

Egypt's inevitable result - or is it?

Activists in Egypt should take notes from the Muslim Brotherhood's strategy and create grassroots infrastructure now.

Mark Levine, Aljazeera, 26 May 2012

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The Brotherhood is popular for delivering health and other services Egyptian officials failed to provide [REUTERS]

Irvine, CA - It was always going to come to this, the Brotherhood versus the military.

More than 1,000 martyrs, 12,000 reportedly imprisoned, tortured and even raped, a military leadership and a newly legalised religio-political organisation that have done nothing to improve the lives of the vast majority of Egypt's citizens since Mubarak's departure. And yet the two most politically and economically conservative forces in the country are now poised to face each other directly for control of the country's "transition" to civilian rule.

What was the point of the 18 days, and all the days that followed? Was the revolt of dignity just an illusion? Did those killed in Tahrir, Alexandria, Maspero, Muhammed Mahmoud, Port Said, and Abassiya, die for nothing?

Mubarak and SCAF could have saved themselves a lot of trouble, it turns out, if they would have fully legalised the Muslim Brotherhood a few years ago and allowed it to run unimpeded for parliament and the presidency. The results wouldn't be very different than they are now and they'd most likely still be as safely ensconced in power as the military is today - maybe even more so.

But while many people lament the strong showing of the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi and regime remnant, Ahmed Shafiq, there are very good reasons why the forces they represent were destined to come out on top - and why, for Egypt's mid and longer term future, such a result is not necessarily a bad thing.

The need for institution builders

Despite the beating the Brotherhood has taken in the past few months for its willingness to work with SCAF, its deaf ear to the concerns of labour, and for breaking its vow not to run a presidential candidate, the Brotherhood's massive organisational muscle ensured that whoever was its candidate would come out within the top two or three vote-winners. But its success is down to more than just the ability of the *ikhwan* to get its people to the polling stations.



Egyptians elect first new president in post-Mubarak era

The Brotherhood has spent the better part of the past century serving as a primary organisational infrastructure for delivering health, education and other services and care that the Egyptian state has been unable or unwilling to provide. And so millions of Egyptians are loyal enough to the organisation to give it a chance at running the country. To paraphrase the explanation of many Egyptians to me after the parliamentary elections in autumn: "We thank the revolutionaries, but did they really think that we would vote for a bunch of kids who've never run anything in their lives? At least the Brotherhood has a record of managing a large organisation. They're the only group with the experience to lead, and we owe them the chance to do so."

There is a big kernel of what the great Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci would have called "common sense" (*senso comune*) to this belief. The reality is that the only way Egypt can initiate the radical reforms necessary to develop the economy in a manner that serves the interests of the majority of the population is essentially to build a new state structure outside the control of the military and the existing elite.

Anyone outside the elite and who didn't have the organisational resources and muscle to build an alternative from the grassroots up - one that could create new political and economic networks to challenge the existing and highly corrupted and unequal ones - would stand almost no chance of changing Egypt's basic political economy. Even if they had more organisational and economic experience, the more "revolutionary" candidates would have an almost impossible time creating what would essentially be parallel organisational structures to the state and then slowly moving their people into it. They would be co-opted, or chewed up and swallowed down by the system they had pledged to dismantle.

The Brotherhood has the organisational and ideological muscle at least to make a fair try at beginning such a sweeping change. Decades of service to Egyptians in so many areas of

social life have given it the right to ask for people's trust, and thus their votes.

But at the same time, however, during the past twenty years, the Brotherhood has slowly but inexorably become part of the economic elite that it must challenge in order to affect serious reform. It has done so both by generating its own economic enterprises that have become extremely successful - as exemplified by disqualified Brotherhood presidential candidate Khairat al-Shater - and by forging personal connections - through, for example, marriage into elite families.

It was only a matter of time before the Brotherhood, which despite decades of charity work for the poor - while never supporting the political and economic rights of the working class, became more formally incorporated into the existing system. The "revolution" only pushed this timetable forward a few years.

In fact, given the choice between working with a movement with whom it shared many basic corporatist and patriarchal values, and which would need its support to function politically, and duking it out with Gamal Mubarak and other young members of the economic elite who had little allegiance or connection to the military - and who supported a liberalisation programme that would have challenged the military's control of the economy - the revolution can be seen to have done the military a favour, at least in the short term, by removing the more dangerous adversary.

The people and the army were never "one hand", but it's always been clear that the removal of Mubarak - *fi*ls more than *père* - was one goal they genuinely shared.

Egypt's Stockholm Syndrome

If there is a logic as to why so many Egyptians have supported the Brotherhood's Justice and Development Party and now its primary candidate for president, it is on the face of it harder to understand why the *felool*, or Mubarak-era candidate, Ahmed Shafiq, has done so well, drawing only a couple of percentage points less than Mursi. Why would anyone outside of the elite who were the primary beneficiaries of the old system support him?

Many explanations are centred on his incessant hammering away on the issue of secularism and security; that is, on preventing the Brotherhood from implementing Sharia (which would appeal to Christians, more secular Egyptians and those worried about the impact of such a move on the all-important tourist industry), and on dealing with the rapidly deteriorating situation of crime across the country.

