

## Some Comments on the 'Egyptian Revolution' of 2011 (ARI)

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**Theme:** The so-called 'Egyptian Revolution', led by the country's middle-class urban youth, has led to sweeping social and cultural changes that constitute the main asset for a transition towards a more democratic regime, despite the uncertainties regarding the political future following the fall of Mubarak.

**Summary:** As in other Arab countries, the rift between the regime and the young people living in the major cities was what sparked the historic events in Egypt in early 2011. The change was not propelled by the Islamists, but by a middle-class youth desirous of freedom which was able to connect with a society weary of misery and corruption. The social tensions accumulated over years coupled with the autistic exercise of power were the drivers of a popular revolt whose weapons have been the social networks. Now, the question is whether this youth will be able to give rise to a political option that expresses its ideals and balances the influence of the other two major political forces in the country: the military and the Muslim Brotherhood.

### Analysis:

#### *The Rupture Between the Regime and 20 Million Young People*

The demographic and cultural transformations in Egyptian society and their effects on the loss of confidence in the State, especially among the young, were widely known. As well as the odd best-seller like *Inside Egypt: The Land of the Pharaohs on the Brink of a Revolution* (John R. Bradle, 2009) which predicted a revolution based on the observation of day-to-day life, the UNDP had published a number of reports on human development that warned of a potential conflict (see research by Azza Karam and Heba Handoussa). The last of these analytical works highlighted the precariousness of the labour market comprising 20 million Egyptians aged between 18 and 29, referring to them as 'the best candidates to act as agents of change'.

It is a youth whose references are a far cry from those attributed to them by many observers blinkered by the distorted perceptions that have so hampered understanding of the southern shore of the Mediterranean (see the study published by the Anna Lindh Foundation: <http://www.euromedalex.org/trends/report/2010/main>). Their ideals are not so different from those of young people in other countries: they want work and more freedom, they detest corruption and they demand to be listened to and respected. These are values that did not fit well either with the conduct of the regime or with the stereotype of the sceptical and fatalistic Egyptian, detached from the collective fate of his country.

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For 18 days, Tahrir Square in Cairo and the streets of Alexandria showed another youth, frustrated but dynamic, more interested in talking about citizenship and democracy than about religion. These are urban youths who constitute the weak link in the conflict between modernity and archaism which is overrunning the Arab world, and who consider themselves to be the children of globalisation, but at the same time excluded from its benefits.

Many of them are middle-class urban youths, who are precisely those who ignited the flame of uprising. They are youths whose families escaped rural poverty under Nasser and whom the Mubarak regime provided with an education that often culminated in a dead-end when it came to finding work. They grew up in a conservative and Darwinistic environment, from which they have only managed to escape by inhabiting virtual worlds where they create more human futures for themselves. They may still be a minority in Egypt today, which is still a country of rural workers and deprived classes, but they were able to express the desires of the majority and win the support of an entire generation for the uprising. Their daring, and the conduct of a prodigious 'digital guerrilla warfare', the weapons of which were Facebook, Twitter and mobile phones, did the rest.

These young people surprised the world with their self-assured language and their cosmopolitan style, and they revealed an Arab society that was completely different to the one we had coded and pigeon-holed. Who would have said the first break with half a century of autocracy would not come from the feared (or venerated) Islamists but (at least initially) from this new generation? They are, of course, religious youths, in a country like Egypt where nothing is conceivable without Islam or eastern Christianity, but they are bearers of a more diffuse, individual and trivialised version of religion than that of their parents and one that is less State-sponsored. Their headquarters of their plots were not mosques, but virtual networks. Their slogan was not *Allahu akbar* ('God is Great') and much less *al-islam huwa al-hal* ('Islam is the Solution'), the slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1995 elections, which this time was only used by the Salafists who joined the uprising when Mubarak had already lost the contest. Quite the contrary, the most widely-used slogans were *kifaya* ('Enough!') and *irhal* ('Go!'), secular expressions which we might attribute to the youth in any Paris *banlieue*. And their heroes were not Sayid Qutb, or Nasser and certainly not Ayman al-Zawahiri or Osama Bin Laden, conspicuous for their absence in this uprising, but rather some accidental heroes like Wael Ghonim, the young Google executive who ran a decisive Facebook page following the death of an Internet user in Alexandria at the hands of the police.

