Islamism, Legitimacy, and the Deep State: How Egyptian "Revolutions" Have Failed to Change Egypt*

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Ever since the former president Hosni Mubarak was overthrown in February 2011, Egypt has witnessed a series of political struggles on both top and street levels. On the top level, self-proclaimed secularists and Islamists were vying for control of the state, with the army, police, and intelligence forces frequently meddling to grab opportunities for their own survival and promotion. In the streets, political groups under different banners held protests and sit-ins, provoking growing fury and violent confrontations among each other. The recent army-led regime change that toppled the elected president Mohamed Morsi was merely a new development of this continuing political struggle in Egypt. The anticipated democratic transition, which could have changed the structure of political representation and power allocation in Egypt, did not unfold. By contrast, the state, continually weakened by political struggle, became increasingly inept at handling economic, energy,

* This paper was based on material available for consultation before August 9, 2013.

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and security crises that have endured in Egyptian society for the last two years.

This political and social turmoil has confused political analysts, both domestic and international, assessing the nature of this conflict. There are currently three popular explanations. The first depicts the political struggle in Egypt as between secular and Islamist ideologies. The second blames political opportunists for drumming up and exploiting popular sentiment to obtain their own share of power by downplaying the legitimacy of democratic rules and institutions. The third holds that there is a covert, deep state in Egypt that monopolizes Egyptian politics and curtails any revolutionary steps towards a true democracy. All three analyses only partially explain the socio-political turmoil in Egypt, and also neglect the deeply entrenched power structure that has shaped the country into its current form.

Ideological Confrontations: Islamist or Secularist?

On a superficial level, Egyptian politics are organized along secularist and Islamist lines. The political parties in Egypt now can be divided into two camps: the Islamist camp consisting of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), which is regarded as the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan*), and the Salafist Al-Nour Party; and the secularist camp represented by the National Salvation Front, an alliance of liberal and leftist parties coalesced in November 2012 to counterbalance what they perceived as the growing *Ikhwan*-ization and potential Islamization of the Egyptian state. Under the leadership of Mohamed Morsi (June 2012-July 2013), the secularists felt themselves to be excluded from critical political rebuilding processes, such as constitution-drafting, legislation, and appointment of cabinet and provincial positions. The Islamist camp blamed the secularists for uncooperative attitudes, which obstructed the functioning of the government and pushed Morsi to lean on Islamists in his cabinet. Both camps were keen to demonstrate their popular bases by organizing, covertly and overtly, street protests, thus creating the illusion of a secular-Islamist divide in Egyptian society. After the recent deposition of

Morsi, the 2012 Constitution, which was believed to be drafted by an Islamist-dominated *Shura* Council, was immediately suspended, an interim cabinet was formed wherein no members of the Islamist camp were included, and a number of high-level officials of the FJP and the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested for unproven terrorist allegations. These ostensible confrontations between Islamists and secularists prompt some to characterize the political developments in Egypt in the past two years as the rise and fall of political Islamism.[1]

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While political forces in Egypt struggled for political influence around a symbolic secular-Islamist divide, it is misguided to perceive this divide as an innate feature of the political community of Egypt that has consistently determined power distribution. Egypt, in its nature, is a modern sovereign state developing in an "asecular"[2] atmosphere, one which is neither secular nor religious in terms of the orientation of the Egyptian political community.

For the majority of Egyptians, including self-proclaimed secularists, Islam characterizes a set of values, customs, and *modus operandi* consciously and unconsciously followed in daily life. In this sense, Egypt has already been Islamic for centuries, regardless of any calls to Islamize Egypt in recent decades. For example, in Tahrir Square during recent "revolutions," the pattern of gathering and celebration resembled what was commonly seen in popular religious festivals across religious communities in Egypt, including Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christians and Jews.[3] Another example is the wave of anger at the blasphemous film *Innocence of Muslims* that erupted into mass protests in Egypt in September 2012. These examples show that, for ordinary Egyptians, Islam is not only a religion but also a feature of their shared tradition and an orientation of their daily lives.

