Dateline Egypt:
The fragile path to democracy

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“Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that.”1 In this reasoning, no one can really claim – with the exception, maybe, of the impressive in size and pulse crowd in Tahrir Square – that the Egyptian army’s action to bring down Mohammad Morsi, the first democratically elected president of Egypt (following an ultimatum that he resign), did not constitute a coup. This is, in fact, a claim that can also be made with regard to the process that brought Hosni Mubarak down in 2011. On the other hand, what seems to be a valid debate is (a) whether such an action was justified, based on Morsi’s loss of legitimacy among the largest segment of the Egyptian population – in contrast to the notion that he was the popularly elected legitimate president – and (b) whether the armed forces, in the absence of any credible and properly functioning institutions and mechanisms, have the authority to do so. The net result is pretty much the same, as both sides of the Egyptian political scene, hold on to their interpretation of reality and therefore acted and continue to act accordingly, with the armed forces reacting in accordance to their perception of their role as the guardians of Egypt’s security against any threat, external or domestic.

The future prospects as worrisome as they are, this crisis can still lead to a re-start, on a better foundation, of Egypt’s democratization process – essential not only for the country’s sake but also, because of its centrality and magnitude, for the region’s on-going democratic ‘experiment’.

Egypt, practically under military supervision, is now walking on thin ice, where the threat of Algerianization is not a boogieman but a dire likelihood – only differentiated by the fact that a large segment of the population is backing the army.
The probability of a new radicalization of the Muslim Brotherhood is very much present, as the coup and the ensuing behavior of the army towards the Ikhouan and their friendly media, raises fears of a new round of oppression and crackdown, sends a message for an exclusive political system where the Brotherhood does not have a place, therefore questioning the merits of democracy for the Ikhouan’s cause. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood’s retaliation and rhetoric, raises fears among ordinary people of a threatening outcome to this confrontation, whereas it reconfirms the convictions of the secular/liberal faction about the Brotherhood’s nature and intentions. The end result is a protracted crisis, unless both sides manage to find a workable modus vivendi.

Why did we get here?
The current deadlock is the result of inexperience, ideological rigidity, poor performance, and incompetence, of a fundamentally faulty political transition process burdened with an autocratic legacy, where neither side, including the armed forces, are immune from responsibility. Both political groupings entered the process carrying their own basis for legitimacy: the liberal/secular opposition, with a strong adherence to democracy, was the group which mobilized and led the massive rallies that ousted Mubarak, and the Brotherhood, as the long dominant underground opposition force which, although a latecomer in the uprising, still had its share in it. Hence, both sides entered the transition process with a strong rationale; yet, notwithstanding the rhetoric, deeply mistrusting each other, they were unable to reach a consensus on the basic rules of the game and formulate a commonly accepted political system. In the consequent elections, the Brotherhood came out triumphant, not only enjoying a nation-wide network, but also because it presented a fairly coherent platform and a consistent agenda, and benefiting from a popular perception that its religiosity and discipline was a testimony for honesty, effectiveness and respectability and that unlike, its secular opposition, it would protect Egypt’s fundamental values, especially Islam, yet without the Salafis’ rigid approach. A year on, the people’s expectations were shattered and Morsi had lost his credibility.

The Brotherhood, during such a vital transitional period, followed a winner-take-all mentality, and refused to share power, offering, whenever it was deemed necessary, unacceptable conditions for dialogue. It thereby proceeded to shape the polity to its own liking. The Brotherhood reverted to authoritarian practices, applying draconian measures, immunizing the president for his actions. Morsi, for his part, chose to subdue the bureaucracy, outmaneuver the judiciary and placate the security services. A process of Ikhouanization of the state apparatus was perceived in the making, as well as, especially with the interventions in the realms of education and culture, of an Islamization of society and therefore of Egypt’s identity. In a nutshell, the Brotherhood’s actions were finally perceived as a process of regime replacement, rather than one of reform and democratization. Meanwhile, conditions got worse, with skyrocketing unemployment, fuel shortages and personal security endangered, for which Morsi’s rule was blamed although the worsening crisis was not entirely his fault, as he did not control all the state’s mechanisms. In fact, a large section of the
business community, skeptical about the Brotherhood’s intentions and direction, remained hesitant to invest.

The armed forces would also have to deal with this reality, allowing for the gradual demilitarization of the state. In order for this to occur, the political and social forces would need to present a common front, while taking into consideration the real needs and concerns of the men in uniform.

Accordingly, the secular/liberal opposition, fragmented, lacking a nation-wide network and any reliable and coherent program, proved reckless and equally unable to accept a non-secular party leading the country. Frequently demanding over-representation and asking for external actors to step in on its behalf, it was also unwilling to compromise. Therefore, it soon reverted to mobilizing the masses against the regime, and finally siding with the army (a choice for which it had accused the Brotherhood of making) and calling upon it to bring down an, admittedly, failed presidential rule. The armed forces for their part, more concerned about securing their own self-interests (among others, through the new constitution, formulated by the Islamists, which provided them with an unprecedented autonomy that was absent in the previous one), opted for a ‘majoritarian’ rule rather than a pluralist one to defend, which accordingly allowed for the shaping the rules of the game. Hence, the key factor for the failure of the process to function effectively was the absence of political will among the major stakeholders to make the necessary compromises and ensure a productive dialogue.