The uprising has made evident the high degree of individualisation of these new generations, no doubt fostered by digital communications. In fact, it is not possible to bring together the mass of young people who came out onto the streets during the early days of the protests under any of the ideological flags that have mobilised the Egyptians since the fall of King Farouk. With the exception of the Islamists, who joined the movement later (albeit playing a decisive role), most went to the protests without slogans or rallying cries, rather adapting songs learned in football stadiums. They were not answering the prayers of any Imam or the orders of the stale political opposition, but the call of the Internet, in which they are unflinching believers.

This behaviour, so steadfast in its objective of ousting Mubarak, but almost post-modern in its formulation of a diffuse and liquid programme, raises many uncertainties and questions regarding the consolidation of democracy in Egypt. However, its social and cultural scale reveals an underlying current that is highly significant. So much so, that if

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we can predict anything at all it is that Egyptian society will not revert to the way it was during more than half a century. Aside from the political outcome of the 'revolution', which remains to be seen, there has been a conquest of the streets and freedom of thought which it would be very difficult to reverse. And this conquest by the youth has spread to millions of Egyptians who have overcome their fear of the ruling powers. In this connection, the uprising has been a collective citizenship experience which could even become the source of a new national identity, more anchored upon future challenges than upon past glory. This cultural change is, without doubt, the most significant event of all.

#### *A Social and Cultural Upheaval*

Wikipedia closed the debate about whether it should be called uprising or revolution. Before Mubarak flew to Sharm el-Sheikh, Wikipedia published more than 10 pages of information regarding *al-thawrah al-misriyyah sanat 2011* (the Egyptian Revolution of 2011), the third revolution in the country after those of 1919 and 1952. Based on the political nature of the change, Wikipedia has certainly got ahead of itself, but if we look at the historic significance of the fall of the *rais* (president) and we add to it the awakening of Egyptian society, we are looking at something more than an uprising.

As well as being gagged, Egyptian society had been decimated by a culture of survival and petty scheming. In no other Arab country had the State been so lax with regard to the demographic and urban explosion. Mahfouz, al-Aswany, Khamissi and other Egyptian novelists have evoked the underworld that proliferated in the major cities, to which people from Cairo and Alexandria responded with sacrifices, humour and by abandoning all collective responsibility aside from those prescribed by Islam itself. For those of us who thought we knew Egypt a little, this has been the biggest surprise of all: to see that, in those circumstances, the society was able to activate a transforming energy.

It remains to be seen whether that social experience will allow a culture of citizenship to emerge, necessary for the consolidation of a more democratic regime. The youth are beginning to behave in ways that express a new awareness of collectivity, and broad sectors of the urban population are joining in. 'Don't throw rubbish on the street, don't cross while the light's red, don't pay bribes: this is your country now', reads a sign in a middle-class district where the traffic lights haven't worked for years. The loss of fear and renewed confidence in their own capacity also spread to the lower classes, where a number of strikes have been staged to demand wage increases and actions to end the impunity of local political bosses and the police.

What is at stake are the relations of power, hitherto hegemonic among the elites that will now have to learn to share decision-making with a civil society that is increasingly less tame. This is a sea-change that calls into question the unwritten pact that has prevailed for almost 40 years among the elites (civilian and military), who monopolised political and economic power, and religious leaders (Muslims, but also Christians), who have tended to monopolise control of the population from a welfare and moral standpoint.

