

Egypt in Transition: What Happened to the Liberal Youths of Tahrir Square?

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Brief Analysis

On May 9, Mahmoud Salem addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Salem, a renowned Egyptian blogger better known as "Sandmonkey," is a longtime analyst of Egyptian political affairs and advocate for free speech and democracy. He ran as a parliamentary candidate last year on the ticket of the Free Egyptians Party. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

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The Current Political Situation

Fifteen months after the Egyptian revolution, the largely secular youth movement on the streets of Egypt has lost much of its enthusiasm. As the deadline for the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to transfer power looms ever closer, the most pressing issue for Egypt's revolutionaries is their lack of representation in the formation of a new government in the place of Hosni Mubarak's regime, which they were instrumental in toppling.

The revolutionary youth, however, have failed to articulate clear demands to negotiate with the various presidential candidates. Instead of

endorsing one viable candidate to represent their interests, they have backed disparate—and failed—campaigns. Consider that of Khaled Ali, a young lawyer who has emerged as a symbol of the liberal youth, but who will win few votes. Ali may be granted an equally symbolic spot in the cabinet, but his candidacy ultimately will only serve to dilute their potential influence. The failure to provide a valid revolutionary candidate leads to even more division among the already fragmented Egyptian street movement.

The Islamists, on the other hand, have been relatively well organized. Yet the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is losing popularity with the public, which began to distrust the group following its decision to field a presidential candidate despite previous promises to the contrary. If the current parliament is dissolved, the MB will likely perform poorly in the ensuing parliamentary elections. Unfortunately, the Salafist Nour Party -- a more extremist Islamist group -- is well positioned to reap the political benefit should the MB's star decline.

Looming Presidential Elections

Despite the Islamists' relatively impressive organization, no political party in Egypt has succeeded in fielding a truly popular presidential candidate. The top three prospects -- Khairat al Shater (MB), Hazim Saleh Abu Ismail (Salafi), and Omar Suleiman (a top security official in the Mubarak regime) -- were all prohibited for one reason or another from participating. The current frontrunner, Amr Mousa, a former member of Mubarak's administration, is receiving lukewarm support from liberals. The MB's backup candidate, Muhammad Morsi, fails to excite even the group's members. Meanwhile, former MB member Abdel Moneim Abou el-Fatouh -- who remains popular among Islamists and liberals alike -- is having some difficulty in positioning himself as the "moderate" alternative since he was endorsed by the Salafist Al Nour party. While these individuals remain the favorites, support for these candidates stems not from any belief in their actual policies, but from a desire not to see a worse option win. This is hardly a formula for electoral enthusiasm.

Regardless of who wins the presidential elections, dissatisfaction and protests are certain. The Mubarak regime so institutionalized corruption that the Egyptian people expect it in any electoral process. Indeed, some political actors want to see the corrupt system continue, seeing it, paradoxically, as a more "efficient" approach to governance than abiding the Egyptian decisionmaking bureaucracy. In any event, the most vexing issue facing the next democratically elected government is not whether decisions will be made, but whether the people in power will have the authority and means to be able to execute those decisions.

Addressing the Failing Economy

The economic crisis in Egypt will only complicate efforts to fight corruption and implement reforms, and it will be especially difficult to push for reforms if the people are hungry. Reform must therefore begin with addressing Egypt's widespread poverty, of which youth unemployment is a key factor. In Egypt's socialist era, the government fought unemployment by hiring tens of thousands of superfluous employees. This tack is not feasible. Economic recovery is going to be a long hard slog that will have political ramifications for those in power during the next presidential term.

To avoid political backlash from the likely economic failures, the liberal Free Egyptians Party will avoid taking any cabinet positions in the next government, as the state of the global economy is not expected to recover in the next few years. Instead, the FEP aims to be in the cabinet around 2016, after the next round of presidential elections, in which Egypt's secular liberals may well have an excellent opportunity. At that point the party plans to implement a capitalist, pro-business economic agenda.

Rule of Law and Security In the Sinai

Security is currently a significant problem in Egypt, although concerns may be somewhat exaggerated. During the Mubarak era, the state relied heavily on fear tactics, intimidating the population so much that Egypt actually became unnaturally safe. But as people became less afraid of the police, the police became more brutal in an attempt to control them. Now that the fear factor has been broken, the police forces are unprepared and unwilling to pull their weight. Indeed, there is little incentive for the police to take risks on the job to keep the public safe. After all, the consequences for killing a police officer in Egypt are less than those for killing a civilian, and the punishments for the most violent crimes are not severe enough to constitute a deterrent for criminals.

Terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula also remains a very real security concern. In addition to the activities of Hamas and al-Qaeda, some Bedouin tribesman in the area are even harvesting organs from refugees attempting to get into Israel. The Camp David Accords prevent the Egyptian army from establishing a strong presence in the Sinai. Still, after so many years of peace, the Egyptian army clearly does not want a war with Israel, but deployment of Egyptian military to the Sinai may become necessary to reestablish security.

U.S. Foreign Aid To Egypt

The continued flow of U.S. foreign assistance to Egypt is a must for the new Egypt. If the United States were to cut military aid to Egypt, the army's weapons would lose functionality within the year, rendering the military useless. Notwithstanding provocations, however, the United States, is unlikely to break off its military aid, which serves such U.S. goals as maintaining the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and the U.S. Navy's preferential status for passage through the Suez Canal. Furthermore, after the new Egyptian government comes to office, it is highly likely that not only the United States but other foreign donors will increase their economic aid in a bid to cement their relations with the new authorities.

U.S. funding for democracy promotion is a thornier issue. Earlier this year, the government of Egypt -- on the advice of Fayza Aboul Naga, a

holdover from the Mubarak regime who is quite close with Minister of Defense and SCAF head Mohammed Tantawi -- provoked a crisis with Washington over the funding of U.S. and Egyptian NGOs. Granted, several NGOs in Egypt are indeed funneling foreign money into their own pockets, but the ones implicated in this year's crisis were legitimate organizations dedicated to promoting Egyptian democracy. Regardless of what transpires, the current practice of providing aid to NGOs is unlikely to succeed. A more productive way to promote democracy in Egypt is to provide Egyptian nationals with four years of American education and the experience of living in the vibrant U.S. democracy. Once they return to Egypt, these new graduates can act as envoys of democracy in their own governorates. Therefore, the funds currently going to NGOs should be reallocated as scholarships for young Egyptians to attend U.S. colleges. By providing a mere ten thousand scholarships every year, this plan would establish for the future a cadre of effective activists and advocates for Egyptian democracy.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Katie Kiraly. ❖

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