

Egypt's Uprising One Year On: Choices for a Democratic Future

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Executive Summary

One year on from the revolution, the internal struggle for power between Egypt's military and the Muslim Brotherhood, unexpected electoral gains of radical Salafis, and increasing support for the status quo from some GCC countries make a smooth transition to democracy unlikely. For their part, Western governments find themselves caught between outdated democracy assistance strategies and the increasing influence of Gulf funding. The current re-evaluation of democratization assistance policy must to focus on key issues and groups if they hope to be successful.

Issues

Egypt has been marred by greater instability in the aftermath of its revolution than expected. Much of this can be traced to the choices made by the military junta, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), and by the country's best-organised political force, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The internal struggle for power between SCAF and MB, the unexpected electoral gains of radical Salafis, and increasing support for the status quo from the Gulf make a smooth transition to democracy unlikely.

The generous interpretation of SCAF's choices is that it is politically bumbling, twisting and turning on key issues from the state of emergency, to the persecution of pro-democracy activist, Egypt's constitution and its timetable for transition, not to mention its failure to reform the security services. The military made things worse by shunning rather than renegotiating – loans from the IMF and Western donors in an attempt to secure some 'revolutionary legitimacy'.

Most of all, it generated and constantly reinforced the narrative of an unstable Egypt. SCAF still controls state media, which remains prominent in Egyptians' lives, despite the increasing availability of satellite TV and the internet. This allowed SCAF to convince many of those concerned about their own economic future and the country's, that SCAF are the defenders of stability rather than the cause of the plummeting tourism or capital flight.

Despite the economic and political costs to the nation, the military's strategy should be seen as a politically rational attempt to secure their position by dividing potential opponents and consolidating control of state institutions. Having found themselves relatively displaced by the 'businessmen' associated with the former President's son, Gamal, the military are likely aiming to ensure this will not happen again. In this sense, Mubarak's removal, the trial of former regime members, and the electoral defeat of former members of the ruling party ought to be seen more as a purge than as signs of democratic transition.

Keywords

Egypt, Middle East, Europe, United States, Democracy, Muslim Brotherhood, Armed Forces

Quotables

- The military's strategy is a politically rational attempt to secure their position by dividing opponents and consolidating control of state institutions

- Mubarak's removal, the trial of former regime members, and the electoral defeat of former members of the ruling party ought to be seen more as a purge than as signs of democratic transition.

- Democracy assistance in Egypt is difficult, but donors must recognize that policies favouring short-term stability over long-term investments helped strengthen Mubarak's regime.

Abstract

Egypt poses the greatest challenge to European democracy assistance strategy, and potentially promises its greatest rewards. Policy design must recognize the stalled nature of the Egyptian transition, and learn lessons about how to design democracy assistance funding and which groups and themes to target.

For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood has attempted with some success to present itself simultaneously as both a revolutionary movement and a force for stability, despite often appearing to cut deals with the military and cut loose its revolutionary brethren. This political gymnastics damaged its credibility, increased the divide between leadership and youth, and may have strengthened Salafis electorally. However, it also made the MB a useful partner – if possible only temporary – for the country’s military rulers: while its split from leftists and liberal forces brought limited electoral damage, the lack of a united front made it easier for SCAF to crack down on pro-democracy groups. The military and the Brotherhood also overlap on economic policy, with the MB’s economic policies differing little from the former regime’s.

Liberal and leftist pro-democracy groups have suffered from a combination of weaknesses: their small size and limited reach, their poor funding compared to Islamist and pro-government groups, and their inability to develop both a clear message and organisational unity. This has allowed their legitimacy to be slowly but systematically eroded by both the military and by Islamists.

Implications

The struggle between the military and the Brotherhood is likely to continue throughout 2012, with both having to make hard choices about what their goals are and what they will be willing to concede. Neither will view with favour prodemocracy groups’ attempts to build more effective organizations. The MB dominated parliament is likely to pass more conservative legislation and be cooler towards Western governments and Israel, but not alter policy drastically.

Saudi Arabia’s prominent role is likely to continue: its willingness to support stability, oppose democratic reform, and work with either the military or the Brotherhood are likely to embolden both these actors in their relations with Western governments and aid donors.

Western governments are increasingly squeezed between their broadly criticised democracy assistance policies and Gulf donors spending much more on blocking transitions to democracy in a strategic country like Egypt.

Options and Recommendations

Few European governments believe there are no lessons to be learned from the Arab Uprisings or that democracy-assistance policies do not need reform: the question is what kind of reform. The danger is that beyond the flourishing rhetoric of the EU’s recent policy revamp, reform will turn out to be cosmetic. Both of these options – doing nothing and cosmetic reform – will further damage an already tarnished reputation.

This complex scenario makes democracy assistance in Egypt particularly fraught. What is certain is that European policies favouring short-term stability over long-term investments in democracy have largely exacerbated the economic and political tensions which lead to the January 2011 uprising.

Donor countries have been reviewing their strategies for the entire region. In this process, it is vital that lessons be learned concerning both the types of groups and the types of issues which increase the likelihood of democratic organisations flourishing. In particular, Egypt and Tunisia suggest a focus on economic rebalancing, and on a strong and independent trade union movement in civil society are crucial.

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