The Main Factors which Blocked Democratization in Egypt

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The "Arab Spring" in general and especially the Egyptian peoples' quest for democracy have dominated the reports, analyses as well as reportages of the international academia and Press during the last months. However, less attention has been paid to the reasons why a non-democratic regime in Egypt had lasted for so long. The analysis of these factors should give a clear picture to the reader of the great difficulty in toppling Mubarak's system and the importance of the Egyptian peoples' revolution.

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Egypt faced a volcanic upheaval during the 20th century. The two World Wars, the rise of the nationalistic movement, the anti-colonial struggle, the demarcation of its modern borders, the foundation of the Israeli state, the Cold War, the Arab-Israeli conflicts as well as the resurgence of Islamists have led this part of the world to the centre of international interest several times in the course of recent history and have vastly affected its internal politics. However, very few implied that the second decade of the 21st century would bring a significant step towards democracy. The existence of the former autocratic regime was a reality due to several political, economic and other related social and cultural factors.

Examining the political realities which forbade for a more democratic future in Egypt, we should certainly mention the political monopoly by the ruling elite, the strength and effectiveness of the state to prevent reforms through its huge and loyal bureaucracy and security forces as well as the threat of radical Islamists and the weakness or complete absence of institutions. In addition, economic reasons such as the importance of foreign aid, absence of market-driven economies and slow economic reforms seemed to be equally important to the deadlock of the political reality in Egypt. Finally, several social factors and cultural norms made the prospect of political change more difficult: the weakness of civil society due to the lack of a common stance from middle classes as well as the class and patriarchal social structure, the clashes for power among the various opposition groups and the absence of former institutional and democratic tradition to make people push for change. Of course, a thorough analysis is needed in order to explain the factors which hindered political development in the "heart of the Arab world".

The Egyptian government and ruler had exhibited an impressive endurance and ability to prevent change while maintaining their political monopoly[1]. Mubarak's uncontested supremacy came from his personal power, the loyalty of his administration and the effectiveness of his tools of political coercion. In most cases, the president used to be the system himself as he was the one to distribute privileges and orders[2] in a "divide and rule" form. Indeed, political pluralism in Egypt was either absent or fake. The opposition was frequently suppressed, weakened or even declared as illegal. The sovereign maintained his unique position by distributing privileges and wealth to his close circle of loyals who were responsible for ensuring his stability by distributing part of the goods to wider groups of his supporters or punishing his opponents. In addition, neither the former Egyptian government (NDP) nor the current main political force (Muslim

Brotherhood) were following democratic values according to their undemocratic practices before and during the past elections (NDP[3]), their way of internal function (NDP[4], MB[5]) or their political agenda (NDP[6 7], MB[8])as it will be explained.

The enlargement of power and the divisions of the government, bureaucracy and security forces[9], whose high members competed for loyalty to the leader[10], were key factors which did not allow political change to occur. As for the role of bureaucracy in this process, one might suggest that it was an important prerequisite for the preservation of the political status quo as it penetrated and controlled society by building ties of clientalism with influential groups and the masses[11]. In addition, the public enterprises produced "disciplined" and frightened citizens who were taught to obey their superiors and never protest[12]. The Nasserist era had left a legacy of high expenditures for the bureaucracy[13] and the army[14] as well as widespread corruption and ministerial rivalries that carried on. This way, whole social groups and most of the citizens became dependent on the privileges distributed to them by the bureaucracy and as a result on the ruler himself. Society became a pyramid on the top of which was the governor and at the bottom his people while the bureaucracy held the role of the distributer and preserver of this structure.

The lack of a certain ideology and governmental plan allowed Mubarak to react at will whenever a threat to his rule rose[15]. The abrupt removal of any rising political star (e.g. Abu Ghazala, Amr Mosa) by Mubarak and his substitution by a low profile or less capable figure proved that the president would not allow any internal opposition to be created[16] not to mention an external one (e.g. Ayman Nour, Saad Eddin Ibrahim). In addition, any opposition to the ruler by a citizen meant the direct exclusion from his "gifts" (e.g. employment, lower taxation, safety). Thus, most of the country's important groups or individuals became part of the system to sustain their profits in an ongoing process. Furthermore, the general corruption was enforced and maintained by the governmental bureaucracy in order to avoid any attempt of social unrest or change. If someone tried to react he might not only lose governmental help but possibly face a trial and even the violence of security forces.

