

The Fifth Anniversary of the January 25 Revolution: Weakened Regime, Weakened Revolutionaries

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There is no denying Egypt's current state of public discontent, stemming from deteriorating living conditions and a state of frustration over the repressive policies of the Sisi government. Today's Egyptian citizen has lost the most basic guarantees of freedom, justice, and human dignity. The brutality of the security state awaits those who freely express their opinions – even those simple citizens lacking power, influence, or support.

In the wake of the fifth anniversary of the January 25 revolution, it appears that the momentum of the popular movement against Sisi's government, which picked up steam as the day approached, crumbled in the face of division and fragmentation.

As early commemorations of the January 25 Revolution began, Sisi's government implemented campaigns to suppress freedom through the indiscriminate arrests of a number of activists and journalists. Notable among these arrests were those of four activists from the April 6 movement charged with "belonging to a banned group," a charge thrown in the face of any dissenting citizen that criticizes Sisi's military policy. Also notable was the conviction of researcher Islam al-Buhairi to a year's imprisonment for his dissenting views on Islamic tradition. His trial moved forward in spite of Sisi's previous remarks urging the renewal of religious discourse, and has demonstrated the insincerity of Sisi's claims.

The prevailing weaknesses of Sisi's leadership, Egyptian civil society, and the repressed revolutionary forces have demonstrated that it is currently impossible to change the balance of power between the regime and revolutionary forces. Any protests or demonstrations will only occur on a small scale without presenting a significant threat to the current regime. Without civil society regaining some of the strength and fortitude that has been exhausted by the deep state, no change will be possible.

Yet if the process of history does indeed tend toward progress, then Egyptian society can defeat this military-led deep state. The glimmer of hope obtained during the Arab Spring, despite its ephemeral nature, was able to ignite an excitement in a new generation that did not accept subjugation like the generations before it.

Ultimately, old dictatorships and their methods are headed towards extinction in the face of the demographic and social changes set off by the Arab Spring. In order to remain in power, totalitarian systems must isolate their people from the world, an impossible feat in light of the tremendous developments in technology and communication.

These developments have contributed to the spread of popular movements and have eroded borders on regional and global levels, which will eventually weaken repressive regimes.

To mark the anniversary of the January Revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has reached out through its social media outlets to call for demonstrations to bring down “the military coup.” The group hoped that by launching this campaign, it could unify various revolutionary forces under a set of specific demands, the lack of which had previously increased fragmentation. Of course, this first requires detachment from any personal or ideological interests, and the conflict between vision and goals has exacerbated the fragmentation between revolutionary forces, in turn allowing Sisi’s regime to stay in power.

The current state of vulnerability in Egypt not only affects those across the political spectrum but also eats away at the foundations of Sisi’s regime. Today there are more than 41,000 political prisoners behind bars, and activists must face the realities of torture and forced, systematic disappearances carried out against them. This intense oppression not only marginalizes civil society’s revolutionary forces, it provides a clear indication of the Egyptian military regime’s weakness. Were the regime as strong as it claims, it would not fear civil society activity or panic when criticized by journalists in an independent press. The arrest of independent journalist Ismail al-Iskandarani has revealed the military regime’s continued war on the media and its intentions to turn the entire media into a regime mouthpiece.

The failure of the military coup to manage Egypt’s political affairs drove the other political currents to bide their time, waiting to pounce on the regime. And as the Sisi regime’s popularity continues to decline, the incentive to wait and see increases. The different visions of these political groups have deepened ongoing debates on where to start the process of democratic reform. The political left argues that the deviation from democracy began with Morsi and worsened under the Sisi regime, while the Muslim Brotherhood believes that the return of “legitimacy” in the form of ousted President Mohamed Morsi is imperative. In other words, there is a fundamental disagreement over whether the January 2011 Revolution or the July 2013 coup marked Egypt’s departure from the path towards democracy. Similarly, each side is demanding a return to the moment that they achieved power via the ballot box, calling their own election the most democratic in Egyptian history. This dispute, that initially fragmented anti-Sisi forces more than two years ago, continues to fester.

While it may seem that the basis of the dispute lies in the Muslim Brotherhood’s inability to let go of their success in the post-2011 elections, it is clear the challenges to democracy are more deeply rooted. Had General Ahmed Shafiq—the only rival candidate to Morsi—achieved victory, the military would have governed throughout the post-revolution period through its representative Shafiq. The amassing of different groups, whether liberals under the leadership of Mohamad ElBaradei or the Islamists under the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, would have presented a real challenge to the government, forcing the new military government to fall, especially since at that time revolutionary furor was at its peak. If we continue with this assumption, then it would seem logical to conclude that the real starting point of democratic collapse was before the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood rather than during it.

Accordingly, it is necessary today for the most liberal youth leaders in the Muslim Brotherhood to redirect towards a new unifying platform of life, freedom, social justice, and human dignity. If they can achieve this, then opposition groups can stand, as a single force, against Sisi and his supporters.

When conditions coalesced to bring down Mubarak in the January revolution, every side had its own personal interests that drove their shared goal. Mohamed ElBaradei, who struggled to build a state based on citizenship, was the exception that proved the rule. Yet he also became a pawn unconsciously, exploited by the Sisi regime. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood sought power in order to implement policies of “empowerment” in the Islamist sense of “taking over the state apparatus” and “Brotherhoodization,” while Salafists strove to “Islamicize” the country as the Taliban did in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the military leadership, led by Field Marshal Tantawi, unified

opposition forces against Mubarak because they saw a chance to “militarize” the state, returning the military establishment to the fore.

The July coup achieved this goal. And over the past two years, the military establishment has been able to use the deep state—including the media, the judiciary, the police, and state employees in all sectors—to oppress revolutionary movements, whether liberal or Islamic.

The foundation for revolutions and movements for social change has always lain in civil society rooted in citizenship. Those of us who participated in the 2011 Revolution in Tahrir Square experienced this spirit. Yet this spirit lacked the building blocks upon which to base real courses of action that would translate what the revolution had accomplished into a sustainable reality. After the January revolution, this community spirit broke down into separate camps of “Brotherhoodization,” “Islamicization,” and “militarization” as a result of the erosion of citizenship as a principle: a true identity, not a fabricated one manipulated by those seeking to get ahead. Political deterioration is neither inherent nor limited to Egyptian society; it afflicts the entire Arab world. It has opened the door to political groups that lack any sense of humanity. Among them is ISIS, which has exploited the current situation to spread its poison among the same young people that have lost their Arab identities in the midst of general alienation and frustration, especially in those countries that experienced the Arab Spring.

In this way, the deterioration of the political environment in Arab communities has contributed to the expansion of extremist groups like ISIS. These groups are impossible to combat, much less defeat, unless different and divergent ranks of revolutionary groups band together. What is required of all political factions, before launching initiatives that align with totalitarianism, is to be self-reflective, self-critical, and able to let go of personal interests in order to develop a foundation for human dignity. In the absence of this reflection and self-criticism, we will be left with only the failure of all revolutionary attempts to recover what has been lost from the Arab conscience.

Muhammad Mansour is an Egyptian journalist based in Washington, D.C. This article was originally published on the [Fikra Forum website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8522#.VqvsovkrLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8522#.VqvsovkrLIU). ❖

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