

# The Elusive Dream: Constructing a Viable Democracy in Egypt

## The Youthful Tide

Revolution came to Egypt in a heady moment in January 2011. It was a largely joyous and peaceful affair. With due respect to all those who suffered, and especially all those who laid down their lives, in the clashes and conflicts that accompanied that seminal event, given the scale of the crowds involved, it was still a largely peaceful affair. It was driven by youth, who were able to strike a chord with the people and to generate the enormous crowds that became the hallmark of the Egyptian revolution: youthful activists, and crowds, enormous crowds that would see the people of Egypt reclaim their future.

It is normal that youth, who are less emotionally attached to the order in which their elders found a place, even if a marginal place, should feel that if that social order rejects them, they owe it no allegiance. They can and will replace it with one more sympathetic to their aspirations and their dreams.

After their journey from childhood to adulthood and the emptiness of unemployment stretching for weeks, months and years, they see their society through the prism of an anger nurtured by years of unfulfilled assurances and bankrupt policies.

Society sees in these unemployed youths a living condemnation of its policies, a breathing reminder of its failures. The politicians' statements sound hollow even to their own ears, as they guiltily repeat the slogans and the empty promises that other politicians have made before them.

But the explosive energy and creative abilities of these youths is available to the summons of experience. The traction of political dissent is capable of attracting their participation and of rousing their dormant powers like a fire signal in the night.

## The Seductive Power of the Crowd

As one, two, three and more youths congregate, they become a crowd, a

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crowd that begins to acquire a personality of its own. Unlike the crowds that are part of the congestion of daily life of Egyptian urban centres, these crowds have a sense of purpose and direction. I watched the phenomenon take shape before my eyes as, even walking into the crowds, one could be enveloped in their seductive embrace, partake of their mood, and swell their ranks with the contribution of our presence. Crowds are more than a collection of individuals. A crowd is a novel creature that emanates from the aggregation of people, through the togetherness, the merging of the one and the whole, the melting of the person into the collective, as the individual is assimilated into the crowd.

But subsequent events were to pile the disappointments of shattered expectations on the agony of violence and the dreaded hand of death claiming young lives in the endless rounds of confrontations that pitted masses of people against the arrayed forces of the state or simply against other masses of people driven by different ideals and expectations.

And the crowds changed. For crowds have character and purpose, have personality and power.

The big crowds were replaced in many places by small bands. Strange bands of thugs appeared among the revolutionaries. Crime became rife in the streets. Vandalism and destruction emerged. The *Institud'Egypte* was set ablaze. Its collection of books put at risk, and its two centuries of recollections largely destroyed. Elections and a new regime would change the constellation of the actors, and direct different crowds to different purposes. But the streets remained the agora of the people, who went there despite the uncertainties of crime and the vagaries of confrontations.

But these were now more cynical, smaller crowds.

Briefly, the idealism of the crowds was re-ignited in the crowds that were mobilized by the three-month effort of the youth-driven movement *Tamarud* or Rebellion, which sought to harness the alienation and the anger against the Muslim Brotherhood regime headed by its now elected president Mohamed Morsi. They succeeded beyond anyone's dreams. The crowds that went out on 30 June 2013 were larger than those that had ended the Mubarak regime three years earlier. And, again, they were largely peaceful crowds, who occupied all the squares of Egypt. They would force the transition. But the dedicated crowds of Islamists who supported the continuation of the regime, though much smaller, made up for their smaller numbers with a higher degree of commitment and even zealotry to their cause. Confrontations would follow. The crowds, ever the crowds, would remain the favoured means of political expression.

## The Difficult Transformation

But there were other forces at work. There were competing visions of a future Egypt. Those who wanted a state organized along the lines of their visions of Islamist principles, those who wanted a western-style democracy, and even those who hoped to craft a democracy that would be uniquely Egyptian.

The Muslim Brotherhood, a movement which for eighty years has tried to build a society moulded on their vision of Islam, and which had been fought and persecuted by most of Egypt's rulers over the decades, were finally able to assume power by the ballot box, first in parliament then the presidency. But in their eagerness to consolidate their positions, they alienated all the forces in Egypt: from the leftists and Nasserists to the liberals and even the Salafists who share their vision for an Islamist future.

