Five Years On, Egypt Lacks Introspection

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Articles & Testimony

The revolution of January 25, 2011 remains the greatest act of social reassessment in Egypt's history. All involved parties agreed on the importance of change for Egypt's future, and that this future required the introduction of increasingly modern means and values. Its actors were dedicated to bringing Egyptian citizens a society of full civil rights and pushing the Egyptian political system towards the fundamentals of just democratic rule.

But even as the youth unleashing the revolution looked to the future, several groups belonging in their very essence to the past—the Muslim Brotherhood, parties of the old regime, and even the military council—ultimately became the forces deciding the country's fate. The youth movement was marginalized and dissipated itself in into endless protests that failed to develop into a political vision capable of growth and guidance for a new Egyptian political order.

The Muslim Brotherhood became the first historical force to take up the flag of the revolution. But once in power, the group came to believe that their ascendance was in and of itself the height of change and reform, even as they retained the old regime policies that had so incensed the revolutionaries.

A second iteration of the revolution occurred on June 30, 2013, when the Brotherhood regime was swept away. But in the midst of this reassessment of the revolution's goals, a nostalgia for the state of the past in spite of its faults appeared. This nostalgia ultimately outweighed the country's aspirations for a revolutionary future that remained deferred in the two years without Hosni Mubarak, but whose great potential for bloody struggles had been partially underlined by January's casualties.

Now, even as many revolutionary groups call for more change in an attempt to evoke the spirit of the January 25th revolutions, self-reflection is utterly absent from any group's analysis of Egypt's current challenges. The revolutionary civilian forces present themselves as a civil democratic camp demanding "No Return" to Egypt's pre-January or pre-June society. Yet these revolutionaries have not analyzed their own experiences with the measure of criticism that would allow them to discover the reasons for their double failure in confronting the Brotherhood and then the champions of state and army. There is no acknowledgement of the meaning behind their failures to bring about revolution either in the street or at the ballot box.

To do otherwise would require the democratic revolutionaries to examine their marginalization and withdrawal from

the now-concluded battle between Egypt's two major political poles. With the army and the remains of Mubarak's state on one hand and the Brotherhood and its religious multitude on the other, the revolutionaries found themselves in a position that left no choice besides partiality towards one side or the other. Instead of diagnosing this failure, the democratic revolutionaries demand self-reflection only of their adversaries, the two main camps that ultimately shaped Egypt after the January 25th Revolution.

Nor has this need for self-reflection been in any way accepted by either side. The camp of the state, comprised of various institutions and bureaucratic apparatuses, was consistently of the opinion that regime change was not the preferred solution to Egypt's difficulties, advocating instead change from within the regime itself by maintaining the state framework while swapping out some of the most offensive actors. This camp has made no reassessments of this initial analysis nor attempts to convince the Egyptian people of its case. While emphasizing the shame of the pre-January 25th state was the failures of a few individuals, they broach no question of whether the state and its bias, culture, and relationship with the society enabled the practices of those individuals. But that proposition fails to hold up to the current evidence of many of the old state's failures in the security, political, and legislative fields reemerging, despite the absence of those originally blamed in the new state.

The remains of Mubarak's regime—National Democratic Party remnants and the politicians and businessmen who acted as satellites of the establishment—consider it their right to return without examination because the balance of power has shifted against their opponents. And when the Muslim Brotherhood's rule created a nostalgia for former president Mubarak's regime, causing the Egyptian people to reason that after experiencing the worst it was worth returning to a lesser evil, the Brotherhood's opponents could avoid reflection on their previous failures in light of its new victory.

But it is no wonder that the Egyptian people came away with this nostalgia during the years of Brotherhood rule: the Brotherhood avoids self-reflection as an organizational tactic. The Brotherhood prefers to perpetuate its institutional identity of tribulation and persecution, deflecting any self-criticism of its performance over the previous years. Currently, the organization continues to deny that any serious reevaluation is required to push the Brotherhood into the present or towards any future success. Meanwhile, some blocs of the Brotherhood do argue that the organization erred, but because "it did not sufficiently repress and detain its opponents; it let the media challenge it; it did not arrest its critics; it trusted the army and the arms of the state."

Nevertheless, it is striking that the public demand for self-reflection is directed exclusively at the Brotherhood, as if other groups by virtue of their position in power have no need for self-reflection. Egypt's entire political climate must be judged by the fact that to date, no group has attained the progressive goals for which the January Revolution was waged.

A current within the Islamic Group led by Nageh Ibrahim and Karam Zuhdi is the exception that proves the rule, where the leaders remarkably pushed members of the U.S. designated terrorist group to renounce violence and engage in peaceful political participation. Aside from this example, no Egyptian political faction has undertaken the kind of introspection that forces it to touch on its own raw nerves in order to forge new positions that can face the real challenges of Egyptian society and endure.

Instead, the predominant currents throughout Egyptian society combine the toxic traits of exonerating themselves of all fault while simultaneously casting blame entirely on others, often through hostile epithets such as "conspirators," "traitors," "deep state," "coup makers," and "enemies of democracy." These accusations turn those who utter them into the narcissistic movie stars of Egypt, who moan that their greatest faults are their manifold virtues. A more common form of self-reflection that political currents also practice is avoidance of blame by evenly distributing fault into a meaningless event from which no lessons can be learned. As one Muslim Brotherhood statement explained, "we all made mistakes."

These types of pseudo-introspection are not enough to bring Egypt back to the path of modernization or help develop any understanding of the pitfalls that still face the country. After the January Revolution's fifth anniversary, self-reflection continues to remain totally absent. Egyptian political currents should be encouraged to practice self-criticism and honest appraisal of their practices and past experiences, because self-reflection is the door to the future. Without it, Egypt will continue to repeat the mistakes of its past.

Ahmad Al-Sawy is an Egyptian journalist. ❖

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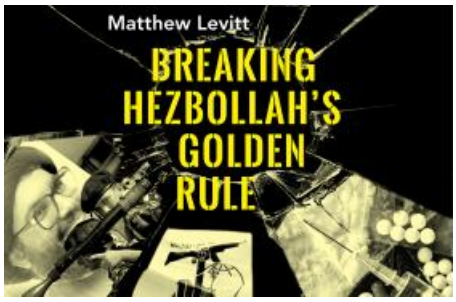

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