These are no doubt important reasons, but I think there is another reason why someone so associated with the old regime - Shafiq was Mubarak's final prime minister - would capture the votes of the very people the regime so oppressed: a kind of political Stockholm Syndrome.

Many Egyptians, however happy they are to have moved into a new era, maintain a

psychological attachment to the man and the regime that held so much power over their lives, and who held that power through a discourse of stability and patriarchal nationalism that, however abusive, still gave them a sense of basic safety and inclusion.

In the chaotic post-Mubarak period, it is not surprising to find millions of people nostalgic for the pre-revolutionary period (I saw a similar phenomenon in Iraq after 2003) and to miss the safety of a system which purported to have a paternal control over their lives and society at large. This sentiment would be strengthened by the fact that, for so many Egyptians, life is objectively worse since Mubarak's departure, which gives added salience to the sense of attachment to the old system, particularly for those such as Coptic Christians, who will undoubtedly be worse off in so many ways with a government led by Islamist forces.

Be careful what you wish for

If there is a silver lining in the scenario of having to live with a parliament and presidency dominated by the Brotherhood and/or Mubarak cronies, it is that the huge expectations placed on whoever wins the presidency will almost certainly be matched by the spectacular failure of the new president to fulfill most of his promises. If there's one thing that has become clear in the past sixteen months, it is that the deep state in Egypt is even deeper than most people imagined, and that SCAF and the economic elite that it represents and protects will not let go of any significant share of its power or wealth without a bloody fight.

In context of a stagnating economy in which tens of millions of people live on two dollars per day or less, and a set of regional and global economic dynamics that render the dream of copying the Turkish Islamist-led economic "miracle" of the past two decades highly unlikely, even a progressive candidate who wanted to improve the situation for the majority of Egypt's population - who are firmly in the poor and working classes - would find it almost impossible to challenge the system. In comparison, the difficulty President Obama has had is but one example of the difficulties of implementing progressive policies when the system is controlled by a massively corrupt and powerful elite.

As it is, however, the choice looks likely to be between a Brotherhood that has already been largely co-opted by Egypt's power elite and hasn't exhibited a willingness to empower the poor and working class, and a *felool* candidate who represents the old system. So there is little chance that either Morsi or Shafiq would have the desire or ability to commence a wholesale "structural adjustment" of the Egyptian economy away from crony, corrupt and neoliberal capitalism and towards one that ensures a fair distribution of wealth throughout Egyptian society.

Instead, their programmes will be limited to finessing and finagling the contours of the existing system to further entrench their power, while bringing in a few new constituencies and using various ideological arguments - support or opposition to Islamic law, Egyptian nationalism, standing up to the USA, etc - to keep the rest of the country largely quiescent.

And this is where the importance of the 18-day protests that toppled Mubarak and all the struggles since suddenly come powerfully back into view. Fewer than half of the Egyptians who voted - and fewer than half of eligible voters actually voted this round - actually support the two major candidates combined. At the time of writing, it appears that more than half the voting age population has sat out the election, a stinging rebuke to the emerging system. And those who did vote will likely show very little patience for whoever wins the presidency to make a significant improvement in their lives. And given the nature of the existing system and the men who will likely lead it for the coming years, there is very little chance that the system will be changed in any substantial way.

All of which means that the single most important accomplishment of this presidential election, more than who wins it, and of the revolution more broadly, is the institutionalisation of a democratic political system. Voters for Morsi and Shafiq might have done so out of loyalty or ideological commitment, or fear of chaos, but few will stick with their choice if the new leader doesn't manage - fundamentally - to improve the lives and life-chances of Egyptians in the near future. And that is why many movements, especially the more revolutionary groups, have not put their stock in these elections and instead are taking a page from the Brotherhood's playbook and working to begin building relations with the tens of millions of Egyptians who will be the ones to determine how the long-term revolutionary process in Egypt plays out. They have, what Gramsci would call, the "good sense" (*buon senso*) to think critically about the current political economic dynamics, to sit out a struggle that can't be won, and to plan for a future that could arrive sooner than those currently in power would like to imagine.

Many activists have expressed the belief to me that whoever wins this election will fail to change the still deeply entrenched system, and will either be co-opted or defeated by it (comparisons with Obama's presidency are inevitable). But this may provide an opening for a more radical and pro-worker and human rights agenda to claim a greater share of power the next time elections are held. In the meantime, by presenting themselves as the forces most able to lead the country towards a better future, Morsi and Shafiq, and those they represent, will be held responsible for the almost inevitable failures to come.

If the true revolutionary forces can use the next few years wisely, building roots into the working class in rural as well as urban areas, and developing a political discourse that moves beyond secular/religious and other dichotomies that have long served to divide the population, they will be poised to play a far greater role in Egypt's future than we are seeing today. If this comes to pass, the 2012 presidential election will prove to have been a crucial curve in a revolutionary road that, however depressing events might seem today, is still wide open as it stretches into the future.

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