The landscape, the actors, and the prospects
Currently, the army is fully in charge, committed to a road map that would lead, under an interim President and government, and after a number of constitutional amendments, to new elections for parliamentary and presidential elections and, more likely, to a referendum over the amendments. Thus, while the secularists and the Salafis have endorsed this road map and are working on the formation of the transitional government, they are in theory willing to offer the Ikhouan government posts. But, the Brotherhood is denouncing the coup, calling for the restoration of its elected president and embarking on “pro-democracy and anti coup” rallies. The climate is tense, as the secular opposition is willing to match those rallies; hence, there is yet no real breakthrough that will allow for a genuine discourse and an inclusive approach, one that will include all the major stakeholders, to the transition process. The conditions have changed since 2011, as indeed Egyptian society is much more polarized than it used to be, whereas other institutions have emerged as actors, albeit with varying influence. These include:

- the Tamarud (rebellion) youth movement, a non-party affiliated group of youths that led the massive anti-Morsi campaign and rallies, and which is emerging as a key actor, representing a vibrant, politicized and pro-democratic civil society;
The National Salvation Front, an umbrella for the secular/liberal opposition parties, which managed to coalesce the various political parties across the ideological spectrum;

- Al Azhar University, an 11 century old religious institution and an influential body in the Sunni community, which the Brotherhood attempted to control;

- the Coptic Church, marginalized by Morsi, emerged as an actor, representing the Egyptian Christian community (around 10%) which is nervous of an Islamized future and;

- the Judiciary (another institution that the Brotherhood attempted to bring under its control) came out in defense of its autonomy, while defending the notion of the rule of law.

The Brotherhood is by no means out of the equation. On the contrary, any future arrangement that will exclude it would be a time bomb at the foundation of Egypt’s democratic experiment. Still, a key issue is whether the two political groupings that represent fundamentally opposing images of Egypt’s social and political order can work together. None are monolithic organizations and within each various variants exist or are emerging. Therefore, the future trends will be influenced by the internal discourse and the direction that these political formations will follow. For the Brotherhood, of paramount importance is the realization of its failure and the reality of functioning within a pluralist, democratic and accountable paradigm. On the other hand, the secularists would need to develop coherent platforms, agendas that can appeal to the common Egyptian, yet also to be able to communicate them nationwide. The armed forces would also have come to terms with this reality, allowing for the gradual demilitarization of the state – which can only take place when the political and social forces present a common front, which also accounts for the real needs and concerns of the military.

In order for this interim phase to emerge as a genuine and promising re-start, an inclusive approach is the only way out, where all parties partake in a constructive dialogue about the rules of the game, before returning to the ballot box, sharing ownership of the final outcome and ready to accept painful compromises. It is not an easy path, especially in view of this deep polarization that Egypt is currently experiencing, yet the only way to progress.

Therefore, may the ghosts of past experiences, of an uncertain, shaky and insecure present, and of a gloomy, anachronistic and autocratic future, bring wisdom, tolerance and patience to Egypt’s leading actors.
Endnotes

1 This is the opening sentence from Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol where Marley, Ebenezer Scrooge’s partner, is about to visit him, as a ghost, on Christmas Eve and warn him about his life direction and future.

2 The terms ‘Muslim Brotherhood’, ‘Brotherhood’, and ‘Ikhouan’ are uses interchangeably throughout the text. ‘Ikhouan’ means ‘brotherhood’ in Arabic. Al Ikhouan al Muslimoun, i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood. An islamic social reform movement, established by Hassan al Bana in 1928 as a reaction to the foreign inspired parliamentary regime in Egypt, grew quickly to become the most successful organization even beyond Egypt, establishing branches or similar organizations in many Arab countries. Al Bana’s approach combined traditional and innovative elements, calling for the restoration of Islam as a guiding force but also that a restored Shari’ah would be subject to a new interpretation, compatible with the needs of modern society. See William L. Cleveland, A History of the Modern Middle East (Oxford: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 196-197.

3 Nathan Brown notices that Morsi was also “unable – almost constitutionally unable, it seems – to reach Egyptians outside his basis. Even when he tried, his language alienated those he tried to attract”. After the Egyptian Coup, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 July 2013. http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/07/04/after-egyptian-coup/gd97.

4 An interesting example is the Brotherhood Without Violence, a youth movement from within the Ikhouan, that accepts (under reasonable conditions) amending the constitution, renouncing all forms of violence, and calls on all political forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood, to engage in national dialogue and develop guidelines for the transitional period.