The Egyptian non-Islamic political parties were also very weak and unable to push for democratization as most of them had been forced to become part of the government's clientalist system in order to survive[17]. The regime used three main measures to cause internal divisions within a potential threat[18]: The first was to wait while a group was weakening on its own. The New Wafd party, for example, faced an extreme intra-group conflict which even turned violent after

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the disappointing results of the 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections. In addition, al-Ahrar party faced violent internal confrontations that led to its dissolution after its founding leader's death in 1998. A second way in which the state dissolved opposition enemies was to place indirect financial pressures. For example, when the Nasserist party rejected Mubarak's referendum nomination in 1999 the state targeted its newspaper, al Arabi, by demanding to pay up its three million LE debt and by blocking the public enterprises' advertisements to its pages. A third sabotage method towards opposition groups was the infiltration of governmental agents into these parties, and their running for the party's leadership. Actually, el-Ghad party was split violently through this method (same fate as the Misr party) after its popular leader, Ayman Nour, had dared to run for President in 2005 and his turbulent political career ended up in jail.

The non-Islamic opposition parties did not ally among them because they were competing each other for governmental favor[19]. For example, a strong opposition block was ready to boycott the 1990 elections but it collapsed when the Tagammu party defected in exchange for governmental favor. Every political party needed to be recognized by the state in order to function legally and could not receive external funds or internal ones if it was not given a governmental permission to do so[20]. A clear example of governmental intervention was the freeze of the Socialist Labor Party (al-Amal) and the closure of its newspaper, al Shaab, in 2000. The President's party itself had been weakened ever since Mubarak took his position as he promoted rivalries among the various factions within the NDP, appointed personally its higher members[21] and undermined the political career of its charismatic figures[22]. In addition, individuals who were elected to the People's Assembly strengthened their local position and acted as intermediaries between the government and the citizens. This way the NDP could easily recruit its clienteles and at the same time was not coherent enough to challenge Mubarak's reign[23].

The security forces as well as the army had a special place in the structure of the Egyptian politics as they were the last safety net of the authoritarian leader whenever his absolute power was challenged[24]. That is why Mubarak attempted to closely control the security forces by putting his close partners in high positions of the army as well as the police and spread divisions among its leaders[25]. Whenever the President was not powerful enough to manipulate security forces, he would rather try to co-opt them to come to a compromise which would not threaten his position. For example, in 1986 numerous Central Security Forces' con-

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scripts rioted after a false rumor was spread that their service would be extended by one year. The President relied on the army to restore order and that led to a bloody crackdown against the conscripts. However, the army returned to its barracks after completing its mission and Mubarak, following his usual stick and carrot policies, promised to the conscripts better salaries as well as living conditions in their camps.

Actually, the huge Egyptian army (numbering around 450.000) was the employer of cheap labor who might otherwise cause social turmoil[26]. In addition, the Ministry of Interior and its agents were used to counterbalance the power of the army in a non-stop struggle for the favor of the President[27]. Whenever social unrest took place the police or even the military forces were employed to assure the ruler's position and restore the order by using extreme means (threats, arrests, violence). Indeed, in April 2008, a general strike was cancelled by the security forces which attacked, after threatening, textile workers at Mahalla leaving two dead and many injured[28]. Thus, the continuing renewal of the emergency law every three years since Sadat's assassination had left Mubarak a free hand over the use of coercion and military courts against any sign of opposition. Finally, the use of the security corps combined with bribery and cheating during the elections had left no space for the opposition to hope for any significant gains.

