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Issue Brief

2011 Revolution in Egypt: Five Years Later

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February 3, 2016

Summary

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Egypt on 25 January 2016 is light years away from what it was on 25 January 2011. Let us trace Egypt's world line, to borrow a phrase from Einstein's General Theory of Relativity whose centenary falls this year, between the two dates and find out why Egypt moved on that particular world line that took it away from democracy towards a police state, much worse than the one under Mubarak.

The Revolution

On 25 January 2011, the people of Egypt shed their fear of the authoritarian government headed by President Mubarak who was supported by the West, re-elected repeatedly through rigged elections, and whose intelligence agencies kept an eye 24/7 on Egyptians and intimidated them from exercising their basic rights. For long, Egyptians accepted, with occasional protests, their status of being subjects to a Pharaoh rather than citizens with a say in running the country. In January 2011, there was a sudden change. Egyptians headed to Cairo's Tahrir Square on 25 January and let the whole world know that they wanted Mubarak, in power since 1981, to step down. They thundered: *El-sha'ab, yureed, isqat el – musheer*. (The people want the fall of the regime.)

Mubarak and the rest of the world were stunned. When President Ben Ali of Tunisia, another favourite of the West who did what was asked of him by President Bush for his ill-fated Global War on Terrorism, fell on 14 January 2011, after a 27-day long agitation, the BBC assessed confidently that there was no threat to Mubarak as the Egyptian people were too scared and apathetic to rise up against him and bring him down. The BBC was proved wrong when Mubarak fell on 11 February, 18 days after the people demanded his exit from power. Tahrir means liberation and the square was christened as Tahrir Square after the 1919 Revolution when Egypt rose up against British rule. That revolt was suppressed with 3,000 Egyptians killed, but finally the imperial power was compelled to grant independence in 1922, though it managed to control Egypt till the 1952 Revolution by Nasser.

The West and much of the rest of the world, with the significant exception of the monarchies in the Gulf and elsewhere, applauded the Egyptian Revolution. Of course, the praise from the West was insincere, but it was loud and clear. The UK's Prime Minister David Cameron, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and the European Union's foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton visited Tahrir Square and wanted to be photographed with the courageous Egyptians. Egypt's friends and well-wishers enthusiastically recalled Wordsworth's immortal lines on the French Revolution:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,

But to be young was very Heaven!

Many thought that Egypt will rapidly move towards democracy and the rest of the Arab world might follow Egypt's lead.

What Went Wrong?

Five years later, on 25 January 2016, Tahrir Square witnessed about 300 Egyptians gathered there to deplore the 2011 Revolution and to thank President Field Marshal Sisi and the Egyptian Police for installing a repressive police state. There were minor demonstrations in different places, but the demonstrators ran away when the police came. Two persons were killed. Egypt has moved away from democracy since 2011 with astonishing rapidity.

What went wrong and how was Egypt's journey towards democracy interrupted, to put it mildly and perhaps inaccurately too? The first thing to understand about the fall of Mubarak is that there were two causes for it. One, of course, was the demand from the people from Tahrir Square and elsewhere in Egypt. The second cause was even more important politically. Mubarak resigned as he was 'invited' to do so by the powerful Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), which did not want Mubarak's son Gamal to succeed him. Since 1952, Egypt has been ruled by men in uniform – Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak. The SCAF did not want a civilian and it was also worried that a civilian president might come in the way of the Army's extensive economic activities, which are not subject to audit by the state. There is some opacity about the Army's economic operations and it controls anything between 25 to 40 per cent of the GDP. Moreover, significantly, Mubarak left after passing on the power to SCAF, a calculated move for two reasons. First, the Army is held in high esteem in Egypt, with some Egyptians believing, quite wrongly, that the Army created the nation. The Egyptian people believed in 2011 that the Army will steer the nation towards a democratic destination. Second, Mubarak presciently calculated that the 'Deep State' led by the Army will treat him and his family better. He will not be hanged as the last Tsar was following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.