The people were mobilized and the crowds came out again. And the deep cleavages in Egyptian society became

manifest. But the vast majority of the people rejected the rule of the Brotherhood. The rejection of the Muslim Brotherhood included their erstwhile Salafist allies. The Army supported the coalition of the disaffected and the confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters became inevitable. And the vast majority of the people who had overthrown the Muslim Brotherhood presidency now supported the army and police in their confrontations with the Brotherhood. Crowds would demonstrate again. Blood would flow.

### Blood

Blood had been spilled before, but now it was with a new vindictiveness and anger. The hopes for national reconciliation receded. The crowds, ever the crowds, now had a different edge to them. Crowds and blood had become endemic on the Egyptian political scene.

Our dreams still drive us forward, even if the dream of a functional democracy including all in its pluralistic embrace seems more elusive than it ever was, it continues to inspire us and it challenges us to overcome the ugliness of violence and the horror of the blood....

An invisible layer of blood is caked over the political landscape, and it shall never be the same again. The blood of innocent victims and combatants alike.

That blood that ended the innocence of the revolution fueled by people power

It haunts our memories

It blurs our vision

It poisons our mind with thoughts of revenge and retaliation.

And keeps the dream of democracy just out of our reach

The elusive dream that gives meaning to our search

That gives grandeur to our struggles

That brings purpose to our quarrels.

But we must recognize that the promise of democracy will not be realized overnight. The fears of the few should not be allowed to determine the course of

action that we pursue. We continue to pursue that elusive dream that seems just out of reach, forcing us to transcend our current limitations and become better people, forging our determination into the lattice of that desired future.

### Pursuing the Elusive Dream

Whatever their failures, their limitations and their shortcomings, the various rulers that have governed Egypt in the last three years have confronted forces that they little understood and certainly did not control. Shifting alignments reflected changing patterns and configurations of a bewildering array of social and political actors.

The rulers lacked leadership and vision and tried to master and use the old levers of power as they tried to dismantle them and create new instruments of governance – a tricky challenge in the best of circumstances, and an almost impossible task under the rapidly shifting realities of the volatile Egyptian politics of today.

And today, if the prospect of an Islamist future has receded, the spectre of the autocratic state is re-emerging. Where is the central concept of the reassertion of the role of the citizen? Where is the fundamental truth of Egypt's revolution? The idea that democracy is the participation of the people in crafting their own destiny.

Revolutions do not necessarily recover the loss of a rejected truth, for the want of which whole nations fare the worse.

There are many who support strong action against the Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters. Some hope that this can be done without a return to autocracy.

And there are those who want to actively work to avoid the return of autocratic force, the hated centrality of coercive power so long dominant in the Egyptian State.

There are those who, committed to the high ideals of the revolution, want to defend the virtues of rebellion as well as the importance of liberty.

There are those who feel that they cannot be quiet as the centralized and oppressive state reasserts itself, those who cannot

find virtue in a fugitive and cloistered condemnation between friends, and who insist to sally forth and seek out 'the adversary', to destroy that adversary's power. Yet because they perceive that adversary only dimly, they concentrate their anger at the symbols of that power: the public buildings that symbolize governance, and the men whose job it is to defend the law and the existing order of things, be their uniform that of the police or the army.

There is a strange joy to the contest... The magic of the crowds, the attraction of destruction, the assertive exhilaration of the destructive act, the liberation of the moment of vandalizing a hated building in the dust and heat of conflict or the mad logic of the crowd.

When enraged by blatant miscarriage of justice, the disillusioned joined the engaged and the committed and marched on the halls of power and the palaces of justice. An act of defiance and rejection of the old/new order that asserts rejection even if it does not endorse alternatives. It is the centrality of the crowds' act of the defiance that brings about the fusion of private obsession and public fact.

Some have started to reject the crowds, to reject the vague and uninstitutionalized mechanism of power that they represent. They believe that the nation is in danger, and that the economy faces an abyss. Some even consider that the abyss is the certain outcome of the continued upheavals on the streets...

Others have abandoned reason altogether, and certain of the truth of their vision or their cause will not even listen to arguments or see the evidence of a different reality. They plunge madly into the abyss of certitude.

Between the certitude of the abyss and the abyss of certitude, the tangled web of Egyptian politics tries to make sense of the post-revolutionary reality. It tries to reclaim a future, with a glimpse of utopianism, to snatch that luminous elusive future from the jaws of the projected dystopia. That luminous elusive dream that keeps driving us forward. And we will not stop until we turn that dream into reality.