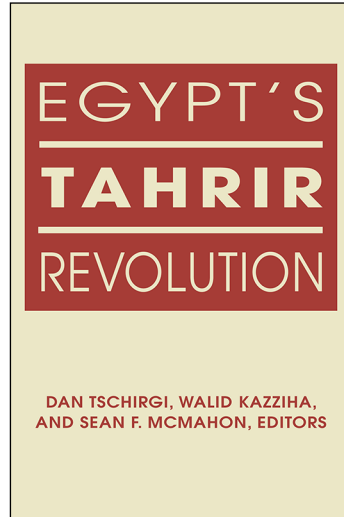


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Egypt's Tahrir Revolution

edited by
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1

Introduction

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and Sean F. McMahon*

In late 2012, Mohamad Morsi—the Muslim Brother elected as Egypt’s first post-Mubarak president—sought through presidential decree to elevate his office above the normal limits of judicial review. It was an explosive decision, one that precipitated a hostile reaction from all parts of Egypt’s public, save committed Islamists. Morsi’s move may have transformed the basis of conflict in Egypt, making it much less one between the remnants of Mubarak’s regime (the army and police) and the Egyptian masses, and much more a conflict between two poles of society: Islamists on one side and, on the other, everyone else.

The situation at the end of 2012 contrasted sharply with the anti-government ground swell that had been unleashed in Egypt on January 25, 2011, leaving in its wake prolonged political uncertainty. Within eighteen days, the thirty-year rule of Hosni Mubarak had ended, and a military council took control of the country. These milestone events were followed in March by a popular referendum that approved constitutional amendments as well as a process for reestablishing a viable government over the next year or so. Elections for the People’s Assembly—the lower house of Egypt’s parliament—were conducted from late November 2011 to January 10, 2012, giving Islamists a clear majority of the seats. By the end of February, the polls had yielded a similar result for parliament’s upper house, the Shura Council.

The period since the events of January 25, 2011, has been one of virtually constant political tumult. It has also driven home two great lessons. The first is that when it comes to dealing with revolution as a social phenomenon, the inevitable initial question is a definitional one: What qualifies as a “revolution”? Social science broadly provides two

categories of possible answers. One is rooted in classical Marxist thought, tracing its origins to Marx's view of history as a materialistic process that ultimately underlies social reality and the concomitant need for social change that is rendered explicable by material contradictions. Proponents of this view are indebted to Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Gramsci, among others. The alternative view, both preceding Marx and further developed in his wake, denies the materialist "key" to historical change, and therefore accepts the possibility of cognitive sources of historical dynamics. Max Weber, and the tradition his work sparked, lie at the modern root of this trend. This view perceives social change as involving not only material disarticulation in the social fabric but also the possibility of evolutionary adjustments that may cumulatively produce change that is in essence "revolutionary."

The so-called Egyptian revolution of early 2011 caught all of this volume's contributors unprepared. Associated in various ways with the daily life of the Department of Political Science at the American University in Cairo, we have witnessed for years, and in some cases decades, the debilitating impact of prolonged authoritarianism on the lives of young Egyptians. The oppressive environment generated by Egypt's political system eventually affected virtually all aspects of the educational experience in Egypt.

It is true, of course, that young people typically retain an irrepressible enthusiasm for life, but even that reality was no match for the daily grind of life in Mubarak's Egypt. Among the first casualties claimed by the political climate as Mubarak's rule degenerated into unabashed dictatorship were the optimism, spontaneity, hopefulness, and adventurous drive to experimentation that are typically associated with the young. Such qualities were well on their way to being overwhelmed by a pervasive fear of authority, a reflexive and unthinking conservatism, and a very low level of creative imagination. That they were not fully eclipsed by 2011 is something that in hindsight should have alerted us to the rage that exploded within Egypt's younger generation on January 25. When the Tahrir Revolution erupted, we all cheered, but with shocked, almost unbelieving, surprise.