The SCAF declared that it would hold elections and hand over power to a civilian government within six months, though it had no intention of doing so. It was demonstrating its superb thespian skills. Egypt's 'Deep State' is led by the army, with the higher judiciary and the intelligence and security apparatus (the mukhabarat) as 'attendant lords'. Angered by the delay in announcing election dates, Egyptians continued with the demonstrations in Tahrir Square and elsewhere. The Deep State, most reluctantly, permitted election to Parliament, which was won by the Muslim Brotherhood and its ally, the Salafists. The Deep State was deeply disappointed with these results. But, it was cunning enough to handle such unanticipated outcomes. The judiciary had before the election noted a certain defect in the election law, but kept quiet about it as the intention was to dissolve Parliament on the basis of the legal defect in case the wrong people get elected. Parliament met in January 2012 only to discover that it had no powers. In the normal course, a member of Parliament should have been designated as Prime Minister and he should have sought a vote of confidence after forming the cabinet. But this was Egypt in the grip of the Deep State. The SCAF-appointed Prime Minister, Kamal el Ganzouri, bluntly told the Speaker, Saad el Katatni of the Muslim Brotherhood, that he could get Parliament dissolved any time.

The SCAF announced the election for President and, once again to its deep chagrin, Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood appeared to win in the second round.

The Deep State decided that it would not be in its interest to have a Parliament dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and simultaneously a President from the same party. There was the risk that Egypt might move in the direction of a normal democracy with serious adverse consequences for the survival of the Deep State and the Army's economic empire. As a result, Parliament was dissolved by the higher judiciary days before Morsi won the election. Morsi entered the Presidential palace on 30 June 2012 only to find that he had no powers. After dissolving Parliament, the SCAF had issued a decree arrogating to itself powers to decide on the budget and a host of other things. Nevertheless, the Deep State played a deep game and Morsi thought the Muslim Brotherhood could evolve a modus vivendi with the Deep State.

In August 2012, there was an attack on the security forces in the Sinai, near the border with Israel, killing 16 soldiers. Morsi made use of that incident to sack Field Marshal Tantawi and the chief of the Army, General Anan. Tantawi had been Defence Minister since 1991. In an autocratic system, high level positions are held by the same person for a long time. Tantawi and Anan were made advisers to the President and General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was appointed Defence Minister in place of Tantawi. Little did Morsi know that in less than a year's time Sisi would dislodge him from office and later assume the presidency as well. However, strictly speaking, it was not for Morsi to choose, as the SCAF might have insisted on its right to choose the Defence Minister. But, it is intriguing that SCAF should have chosen the youngest among them to succeed Tantawi, the oldest. Since the SCAF accepted the sacking of its head, Morsi concluded wrongly that he had the upper hand.

The Deep State decided to give Morsi a long rope. He helped them by making some wrong moves. He hastened with the new constitution and got it approved in a referendum. He should have noted that less numbers of Egyptians participated in the referendum than in the presidential or parliamentary elections and that his own popular support was eroding. He tried to resurrect the dissolved Parliament, but was overruled by the higher judiciary. He issued a decree giving himself powers beyond the reach of the judiciary, which upset many Egyptians. One Egyptian wrote Morsi a letter in hieroglyphics, sarcastically implying that he was a Pharaoh. Morsi did not realise that the liberals and leftists who lost the election were not going to wait till the next election.

The Army, watching with satisfaction the growing disenchantment with Morsi, sent out signals, not always discreetly, that in case there is a strong popular demand it will unseat Morsi. All of a sudden an organization by the name of Tamarod appeared on the scene and it was announced that it had collected 22 million signatures calling upon Morsi to step down. Nobody seems to have taken the trouble to verify the claim. Tamarod was financially supported by big business, which wanted to bring down Morsi at any cost. Morsi was living in a fool's paradise. He had helped the US in preventing an Israeli attack on Gaza in retaliation for rockets sent to Israel from there. He did not believe that Sisi would stage a coup and, to him, it looked impossible that the US would permit the Army to stage a coup.