Management of diversity and the place of women in the new society will be the litmus tests of this change. In a country where Muslims and Coptic Christians have lived in a climate of cold co-existence for 14 centuries and where both Islam and Christianity are conservative-based, Tahrir Square was the scene of unprecedented exchanges between Christians and Muslims, with significant episodes like that of the young militant girl, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, hugging the feminist Nawal el-Saadawi. The distrust of the Coptic Church calls for prudence, but the question is whether the transition will

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culminate in a new climate of peaceful co-existence, or if the political scenario which emerges from the next elections will fuel the suspicions. In any case, in a more democratic society, Muslims and Christians must build a new kind of relationship, based on living together rather than simply co-existing.

As for the plight of women, the uprising also brought tales and images of hope. In a country where sexual harassment is the main social scourge, the challenge posed by the street promiscuity that accompanies all revolutions was successfully overcome, according to the testimony of many Egyptian women. If this new climate is confirmed, there will be more reasons to talk of a 'revolution', since this is, without doubt, the main unresolved issue in Egyptian society. In the long term, education reforms will play a pivotal role; more immediately, it will all hinge on the unwritten pact that we have already referred to between public powers and religious leaders.

#### *The Uncertainties of Political Change*

Now that the initial euphoria has faded, vital questions regarding the political future are emerging. Is this the prelude of regime change, as many young people suggest, or just changes at the heart of the regime? The scale of the challenges, the inexperience of the youth, the role of the Army and time itself all work in favour of a measured response.

It would be bold indeed to try and anticipate what shape the Egyptian transition will take. We do not have experience of the transition to democracy of an Arab country following a popular uprising of this scale and the fact that almost everything remains to be done raises a number of questions. Is it useful to draw on transitions like those of Spain or Portugal? These experiences can help remind us that, when a radical break with the previous order does not take place, as is the case in Egypt, everything hinges on the kind of agreement those promoting change and those resisting it are willing to reach. Lastly, what will be the result of this commitment in Egypt, assuming there are no major disruptions that precipitate the process in one direction or another? We will have our first answer in six months' time, if things go according to plan and free elections are held.

For now, there is still hesitation on both sides; indeed, the sides themselves have yet to be properly defined. The forces of change will emerge from those who occupied Tahrir Square for 18 days: the urban youth, the traditional opposition parties and the Muslim Brotherhood; a heterogeneous mix indeed, combining different generations, political views and religions, unified by the challenge of ousting the *rais* and by having achieved that aim. As expected, this unity has already started to show cracks. Consequently, the move from the uprising to configuring a political agenda will inevitably trigger divisions and misalignments in all parties involved.

The debates are already underway, especially among the youth who are the most active component of the movement, and credited with the most prestige, but also the most anomalous. Some dream of setting up a 'youth party' which would be the genuine upholder of the ideals of 25 January. However, they lack both a programme and visible leaders, and they continue to use the Internet to promote a debate on the future which is fascinating but disorderly. Their weapons continue to be Facebook and the demonstrations on Tuesdays and Fridays in Tahrir Square, but these do not seem like sufficient instruments to organise a mass political party in a country of 80 million inhabitants. Their future will depend on their capacity to find a leadership that reaches beyond the scope of urban youth. This task has as many potential suitors as presidential candidates.

The debate has also begun among the Muslim Brotherhood. They know they are strong, but they are isolated from the rest of the movement, and they need to review their archaic philosophy which collides head-on with the spirit of this revolution. Their youth have proposed that democracy should begin at home. Some look towards Turkey and others think that Egyptian society and Islam are too conservative to follow the same path. As for their electoral space, one can only speculate. It seems most sensible to believe that it will depend on the course of events, although their record in Parliament between 2005 and 2010 is not glorious. This has not been their revolution. An expert like Olivier Roy even called it a 'post-Islamist revolution', based on the authority afforded to him by having proclaimed the limits of political Islam no less than 20 years ago.

Neither is it easy to imagine the role of those who sustained the regime. Will the National Democratic Party, with its more than 3 million members, survive, extricating itself from the corruption, changing its name and presenting itself as the secular bastion versus the Muslim Brotherhood? The disrepute it earned in the last elections, when it won more than 90% of seats in Parliament, makes that an uphill task.

