

Where is Egypt going?

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Now that three years have elapsed since the 2011 Revolution in Egypt, it is pertinent, nay, imperative, to ask the central question: Where is Egypt? Where is it going? On January 25, 2011 Egyptians shed fear of their repressive government that had deprived them of their human rights for decades and gathered in the world famous Tahrir Square to demand that President Hosni Mubarak resign. Mubarak, in office for thirty years, fell eighteen days later. Millions of Egyptians in Tahrir Square and elsewhere saw the exit of Mubarak as signaling the beginning of Egypt's journey towards democracy. Three years later, it is painfully clear that Egypt has lost its way towards democracy; in fact, it is heading fast in the opposite direction. The police state under Mubarak is being restored; freedom of expression has been drastically abridged; dissent does provoke punishment; political prisoners total up to twenty one thousand; and political demonstrations need prior permission. Egypt is under military rule and a field marshal is soon going to be elected president.

The Egyptians who assembled, or more accurately, who were permitted to assemble, in Tahrir Square on January 2014 did not go there to celebrate the 2011 Revolution. They went there to bury that Revolution and to celebrate the 2003 coup. Many carried big photos of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and of Nasser, the most charismatic leader in the Arab world in our times. The obvious intention was to suggest that al-Sisi is the Nasser of the day, and the savior of Egypt. Some carried photographs of Mubarak, a clear indication that the Mubarak loyalists, known as *fulul*, are actively engaged in politics, supporting the regime in power. It was a state-funded and state-sponsored, superbly and expensively choreographed event. There was a state-of-the-art stage, a far cry from the rickety, shaky one in 2011 the same day. The lighting system was sophisticated and expensive. The crowd was there to cheer General al-Sisi. There were t-shirts and sweets displaying his image in galore. Predictably enough on January 27 the General was promoted Field Marshal and the SCAF (Supreme Council of Armed Forces) 'approved' his candidature at the Presidential election, dates for which are yet to be announced. Incidentally, the choreography is unerring. The interim President, Adly Mansour, appointed by al- Sisi, had earlier said that the election to the Parliament would take place before that of the President. Later, it was announced that there was flexibility, meaning the sequence could be reversed. The intention is to take advantage of the current high popularity of al-Sisi whom many women say on television that they want to marry.

It is time to look analytically and critically at the political developments in Egypt since the exit of Mubarak in February 2011. Otherwise it will not be possible to understand what is now happening. The first and foremost point to note is that it was a flawed and incomplete revolution: Mubarak fell, but the 'the Deep State' that supported and enabled him to sustain his dictatorship did not fall. The concept of the Deep State was originally applied to

Ottoman Turkey and its republican successor founded by Ataturk. It basically meant secret sources of political power. Currently, in Egypt's case, it means the triumvirate of the Army, the Higher Judiciary, and the Intelligence agencies, generally known as the Mukhabarat in the Arab world. Out of the three the Army is the leader and others are 'attendant lords'.

The second point to underline is that the Deep State did not want Egypt to be a democracy as it had everything to lose if that were to happen. The SCAF grabbed power when Mubarak fell; Egyptians hold the Army in high esteem and when the Army announced that it would arrange for election in six months' time and hand over power to a democratically elected government most Egyptians believed it. However, the Army was in no hurry to hand over power. It delayed the election, finally held and completed in eleven months. Here it is important to look at the collaboration between the Army and the Higher Judiciary. Judge Tahani el Gebali, Deputy President of the Supreme Constitutional Court, was the friend, philosopher, and guide to SCAF in legal matters. She advised the postponement of the election to the parliament pointing out the risk of the Muslim Brotherhood's victory. When the results came with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists winning a 70% majority, SCAF regretted the holding of election and told her that she was right.

The Higher Judiciary in Egypt is exceptionally smart and cunning in pursuing its goals. It had made sure that there was a minor technical flaw in the procedure adopted for the election; the intention was to make use of it, if necessary, to declare the parliament to have been illegally elected. This is precisely what happened. The parliament met in January 2012, only to discover that it was devoid of any powers. There was an Army-appointed Prime Minister, Kamal el Ganzouri, not answerable to the parliament. He threatened the Speaker (Saad el- Katatni) many a time that he would get the parliament dissolved.