The reemergence and empowerment of hard core Islamists and the less radical Muslim Brotherhood, which has denounced its past terrorist practices, in the Egyptian scene during the last decades was another political factor worth mentioning as it provoked fear to some reformers and offered an excuse for the intervention and brutal means of the administration in the consciousness of liberal citizens. The radicals[29] (e.g. Takfir wal-Hijza, al-Jihad, Jama'a al-Islamiya) used their perception of "ideology"-religion to attack the state, "Judeo-Christians", the "West" as well as whoever actually was or thought to be pro-Israeli[30]. They followed writings such as those of Sayid Qutb, a former Muslim Brother, and embraced violence in order to impose Sharia law and their perception of Islam which they thought to be a complete and perfect system for all aspects of governance. Ayman al-Zwahiri, the current leader of al Qaeda, used to be the head of al-Jihad back in the 1990s proving the close ties of Egyptian Islamists with international terrorist organizations. Al-Jihad's recent support for al-Zwahiri shows that little has changed since then[31]. Actually, the former President, Anwar Sadat, was killed by a military cell of al-Jihad in 1981 and apparently Mubarak, who was sitting next to him and got wounded that day, had never forgotten this terrorist attack.

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The government took advantage of its war against terrorism in order to further oppress the broader opposition[32]. Thus, every group or individual who became "disturbing" for the government, after being baptized as a terrorist or a general threat, might be excluded from politics or even arrested in the name of war against terrorism. Oppositional groups[33], individuals and the international community did not strongly react to these practices as the fear of an islamization of the Egyptian society seemed to be an adequate excuse for this kind of response by the government[34]. Indeed, the internal politics of the Muslim Brotherhood[35] and its past rhetoric (e.g. concerning women, other religions, application of Sharia' law) prove that these fears were to a certain extent justified. However, the Muslim Brotherhood's electoral win after Mubarak's fall showed that it has a broad support by Egyptian voters. Hence, their doubtful commitment to the rules of democracy remains to be proved.

An equally important political factor which hindered democratization in Egypt was the weakness or complete absence of political institutions[36] in the country, a fact which prevented change to happen and made future political evolution completely unpredictable. The constitution was frequently violated due to the emergency law, and institutions were either nonexistent or corrupted and filled with the ruler's supporters[37]. Furthermore, during the elections the governmental cheating and violence used to be almost uncontrollable[38]. The Political Parties Committee (PPC) which granted legal status to any new party was completely controlled by the regime and had been blocking or supervising the political activists' actions[39]. Thus, the available institutions could not check governmental decisions[40], but they were rather used to promote and ensure the realization of the elites' will[41]. However, these practices had created serious gaps[42] concerning procedures of law, political succession, economic predictability and a lack of democratic tradition which led to the continuity of the aforementioned problematic model. Even the newly elected regime will lack a level of legitimacy due to the complete absence or weakness of institutions which normally monitor and check governmental policies in democratic states.

In addition, the preservation of the political status quo in Egypt was based on economic sources such as the Suez Canal and foreign aid[43]. During the Cold War, Egypt was granted huge economic aid by both superpowers due to its geostrategic significance. The USSR military, economic and political support to the regime was substituted by the USA aid after the 1973 war. Actually, the foreign policy of Mubarak's regime was mainly based upon the preservation

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of these external funds[44] while Egypt had become heavily dependent on foreign powers (not only Western but also regional). In 2009, the declining annual USA military aid had reached the amount of $1.3 billion[45] (second only to Israel) and the civil one $250 million[46]. The government had taken the minimum possible reforms in order to maintain its power but at the same time sustain the crucial US aid and the international favor[47]. Indeed, in 2002 the USA ambassador, David Welch, was asked whether the USA would encourage the democratization of Egypt and he replied: "the United States considers Egypt a friend and we don't put pressure on our friends[48]."

Foreign powers kept supporting the undemocratic regime through diplomatic, economic and military aid[49] to ensure their interests and stability in the region. The rental income[50] (foreign aid and control of the critical transit facilities of Suez Canal) gave the Egyptian government the chance to set up and maintain an enormous public sector and strong security forces[51] which were, as we have already discussed, frequently used to avoid political change. The huge public sector was the main employer as well as the provider of goods to society[52], and a very effective way to sustain the ruling administration. Indeed, a national program ordered the public enterprises and governmental services to hire most of the university graduates (this measure used to be effective for everybody about a decade ago). This way, citizens relied heavily on the state and did not question its legitimacy.