As the agitation supported by the Army, the leftists, the liberals, and the pro-Mubarak rich spread like wild fire, Sisi issued an ultimatum for a political settlement within 48 hours, knowing that the opposition was not willing to talk to Morsi. The Army kidnapped Morsi on 3 July 2013, much to the jubilation of a large section of Egyptians, barring the Brotherhood which woke up rather late from its slumber. The left and the liberals were jubilant. Little did they know that the Deep State would eventually put them behind bars and curtail their freedoms before long. They too were living in a fool's paradise. A good many of them are either abroad, in prison, or have just 'disappeared', as happened to Chileans whose loyalty General Pinochet suspected with or without reason. Former Vice President El Baradei is in self-imposed exile.

The Brotherhood launched a big campaign of protest seeking Morsi's restoration. It did not know where he was and whether he was alive. The SCAF decided to use brute force without any limit against the demonstrators even if they were peaceful. The intention was to weaken and extinguish the Brotherhood. They will be branded as terrorists and the gullible Egyptians will accept the government's version. The calculation proved to be correct.

On 14 August 2013, a large crowd of men, women, and children occupying Ra'aba al-Adawiya Square demanding Morsi's restoration were shot at. The European Union's representative Bernardino Leon, working as a mediator, had believed that a compromise worked out by him was acceptable to Sisi. The compromise provided for an end to the sit-in, release of arrested Brotherhood members, an honourable exit for Morsi, an amended constitution, and an early election for a President. The Army arranged for a massacre early in the morning after closing all exits, as was done at Jalianwala Bagh in 1919. There is an important difference between the two massacres: Even now, many Egyptians believe that it was right to have killed so many of their fellow citizens in cold blood, thanks to propaganda Goebbels would have been proud of. The British government was not as clever as the Egyptian Army in propaganda. The course of Egypt's history would have been different, and much happier, if the EU compromise had been accepted.

The SCAF promoted Sisi as field marshal and, in May 2014, he got elected as President with a majority of 93 per cent. He had to blackmail a politician to contest the election, in order to give the election some respectability. Sisi is popular still, but his failure to deliver on the promises made has diminished his stature. His policy of destroying the Brotherhood by use of state violence has not worked. The Brotherhood is more visible these days in cyber space than in the real world. The coup against Morsi provoked a revolt in the Sinai, which continues though the Government has announced more than once that it had put an end to it. The rebels in Sinai have announced their affiliation to the Islamic State. Egypt's tourism earnings have come down as tourists do not feel safe, especially after the crash of a Russian jet carrying 217 tourists from Sharm al Sheikh on 31 October 2015. It was an Islamic State agent who placed a bomb on the plane before it took off. Unemployment remains high at 42 per cent among the age group 15-24, prices are going up, and wages stagnate.

Much before the anniversary of 25 January, the Government had done its best, or worst, to prevent any protest at Tahrir or anywhere else. It had closed down

cultural centres. It had intruded into 5000 flats looking for 'suspects'. Hundreds of Egyptians suspected of holding views not in agreement with those of the Deep State have 'disappeared', as mentioned earlier. We do not have the exact figures.

Though initially the US expressed its moral indignation at the massacre at the Ra'aba al-Adawiya Square, soon cold calculations of geopolitics prevailed. The military regime in Egypt is in the good books of the West. Financial support from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE, after Morsi was overthrown, has been sizable. At a conference at Sharm al Sheikh in March 2015, a total of USD 12.5 billion was pledged by GCC states. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and UAE pledged USD 4 billion each, with Oman pledging 500 million. Qatar kept away. We may assume that the donors too wanted Morsi toppled. Egypt, financially stressed, spent all the money from its Gulf donors within months. There is some reason to doubt whether the donors will rush in with more cash now that oil prices have been going down. Saudi Arabia has been warned by the IMF that it might run out of cash in five years if the price of oil does not rise. Egypt has reasons to worry. If it accepts the prescription of the IMF and cuts down subsidies to the poor, there might be a popular explosion.

As of now, a large section of Egyptians are frustrated, but unwilling to stop supporting Sisi. The repressive regime will do its utmost to suppress dissent and for the time being civil society is finding it extremely difficult to act freely. However, it will be wrong to conclude that Egypt will remain unfree for too long. Did Napoleon's accession to power put an end to the French Revolution?

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