However, this Islamic feature does not necessarily mean that Egypt is or can become an Islamic state. Theoretically, there is a

fundamental difference between the modern sovereign state and the Islamic state: In the former, sovereignty belongs to the political community of the state and governance should be in accordance with the will of the whole community; in the latter, by contrast, the political community itself "neither possesses sovereignty nor does it have — in the sense the modern state has — an autonomous political or legal will, since the sovereign is God and God alone."[4] This distinction determines that, in these two models of states, the legislative, judicial, and executive form and function in entirely dissimilar ways. In the modern sovereign state, a constitution is necessary in that it defines the nature of the relation between the political community and the state, how the community delegates the state to govern in its name and for its interest, and how the power of governance is distributed among state institutions. Laws are made by a legislative body to reflect the common will and values of the community; the judiciary is responsible for implementing the laws impartially through fixed procedures; and the executive, which is either elected or delegated, manage community affairs in accordance with the laws. In the Islamic state, no constitution is needed because the sovereign-community relation is predetermined and no community consensus is required on this matter. The *Sharia*, or Islamic law, works as an overwhelming moral force representing God's sole sovereignty over the community of believers. God is the only legislator. Jurists, who are not bound to state institutions, are merely interpreters of *Sharia*. Judges, who are appointed by the sultans of the state, resolve legal disputes in the community based on the interpretations of jurists. The sultans and their bureaucracies govern the community as delegates of God, and are subject to the authority of *Sharia*.

Recent "revolutions" in Egypt did not change the country's political system: a modern sovereign state representing the will of its political community rather than God. Islam is a point of reference as usual, and *Sharia* is still, and can only be, a source of legislation. This has been reflected in the chapters of the two Islamist parties in Egypt and the now suspended 2012 Constitution. The charter of the FJP states, "We also confirm our deep belief in the need to state in the Constitution that Islam is the official religion of the state,

Arabic is the official state language and that the principles of Islamic *Sharia* are the main source of legislation, and thus, the application of *Sharia* in all walks of life," and also, "Our party asserts that Egypt is a civil state with an Islamic reference."[5] Similarly, the charter of the Nour Party states that "the nation as a whole has exhibited a great popular consensus on the adoption of Islam as a religion of the state, and Arabic as the official language, and the principles of the Islamic *Sharia* as the main source of legislation."[6] As well, both parties emphasize the preeminence of the constitution, the national interest, and the people's will; no divine sovereignty is mentioned.

Let us look at how Islam is represented in previous constitutions of Egypt. Taking the status of *Sharia* as an example, Article 2 of the 1971 Constitution states that "Islam is the religion of the state, Arabic is the official language, and the principles of the Islamic *Sharia* is a source of legislation."[7] In the 2007 Constitution, a slight modification was made to Article 2, which reads, "The principle of the Islamic *Sharia* is the main source of legislation."[8] This article is kept intact in the 2012 Constitution, although during drafting some Salafists wanted to make *Sharia* "the only source of legislation." Moreover, the 2012 Constitution includes Article 219 explaining the contents of the principle of *Sharia* and Article 3 granting other religious communities in Egypt the right to choose their own religious laws as a source of legislation guiding their civil and religious affairs.[9]

It is, therefore, clear that in the framework of the 2012 Constitution, Islam is still a point of reference. *Sharia* does not replace the modern legal system of Egypt, and Islam is still secondary to the machinery of the nation-state. This confirms our observation that the political space in Egypt is asecular. In Egypt, neither complete secularization nor complete Islamization will succeed. The ideological confrontation between Islamism and secularism is more or less exaggerated.

Moreover, there is a consensus concerning the identity and future of Egypt, promulgated by the "revolutions" of 2011 and transcending the illusional divide between Islamism and secularism. Briefly speaking, this consensus defines Egypt to be a sovereign state ruled by constitution rather than any individual or interest

groups, one that guarantees freedom of thought and speech, maintains social justice, and respects cultural and religious diversity. This consensus has been consistently articulated in slogans of demonstrators, the *Azhar* Agreement (*Wathīqat al-azhar*) that has been signed by all major political parties and revolutionary groups in Egypt through the mediation of al-Azhar Mosque,[10] and charters of various political parties.

Consequently, when secularism and Islamism are used as rationales for struggles between various political parties, such usage is more about sectarian interests than actual ideological differences. Anxiety about Islamists in Egypt is not because they are trying to transition to an "Islamic state," but because those belonging to the Islamist camp now threaten the position of other groups in the power structure, including secularists, liberalists, the army, police, and intelligence forces. Sadly, Islam has become a label of political identity in current Egyptian politics, replacing its core function as a reference of morality, social order, and cultural orientation.

Acquiring Legitimacy: via Institutional or Popular Mechanisms?

In his final speech as the president of Egypt, before being deposed by the army, Mohamed Morsi was still defending himself based on the principle of legitimacy. His legitimacy was acquired through the institutional mechanism of democracy. He won the presidential election, albeit with only a marginal majority, and his tenure of presidency was legally stipulated to be four years. In the eyes of his supporters, he made no major faults during his time in office, making any accusation of malfeasance untenable. His claim to continuing his presidency was solid and fully legitimate. Now in Cairo, there are at least three major sites of sit-ins, where supporters of the disposed president request his return by toting the principle of legitimacy. The international community initially doubted the nature of this deposition, unsure if it was by popular demand or a coup, according to the same principle of legitimacy.

