Why Egyptians Don't Want Another Revolution

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Articles & Testimony

For the moment at least, many Egyptians have become so fearful of change that they are content to live with their broken state, which they view as preferable to further collapse.

Four years ago Sunday, at 1:30 in the afternoon, I stood across from the High Court in downtown Cairo, approximately one mile north from Tahrir Square. Egypt's revolutionary youth activists had called for mass protests against police brutality -- January 25th is Police Day in Egypt -- but at that particular moment, security forces kept three small groups of demonstrators at bay. Suddenly, a few hundred protesters marched into the area from the north, overwhelmed the police and converged with the other protesters to form one enlarged mass. As the protesters pushed southward, riot police scrambled to block their advance, but soon recognized that they were severely outnumbered and stood down. When the snowballing procession finally reached Tahrir Square, I saw a young police officer pull out his phone and snap a photograph. The protests were not yet an uprising, let alone a revolution, but that police officer seemingly understood that something historic was unfolding -- and rather than repressing the demonstration, as was his job, he chose to preserve it for posterity instead.

The story of Egypt's 2011 revolt is often told in terms of the youthful revolutionary activists, who used their street smarts and social media savvy to mobilize the masses from multiple directions and overwhelm the police in downtown Cairo, as I witnessed on that day. But Egypt's "Arab Spring" is equally the story of an autocratic state's breakdown. Indeed, it's the story of the intrusive domestic intelligence agencies that failed to anticipate the demonstrations; the domineering ruling party that failed to mobilize a coherent response to support Hosni Mubarak's regime; and the much-feared police forces that showed signs of demotivation on the uprising's first day, and then utterly collapsed after a mere four days of protests.

Four years later, this remains the ultimate legacy of Egypt's uprising. While the activists' revolutionary dreams were never realized, Egypt's state broke down further, and remains quite broken today. As a result of this experience, many Egyptians are so fearful of change that they are now content to live with their broken state, since they view it as

preferable to further collapse.

To be sure, Egypt's state didn't suddenly implode during the 2011 uprising. Its bureaucracy has been bloated for decades. As Egyptian journalist Mahmoud Salem notes, over six million workers are scattered across 32 ministries, and Egypt's labor laws make it extremely difficult for government employees to be fired. Moreover, Egypt lacks an inter-ministry coordination process, and internal ministry by-laws create so much red tape that major decisions are often delayed indefinitely, except when corruption facilitates them. As a result, Egypt's government functions primarily as a welfare program: it feeds its millions of employees and their families, but is otherwise a model of inefficiency.

Of course, this inefficiency was one of the 2011 uprising's main causes, as Egyptians took to the streets hoping to achieve better governance. Yet the mass protests catalyzed an already weak state's utter collapse, and took an especially severe toll on the security services. In this vein, after initially standing down on the afternoon of January 25th, riot police violently cleared Tahrir Square later that evening, and then blanketed much of Cairo with teargas on January 28th, when the protests grew considerably on account of the Muslim Brotherhood's decision to participate the previous evening. But by late afternoon on the 28th, the police were on the run, as protesters attacked police stations throughout the country, and nearly stormed the Interior Ministry before the military intervened to protect it.

While many Egyptians initially welcomed the military junta that succeeded Mubarak as a stabilizing force, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and its cabinet utterly failed to rebuild the Egyptian state. This was partly due to the constant wave of workers strikes that continued for months after the uprising, in which everyone from police officers to teachers to Al-Azhar's clerics took to the streets to demand higher pay and greater independence.

The transitional government's insecurity also contributed to further state breakdown. As Mubarak-era ministers were arrested and prosecuted for corruption, the new technocratic ministers feared suffering similar fates if their government was toppled, and thus declined to take major decisions. The government was especially hesitant to undertake reforms that could invite popular protests, so the bureaucracy remained bloated and Egypt's cash reserves declined under the weight of salaries and subsidies. By the same token, the SCAF feared that it would become the target of another uprising if the security services reasserted control too forcefully. So during the sixteen months that followed Mubarak's ouster, crime and sectarian violence increased significantly, and the state focused its repression on revolutionary activists almost exclusively.

Egypt's state collapsed even further under Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, who won the June 2012 presidential elections, in large part due to the Brotherhood's particular nature. The Brotherhood is a vanguard -- a deeply hierarchical organization that aims to resist Western influence from the grassroots up. Specifically, it works to "Islamize" the individual through its rigid five-to-eight-year indoctrination program; then "Islamize" the society by dispatching its members to recruit new Muslim Brothers through social services; then "Islamize" the state by winning elections and appointing its members to positions of authority; and finally establishing a "global Islamic state" comprised of other Brotherhood-run countries, which will challenge the West for worldwide hegemony.

If this theory for gaining global power sounds fantastical, well, it is. But it was nonetheless the theory that Morsi and the Brotherhood attempted to enact during their short time in power. Indeed, the Brotherhood believed that appointing Muslim Brothers to top governmental positions would, by itself, have a transformative effect, because Egypt would now be governed by Islamists, and not by corrupt Mubarakists. But of course this wasn't the case: the Brothers had no governmental experience, and in many cases lost control of the ministerial and provincial bureaucracies that Morsi appointed them to run.

