerment of the police state and organising popular support for a new and more democratic mode of governance via the upcoming parliamentary elections are two imminent critical challenges that revolutionary forces in Egypt will have to face. ■

## ■ THE AUTHOR

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