What about the Army? It was also in Tahrir, protecting the demonstrators. Its overwhelming deployment, during more than one month, in all the country's main cities, confirmed the exceptional osmosis, unique in the Arab world, with the civilian population. It could be a guarantor or a player, depending on the circumstances. The military abhor power vacuums and disorder and that is why they have courted the Islamists in the short term, but the Muslim Brotherhood are still their main concern for the future. Their support for the youth appears to be sincere, but it will not be unconditional and the first disagreements have already emerged. Their concept of power is anchored in Egyptian traditions whereby everything goes through the upper echelons of power. That is why their approach will depend on the confidence they have in the presidential leadership instated following the elections.

For now, Egypt is enjoying a well-earned celebration of democracy. The events were on such a scale and the resonance abroad so immediate that few Egyptians doubted they were experiencing a revolution. However, in retrospect, the term does not properly reflect what happened. The historian Robert Zaretsky, when looking at that amazing month from the 'long-term' standpoint which Braudel used to use to interpret the history of the Mediterranean, concludes that the fall of Mubarak may be another step in the millenary process of the loss of influence of the 'Pharaoh'. Initially, it might not seem like much, but if in six months' time Egypt has its first democratically elected president then it would be an historic milestone.

## **Conclusion**

### *The End of a Way of Understanding the Arab World*

The rapidly unravelling events in various North-African countries have shifted the focus of the debate regarding the Arab world. Approaches focusing on the religious identity and/or pre-eminence of the Middle-East conflict are gradually giving way to a renewed interest in social and cultural transformations. In other words: the focus has shifted from mosques to society at large, from the veil to women and from the Koran to the youth; from what is (supposedly) Arabic to the Arabs themselves. If it consolidates, this change would mean replacing a way of thinking anchored upon excessively ideological concepts with another based on a more empirical reflection, able to engage with processes of change.



The lack of focus that has prevailed in the last few decades was based on an idea that is now revealing its limitations, namely that the status quo is inevitable because the only alternative would be the triumph of political Islamism. Underpinned by the need to access fossil fuels, the region's status quo theory was armour-plated in 1945, when Roosevelt met King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud on his return from Yalta. The creation of the State of Israel three years later, coupled with the Cold War, would afford this paradigm political legitimacy. The first to question it was Barack Obama in his speech in Cairo to more than 2,000 Egyptians, many of them young people, in which he addressed the themes of youth, women, freedom and modernity, without making too many concessions to the established alliances. In one of the most significant articles written on the Tahrir Square events, Thomas Friedman rightly observed that, for 18 days, no-one burned a single US flag (nor, apparently, an Israeli flag). This may have been the first revolution in the Middle East whose epicentre was not located in Islam or the larger pan-Arabic causes, but in society itself.

In the last few years there have been numerous studies on political Islam, which have no doubt helped achieve a better understanding of the Arab world. But the debate on Islam reached a dead-end some time ago, fuelled by the false dilemma that presented political Islam as the lesser of two evils, or the magic word able to bring the democratic genie out of 'Aladdin's Lamp'. It was a seemingly endless, circular, sterile debate until the uprisings of Tunisia and Egypt.

Robert Malley and Hussein Agha described the 18 days leading to the fall of Mubarak as an opportunity for the 'rebirth of the Arab world'. This might be premature. But in any case, what happened does represent an opportunity to change the way we understand this world (which is not a single world, but a highly diverse combination) and to put an end to an era shaped by 'orientalism' and by upholding the status quo. How could these societies remain immune to the changes unleashed by the fall of the Berlin Wall? Why should the rise of Islamism be the only consequence? Why should young Arabs be opposed to globalisation, rather than sharing in its benefits as others do? Why should they back dictators or aspire to new caliphates, instead of wanting to be freer? In light of the waves of change spreading through Egypt and other countries in the region, answering these questions should now be easier. If this helps to change the way we see Arab countries and their societies, and hone our understanding of them, this will be one of the most significant outcomes of the Egyptian revolution of 2011.

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