However, presently in Egypt, the institutional mechanism cannot guarantee the legitimacy of a president and his cabinet.

Ever since Hosni Mubarak was toppled in February 2011, popular movements, such as demonstrations, protests, and sit-ins, have become an alternative mechanism to challenge any regime, regardless of its institutional legitimacy. All players in Egyptian politics know the importance of this popular mechanism well. In June 2012, the newly elected president Mohamed Morsi attended two inaugural ceremonies: one at the Supreme Constitutional Court of Egypt and the other in front of a revolutionary audience at Tahrir Square. He clearly understood that winning popular support was as vital as following the institutional protocol for his hold of the presidency. During the previous year, when the president and his ruling bloc, the judiciary, and the opposition parties were vying for control of the state around issues of parliamentary re-election, constitution-drafting and limiting or expanding the power of the presidency by resorting to institutional and legal procedures, these power competitors also sought popular support by organizing street demonstrations, protests, and cross-party violence. On June 30, 2013, when a wave of anti-Morsi mass demonstrations swept across Egypt, the army swiftly intervened to depose Morsi under the guise of respecting the people's will, rather than protecting the integrity of the institutional mechanism of democracy. On July 24, 2013, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, commander in chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces, called for Egyptians to march in the streets to support the army in deposing Morsi and crack down on the "terrorism" of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is noteworthy that al-Sisi made this call when the army already controlled the machinery of the state, including the current interim government formed under its tutelage.

It seems that the mechanism of mobilizing popular public support has become more powerful than ever in Egypt, to the extent that it determines the survival of the ruling regime. But it is highly doubtful that this mechanism actually reflects the empowerment of the Egyptian people. Quite the contrary: The fact that institutional and popular mechanisms have to coexist illustrates that the people, ordinary Egyptian citizens as a collectivity, have yet to be included in the political system. In other words, the will and the power of the people have not been

politically institutionalized; the current political system is still not democratic in a true sense. In order to make their voices heard, citizens have to take to the streets because they do not feel the political institutions function in accordance with their political views and aspirations.

The dissociation between state institutions and citizenry can lead to two negative consequences. The first is the endurance of popular demonstrations. This is what Egypt has witnessed since the overthrow of Mubarak's regime. A series of protests and sit-ins, with changing targets of attack and confusing political pursuits, became a common scene in major Egyptian cities. Worse still, street violence has escalated significantly since the beginning of 2013, which is a natural development of unremitting confrontations between different groups in the street. The continuation of street confrontations and the inability of the government to curb them have eroded public trust in state apparatus, leading to the growth of anarchism in Egyptian society. An example of this would be the Egyptian "Black Bloc," a self-described anarchist group that violently attacked public infrastructure in several Egyptian cities during recent street protests against Morsi's regime. Another example is revolutionary youth, who identified themselves as *harrāk* (motor) in the January 23 protests in order to announce their pioneering role in promoting social progress, and who then switched to *tamarrud* (rebellion) during the June 30 protests simply to express dissatisfaction with the then, and potentially any future, government of Egypt.

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The second consequence is the degradation of popular demonstrations, from a form of political and social revolution to a means of political struggle between interest groups. If the January 23 protests can be seen as a popular movement shaped out of the collective fury at Mubarak's authoritarian police state, the June 30 protests were a suspiciously coordinated effort that made use of

the popular sentiment to overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood's monopoly of the state.[11] This was clearly a shift. The January 23 protests may have empowered people initially, but in the long run it made political players realize how powerful the popular force can be and how important it is to move this force in their favor. The popular force, which could have been an impetus to political and social reform had the revolutionary people been incorporated into the political transition after Mubarak's downfall, soon became the political capital for which all groups and parties were vying.

Is There an Invisible Deep State in Egypt?

An unusual phenomenon captivated observers of Egyptian politics after the deposition of Mohamed Morsi: a widespread suspicion that the entire anti-Morsi movement was a well-planned intrigue. It was reported that the series of social crises, including the gas shortage, power cuts and dwindling numbers of on-duty police to maintain social security, which mobilized popular anger against Morsi and his government suddenly disappeared after his downfall.[12] Moreover, generous aid from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait quickly arrived, temporarily alleviating economic hardship in Egypt. There is an intellectual supposition that it was the *fulūl*, referring to the beneficiaries of the Mubarak regime, the army, and the police who collaborated to overthrow Morsi, in order to restore the old pattern of power allocation in Egypt that had been challenged by the Muslim Brotherhood during the previous year.[13] It is hard to say at this stage whether this supposition is a conspiracy theory or a yet-to-be-proved historical fact.