Within eighteen days, it was over, or at least the fundamental, first objective of the regime's opponents had been achieved: Hosni Mubarak resigned, and the young revolutionaries' demand for true democratic change seemed to have advanced significantly as a result of this first step. For many of us, the iconic photograph that most captures the spirit of Tahrir is that of youths cleaning Tahrir Square after Mubarak had stepped down. When the photographer pointed out that Egypt's revolu-

tion was the first to have revolutionaries who tidied up after themselves, those in the picture reportedly explained that now they finally felt true ownership of the country.

And this returns us to our original question: What is a social revolution? As a group, we have been unable to arrive at a consensus on a single definition. On the other hand, we have certainly identified some key hallmarks of a social revolution, including the following three features:

1. A social revolution marks a major change in the way a society is organized, and this, in turn, affects and is affected by both the structures and the values that characterized the old social order.
2. A social revolution is felt by most people in a society to mark a major change in the nature of their society.
3. A social revolution is a historical event, and, as such, will inevitably leave traces of its impact on the subsequent history of the affected society's development.

All these criteria require interpretation by the analyst, which is to say that none are objectively definable. What is more problematic is that the third criterion is obviously impossible to evaluate at any given moment. In short, then, the task of defining "revolution" remains in the realm of subjective judgment, with only some indefinable future to rely upon as a definitive agent.

While the Marxist-inclined among us may stick to a vision demanding objective evidence of a revolution in materialist terms, the Weberians among us will be more flexible, accepting the possibility that history involves incremental change that may sometimes produce revolutionary transitions, and that the causes of this may be either material or cognitive, or some combination of both. In any case, the unity of our collective analyses lies in our shared assumption that history is, in the long run, dynamic.

In this light, we clearly agree that Egypt experienced a movement toward "revolution" in the process of overthrowing the regime of Hosni Mubarak, but we can also just as clearly differ on the event's immediate and future significance for both Egypt and the Arab world. In short, the second great lesson taught by the events of January 2011 and since is that a revolution's "real" meaning will be seen differently by different people.

The Egyptian revolution now appears to provide an interesting synthesis of the Marxist and Weberian models. On the one hand, the institutions and fabric of the Egyptian state and society have been changed. Mubarak, his family, and almost all of his immediate senior aides have

been removed from power. Some of the major institutions that were closely associated with his regime have been undermined, displaced, or even eliminated. The clique of top businessmen mobilized by his younger son in preparation for his anticipated succession has suffered a serious setback. Suddenly, whole social categories of the long-marginalized Egyptian populace are moving rapidly to gain a place for themselves under the sun. The Salafi movement has emerged in strength to challenge other social and political parties as well as to pose a possibly lethal threat to Egypt's ancient Coptic community. Last but not least, demands by various professional and labor groups continue to exert pressure on the declining economic and social order that Mubarak left behind.

On the other hand, a great number of Egyptians are skeptical about these changes. They view them as insufficient and failing to provide the proper dynamics for the emergence of a new society. Mubarak is gone, but some of the pillars of his political system remain. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was replaced by President Morsi, but does not seem to be acting any differently. The authoritarian skills of the Mubarak era have been maintained. The old style of politics has been perpetuated. Increasing pressures on radical movements have been exercised, and the media have been subjected to the oppressive measures of the past. Government bureaucracy is still stifling the poor, and corruption has not receded.

Some call for another revolution, while others demand that the path of the first one be corrected. Between these extremes, confusion prevails. Many continue to argue that Egypt should have promulgated a constitution prior to calling parliamentary elections. Until now, these groups still fear that the revolution will be hijacked by Islamists.

Despite these differences, Egypt's political life has acquired a welcome vibrancy. A majority of Egyptians were long isolated from the exercise of power and excluded from political discourse. Today, there are hardly any Egyptians who do not have an opinion about the country's political situation. Whether these debates will yield practical results favoring the development of a vibrant society and a viable state, as well as a way out of the authoritarian impasse in which Egyptians found themselves in recent history, is a moot point. However, the signs indicate that Egyptians are returning to the realm of politics through their daily discussions and growing interest in their own political future.