Meanwhile, Morsi alienated large segments of Egyptian society in November 2012, when he asserted total power through a decree and then rammed an Islamist constitution through to ratification. While the police initially repressed anti-Morsi demonstrations and assisted the Brotherhood in torturing opposition protesters outside the presidential palace, the explosion of anti-Morsi activities nationwide during the spring of 2013 catalyzed a reversal. The police sensed that the tide was turning against the Brotherhood and had little interest in losing a second uprising.

So when unprecedented millions of Egyptians took to the streets on June 30, 2013, to demand Morsi's ouster, many police officers marched with them in uniform, and refused to return to work until Morsi stepped down. Meanwhile, other state institutions also participated in the rebellion: the intelligence services encouraged the protesters, many of Morsi's ministers resigned, and the Egyptian military dropped flags on the demonstrations from helicopters. By the time that then-Defense Minister Abdel Fatah al-Sisi announced Morsi's toppling on the evening of July 3, Morsi was a president in name only: he no longer controlled anything on the ground, and that made his ouster practically inevitable.

To many analysts, the ultimate alignment of Egypt's state institutions against Morsi and the Brotherhood proves the existence of a "deep state," which can effectively control things from behind the scenes. But in fact these institutions' momentary unity against one set of adversaries should not be mistaken for the kind of coherence that the term "deep state" implies. And while Sisi has made the reassertion of Egypt's state a priority since becoming president last June, Egypt's state remains broken.

Consider, for example, the stream of leaked recordings of top military leaders that Turkey-based Brotherhood satellite networks have aired in recent months. In one recording, Gen. Mamdouh Shahin devises a plan for claiming that the Interior Ministry is holding Morsi in pre-trial detention, when the deposed president was in fact being held at a naval base. "You will never find a better forgery than this," Shaheen says, while other officials in the room can be heard laughing. In another recording, Gen. Abbas Kamel, who is now Sisi's chief-of-staff, calls the public prosecutor to request the exoneration of a prominent journalist's son. The recordings indicate that Egypt's state is fighting amongst itself -- and that one of the intelligence agencies is making and leaking the recordings to subvert the military leadership, with which Sisi is associated.

Moreover, the Sisi regime's obsessive monitoring of local media reflects its insecurity. According to one prominent journalist who has spoken with Sisi, the Egyptian president personally works to influence journalists' coverage by calling three television news hosts per day. And as Buzzfeed reported last week, the Egyptian government has ordered local media to boost their coverage of arrests of homosexuals to distract from its failures.

Still, Sisi appears to have staying power. This is partly due to the fact that the state is performing better under his stewardship in certain critical respects. Bread shortages have diminished, a smart-card system for distributing subsidized bread is being implemented, and Sisi announced major gas-subsidy cuts during his first month in office -- a vital cost-cutting measure. It is also partly due to his repression of the opposition, including a severe crackdown on the Brotherhood and the arrest of many prominent revolutionary activists under a 2013 law that significantly limits protest activity.

But perhaps the most important reason for Sisi's staying power is the popular mood, which is a cocktail of weariness and relief. Egyptians are exhausted after four years of tumult, but at the same time satisfied that their country hasn't suffered the devastating chaos of Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. So while many of the economic and demographic problems that caused the 2011 uprising haven't been resolved, a critical mass of Egyptians now prefer their broken state to spinning the wheel again and risking further collapse.

That narrative, of course, flies in the face of the dominant narrative in Washington, which sees the "Arab Spring" as a

democratizing moment that Egyptians betrayed when they rallied behind the military's ouster of an elected president in July 2013. And to be sure, that disappointment has merit: there is nothing democratic about Egypt's post-Morsi trajectory, and the current regime's severe repressiveness is a proper target for condemnation. But Washington should bear in mind that the romantic hopes that many Americans had for Egypt from 6,000 miles away entailed a great deal of pain for the Egyptians who lived with consequences of the January 2011 uprising. And four years later, the uprising's ultimate impact is that many Egyptians are now too cautious to ask for more than they already have.

Yet the Egyptian public's disinterest in another mass uprising doesn't mean that Sisi's regime is entirely stable. After all, Sisi's regime ultimately depends on a broken state, and attempting to fix that state carries tremendous personal risks. For example, if Sisi lowers salaries or cuts the bloated bureaucracy, millions of Egyptians will become intolerably desperate. And even if Sisi were inclined to reform the Interior Ministry -- a big "if," to be sure -- he would risk alienating the police and catalyzing further state breakdown. Of course, the fact that Brotherhood leaders have called for Sisi to be killed makes him especially risk averse on that front: indeed, the state's repressive institutions are his first line of defense in a brutal life-and-death struggle.

For this reason, Washington's best policy towards Egypt is a conservative one. While it is clear from 6,000 miles away Egypt cannot be stable without political and economic reform, it's difficult to push that agenda in a country where both the government and much of the population fear domestic change. Instead, Washington should focus on rebuilding trust in Cairo by emphasizing the basics of the U.S.-Egypt relationship: U.S. military aid for security cooperation. To be sure, this rather simple, three-decade-old formula isn't entirely satisfying, given the many challenges that Egypt faces. But within Egypt's current political environment, consistency equals comfort.

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