What is certain is that this kind of conspiracy theory is not new to Egypt. In June 2012, there were already discussions in Egypt and abroad about the existence of a "deep state" in the country.[14] The deep state, a concept borrowed from Turkish politics, refers to an invisible network of stakeholders with shared interests deeply entrenched in society, combining important figures in state bureaucracy, the army, industry, business, the media, and other sectors of society. Those belonging to this network usually hold an ultra-nationalist ideology; they aim to maintain the status quo of the

nation and prevent any radical, uncontrolled change. The deep state may also have its own militia, which can be called upon whenever necessary to block social reform and revolution by creating social instability, in order to compel the nation to return to its old tracks. Moreover, the deep state is usually supported by regional and international capitals and powers.

For some analysts, all of the above features of the deep state are expressed by a seemingly hidden conservative force in the Egyptian context. According to them, this force consists of the *fulūl* and the army, who wished to retain their power positions after the downfall of the Mubarak regime, their old protectors. The Muslim Brotherhood seems to believe in the existence of this deep state in Egypt. In his inaugural speech addressing at Tahrir Square, Morsi called for continuing revolution until all the old, anti-revolution strongholds of power were broken. During his presidency, his cabinet struggled to run in line with this ambition, but failed to reach a deal with domestic and international capital-holders to reactivate Egyptian economy. Nor did they manage to restore social stability and ensure basic supply of food, electricity, and gas. The failure of Morsi and his cabinet aroused widespread popular anger and distrust, leading to the mass demonstration on June 30, 2013, which finally terminated Morsi's presidency. The Muslim Brotherhood blamed the deep state for their coordinated non-cooperation with Morsi's cabinet. The Brotherhood claimed that what happened on June 30 was a restoration, led by the deep state, of what had been achieved since the January 23 protests, such as the overthrow of authoritarianism and the installation of democracy.[15]

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deep state reveals some stubborn features of Egyptian politics, such as the lack of transparency and the exclusion of the majority — ordinary citizens — from politics, which have not been shaken by recent "revolutions."

The Power Structure That Has Not Been Challenged

The secular-Islamist divide, the double mechanisms to acquire legitimacy and the imagined deep state only partially explain the current socio-political crises in Egypt. However, together they reveal a persistent power structure in Egyptian society that has not been challenged by "revolutions" from early 2011 to the present.

That political competitors label themselves and each other along a secular-Islamist divide, regardless of an existing consensus concerning the identity and future of Egypt, shows how politicians in Egypt care more about their share of power than solving endemic socio-economic problems that have afflicted ordinary Egyptians for decades. The dissociation between institutional and popular mechanisms illustrates how the popular force, now politically enlightened and activated, has long been and is still excluded from politics in Egypt. The claimed existence of the deep state and its currency in contemporary Egyptian political discourse reveals that there is a structural impedance to achieving socio-political reforms in Egypt, compelling frustrated politicians, intellectuals and ordinary citizens to find a concrete body to take the blame.

But what is the structural impedance that causes the above socio-political symptoms? This impedance can be briefly described as follows. First, an oligarchy consisting of rural landed classes, affluent urban merchants and businessmen, and bureaucratic-military elites has long controlled the economic resources of Egypt and monopolized the Egyptian state. Politics has always been an elite game in Egypt, obstructing the development of an actual representational system that can reflect the will of ordinary Egyptians. Second, in order to curb the popular force in Egypt, the ruling oligarchy buys loyalty through an expansive welfare network, including subsidies in food, energy, and education, as well as a cumbersome bureaucracy to offer state-patronized jobs.

The oligarchy also relies on the intelligence service to identify, monitor, and terrify political dissidents before they can arouse sufficient popular support. These measures, implemented for almost six decades, have imposed a heavy burden on the fragile Egyptian economy and crafted the bureaucracy and intelligence service into "states within the state" that are difficult to reform. Third, international and regional powers, such as the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, encourage the maintenance of this oligarchic mode in Egypt in order to easily influence the country via economic aids and elitist alliances.

It can be argued that Egypt cannot move forward until some significant efforts are made to weaken the aforementioned structural impedance. Before that time, Egypt will still face multiple rounds of popular protests, along with potential regime changes. The recent downfall of Morsi's regime and the continuing street confrontations among pro-military, pro-Morsi, and revolutionary groups are just the latest manifestations of this tendency.

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