Political parties have mushroomed; among them are the good, the bad, and the ugly. Independent leaders with a strong sense of direction are emerging after having been almost totally eclipsed during the

Mubarak era. Moreover, young men and women are no longer afraid to challenge the authority of the state and, if necessary, to put their lives on the line to defend their newly won freedoms.

The debate surrounding the hijacking of Egypt's January 2011 revolution is impassioned, and has serious consequences. Undeniably, changes have taken place, and there are still more to come. Mubarak has been removed and the barrier of fear has fallen, hopefully forever. Yet it is also true that some pillars of the old order have outlived the fall of the ancien régime, and have managed to sustain themselves in power. The SCAF did not represent a revolutionary movement, nor was it expected to become one. President Morsi was able to chase it from power with only one, hardly dramatic, confrontation. Thus, we saw the SCAF bowing to the pressures of politics. It has retracted some of the decisions it had taken and bowed to the power of the people. Left to its own devices, the SCAF would have monopolized power. But today's reality is that Egypt is still living a process of revolutionary change with the potential to determine a limited professional role for its military.

Since the January 2011 revolution, the political reactivation of Egyptian society has produced three major political blocs. First is the Islamist bloc, consisting mainly of the well-organized Muslim Brothers, the Salafis, and independent Muslim personalities. Second is the Liberal bloc, which includes the youth movement and some of the newly founded political parties that support liberal programs. The third bloc revolves around the SCAF, and includes constituencies attached to the bureaucracy and those in power.

None of these blocs represents on its own a cohesive political movement unified organizationally in one single party. Each coheres largely as a defensive mechanism against the others. However, especially in the cases of the Islamists and the liberals, loose ideological linkages are also organizationally relevant. None of these political forces on its own is currently able to lead the country and define its future steps. The outcome of the interaction among them will set Egypt's eventual political direction. The balance of power could shift if two blocs decide to join hands, but this has not yet happened.

After January 2011, Egypt set itself on the course of completing its unfinished revolution, with the country remaining in the throes of a political process that could ultimately lead it to total change. For now, Cairo remains between Kerensky and Lenin, between the first Russian revolution and that of the Bolsheviks. In less dramatic but sober terms, Egypt is currently caught between Weber and Marx.

The Puzzle of Egypt's Long-Term Future

Trying to fathom the significance of Egypt's revolution necessarily thrusts one into the thankless task of political divination. From some perspectives, the record of Egypt's short post-revolutionary history seems to indicate that with the coming of the SCAF, Egypt actually experienced a counterrevolution rather than a "revolutionary moment."

In January and February 2011 the Egyptian state's repressive apparatuses grew stronger when Mubarak transferred power to the SCAF, and in a wonderful—though some would say "confused"—instance of metaphorical symmetry, a favorite chant in Tahrir Square was "the army and the people are one hand." Class oppression and exploitation were not eliminated in the aftermath of the revolution. They increased. Furthermore, none of the repressive state machinery was broken up. Its power was not diminished. In fact, as the extensive post-revolution use of military trials indicates, the reach of the repressive state apparatuses was extended, and their power was augmented after the revolutionary days of January–February 2011. In September, Human Rights Watch disclosed that more than 12,000 people had been tried before military tribunals since January. Strikingly, the monitoring group reported that this was "more than the total number of civilians who faced military trials during the 30-year rule of Hosni Mubarak."¹

An additional element giving cause for concern as Egyptians prepared to elect their first post-revolution president in the summer of 2012 was the intense chauvinism that marked Egypt's political life since Mubarak's fall. From the early days of 2011, Tahrir Square—and indeed the entire country—were rife with nationalistic fervor. Supporters as well as opponents of the Mubarak regime were driven by nationalist sentiments, including the presumed menace posed by "foreign agents." All discourses, even those articulated by Islamists, were nationalistic. Also, as was made abundantly clear the night the tanks rolled into Tahrir Square to be greeted with euphoria, anti-Mubarak protesters did not want to smash the state apparatus. They wanted to wrest control of the state apparatus from the Mubarak regime. From a Leninist perspective, the Egyptian insurrection sought to do a most *un*revolutionary thing—allow a new class to govern with the old state machinery; not destroy the state, but transfer its proprietorship.