As we have already discussed, there was no central economic strategy that could lead to political democratization, but rather a huge public sector driven by the elites' decisions, a weak private sector and a large informal one. At the same time, the liberalization programs which were pressed-upon by foreign powers and international organizations were realized slowly and disorderly leaving no space for hope of a democratic change but they had rather created a system of crony capitalism. The informal nature of the economy gave also the benefit of uncertainty concerning state responsibilities since the opposition found it difficult to locate and criticize specific policies[53]. In addition, an environment of distrust had been built among influential individuals as the ruling elite spread divisions[54] until they became completely loyal and dependent on Mubarak and his ruling team[55]. Then the bureaucracy and the ruling political party distributed benefits to the powerful groups and people in order to be well tightened altogether under a common goal: the survival of the government.

This environment of corruption and political backwardness might have been disrupted by the need to follow the interna-

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tional economic and political paradigm, but the ruling establishment found again a way to maintain its authority. The former government was obliged to take some liberal economic decisions due to the socioeconomic crisis of the last decades but it did so in favor of weak and slow reforms in order to avoid making political reforms as well (e.g. survival strategies[56]). The strategy followed by the ruling elite was to promote a degree of economic change sufficient to attract foreign investments but without undermining the fundamental social and economic interests of those domestic groups which were tied to the public sector[57].

Finally, certain Egyptian social and cultural norms favored the maintenance of the authoritarian regime in multiple and complex ways. Patriarchy has been the unquestionable model for the average Egyptian family[58] and this way a general concept of a one man strict leadership had been the norm. The most revolutionary parts of society, such as the associational groups, were divided in personal cliques, familial networks, and regional factions. The corporatist structure that the regime had imposed on the syndicates further worsened their weak position. Indeed, the 2003 Egyptian Unified Labor Law was supposed to allow strikes but only if they were approved by the General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions which was, of course, dominated by the NDP[59].

Meanwhile the informal groups, which were the most usual mode of organization, were not strong enough to fight for change effectively. Most times these groups fought each other to gain or keep a strong position in the social puzzle. These rivalries and the resulting hierarchies among the various groups, made the extreme power enjoyed by a small ruling elite seem normal. Furthermore, the locus of the middle class (bureaucracy, the clerics, and the bourgeois) were either manipulated or co-opted with the establishment while their conservative education system could not fertilize oppositional stances[60]. The emergence of two new strata over the last fifty years, the industrial working class and the professional middle class, had not provoked any significant change because the first lacked the confidence to challenge the status quo and the last was fragmented and too weak to compete with the traditional political system and the growing power of Islamist groups[61].

Moreover, the absence of a pertinent and viable institutional tradition in the political life of Egypt as well as the country's past imperialistic experience by foreign powers had created a cultural structure where democratic consciousness was very weak and rare. Actually, before, during and ever since Prophet Muhammad's rule the politics in the Middle East had been based on patrimonial and patriarchal princi-

ples where institutions' role was rather small[62].

The main factors which prevented democratization in Egypt for so long are thus included in the broad categories of politics and economics as well as the socio-cultural norms which influence them. The connections among these various reasons which resulted in a long political underdevelopment of the Egyptian nation are very complex and usually hard to distinguish as they closely interacted. Mubarak would not have been able to sustain power for so long without the cooperation of the elites, the army and the bureaucracy, which were loyal to his rule in order to maintain their own privileges coming from national resources and foreign aid. The opposition was divided and could not challenge the central authority and inspire the broad masses who had got used to authoritarian rule and economic dependency on the bureaucracy. Finally, the local institutions, which in most countries control and validate the governmental policies, were either completely absent or too weakened and corrupted to complete their mission.

Thus, all these factors worked together to bring about the preservation of the "Mubarak state" until the recent revolution. True democracy is still difficult to imagine since Egypt is currently under the armed forces' control while its strongest political force, the Muslim Brotherhood, has given few signs in the past of advocating a truly democratic vision for the country[63]. However, the enormous bravery and determination shown recently by the Egyptian masses leave plenty of space for optimism and hope that the Arab Spring will not become an Islamist Fall.

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