The political upheaval of 2011 was therefore simultaneously both a superbly simple and direct phenomenon and an incredibly complex one. It was simple and direct in that the movement found unity in the almost unanimous desire to rid Egypt of Hosni Mubarak's rule. It was far more

complex in that it united Islamists, secular liberals, traditional elites, and others—all in a welter of fundamentally differing interests and ambitions. The whole affair begged the question of this disparate movement’s significance for Egypt’s future direction. We hope that analyses in this volume will shed welcome light on the processes that led to Egypt’s revolution as well as on that event’s overall significance.

Structure of the Book

Part 1 covers the specific factors and dynamics that underpinned, and flowed from, the Egyptian revolution of January 2011. Part 2 covers the context of the revolution, exploring the broader historical and political environments. Part 3 covers the implications of the revolution, examining its significance for both theory-building and international affairs. Part 4 offers some preliminary conclusions regarding key questions related to the meaning and implications of Egypt’s 2011 political upheaval.

Part 1 begins with a chapter by Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyid, who raises the compelling question: What went wrong with Mubarak’s regime? His analysis uncovers a series of missteps, none of which were necessarily preordained, that led the former leader to his political doom. Picking up the same analytical query, Walid Kazziha asks a closely related question: How did a relatively harmonious political system, created and strengthened over the years by four successive presidents with military backgrounds, end up under the last of them in a revolution? Kazziha’s answer concentrates on the regime’s final few years and, particularly, on its experimentation with an unacknowledged, though real and disastrous, power-sharing arrangement between the elder Mubarak and his youngest son, Gamal.

Sustaining the tight focus on Egypt’s 2011 revolution, the four remaining chapters in Part 1 take up detailed considerations of key causal elements that paved the way for the Mubarak regime’s demise. Nadia Ramsis Farah explores the underlying economic causes that were involved. Earl (Tim) Sullivan, making good use of decades of experience as an educator dealing with Egyptian young people, examines the pivotal role of “youth power” in the events of 2011. Manar Shorbagy deals with the role of women in Egypt’s recent revolution and its aftermath. Finally, Sherine ElGhatit examines the much discussed role of Islamists in the revolution, offering a welcome and reasonable discussion of this emotional subject.

The three chapters of Part 2 provide an overview of the regional, social, and economic factors that shaped Egypt's 2011 revolution. Ibrahim Elnur's opening chapter explores the implosion of political patronage regimes in the Middle East, offering a penetrating analytical account of the Arab Spring of 2011 as forming the context for Egypt's Tahrir Revolution. This is followed by Sean F. McMahon's incisive Gramscian analysis, which offers a variety of insights into the revolutionary interplay among Egypt's social forces and the regional order, as well as some rather startling, if controversial, predictions regarding Egypt's post-revolutionary future. Last, Ivan Ivekovic confronts the issue of Egypt's uncertain transition. Carefully teasing out the implications of the different domestic actors and interests involved in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary effort to determine the country's trajectory, he presents a compelling picture that is solidly grounded in political economy.

The three chapters of Part 3 analyze Egypt's revolution in terms of broader issues, specifically its theoretical implications for the understanding of transitional politics in changes from authoritarian to participatory systems, as well as its practical implications for key international actors, such as the United States and Israel. Nadine Sika takes up the challenge of mining the Egyptian experience for theoretical insights by comparing the 2011 overthrow of Mubarak's regime to the 1989 collapse of the East German government. Amr Yossef and Dan Tschirgi respectively focus on the revolution's significance for Israel and the United States.

In Part 4, the editors take up the challenge of directly confronting the most important questions raised by the tumultuous events of 2011–2012 for global politics, the discipline of political science, and the Egyptian people.

Note

1. See Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Retry or Free 12,000 After Unfair Military Trials," September 10, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/10/egypt-retry-or-free-12000-after-unfair-military-trials>.