The parliament was dissolved by the Higher Judiciary in June 2012. By then it was clear that the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muhammad Morsi might win the election for the president. After the parliament was dissolved, SCAF issued a declaration arrogating to itself powers to decide on the budget and for issuing laws. The excuse given was that since there was no parliament it was necessary to fill the legal vacuum. The real intention was to render President Morsi as powerless as the dissolved parliament was. Morsi who took office on June 30, 2012, bided his time to recover his lost powers. In August 2012, unknown armed men killed 16 Egyptian soldiers in the Sinai, close to the border with Israel. Earlier, Morsi had attracted attention and praise from US for effecting a cease-fire between Hamas and Israel. Morsi 'invited' Field Marshal Tantawi, the head of SCAF and ruler of Egypt after Mubarak to resign. General Sami Anan, the chief of the Army, too was 'invited' to resign. They did and Tantawi was offered and accepted the post of Advisor to the President. Morsi appointed General al- Sisi as Defence Minister. A superficial observer might have thought that Morsi scored a decisive victory over SCAF and that the latter accepted defeat stoically. The future was to show that SCAF was determined to win the war after losing a battle. Morsi believed that his victory over SCAF was decisive and permanent.

Morsi decided to accelerate the constitution making process. A constituent assembly appointed by the dissolved parliament was writing the draft. It was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood numerically and otherwise. There was reason to believe that at any

time the Higher Judiciary might dissolve the assembly. Morsi had to recover the powers taken away by the Army before he came into office. In November 2012, Morsi issued a declaration that gave himself immunity from judicial scrutiny for certain acts. The primary intention was to complete the writing of the draft of the constitution, put it to a referendum, and hold election to the parliament as early as possible. In other words, Morsi wanted to take Egypt towards democracy. But he was viciously attacked for behaving like a Pharaoh and was sent a letter in hieroglyphics.

However, Morsi failed to notice that his adversaries were succeeding in portraying him as an undemocratic leader taking Egypt in the direction of an Islamic state, shackled by Sharia, and anti-modern. In fact, some of his actions did lend weight to such an interpretation. For example, he appointed as Governor of Luxor a man believed to be associated with an attack on foreign tourists killing in all sixty in November 1997.

The Higher Judiciary bided its time. It did not, though it could have, quash the presidential order. Earlier, it had quashed Morsi's order reviving the dissolved parliament. The intention of the Deep State was to give Morsi a long rope. The public was turning against him as the economy was going from bad to worse, with shortages and soaring prices of essential goods. Given the precarious political situation, the number of foreign tourists dropped. Naturally, Morsi's promise to create employment was not carried out. The Deep State watched the swelling anti-Morsi tide with some satisfaction. Morsi won the referendum on the constitution. But, it was a Pyrrhic victory. His adversaries got emboldened and protests against him mounted. The Army started to look for an opportunity to get rid of Morsi. The police was not fully cooperating with the government in meeting the protests as the higher officials in the ministry of the interior were part of the Deep State. They were not going to take orders from the Brotherhood whom they had tortured for decades. Finally, Morsi had to call in the army to deal with the protestors. Military tanks were deployed in Cairo in December 2012 as the anti-Morsi protests mounted. That marked a decisive point in Morsi's downfall.

The coalition against Morsi was broad based with practically all Egyptians minus the followers of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Army was not only watching, but giving much more than encouragement to the protesters. They read the writing on the wall correctly: If they keep mobilizing, at some point the Army will step in and remove Morsi. The date chosen was the 30th of June, 2013 when Morsi will complete one year in office. Predictably, General al- Sisi gave a 48-hour ultimatum to Morsi: Settle through negotiations or else. There was no way Morsi could have negotiated his way out as his foes did not want to talk to him. It seems that he was under the false impression that US will not permit a coup against him. What game US played is yet to be fully revealed. Probably, it was a double game. On July 3, 2013, President Morsi was physically taken to an undisclosed place and kept incommunicado for weeks. The SCAF got back in power and promptly appointed the President of the Superior Constitutional Court, Judge Adly Mansour as interim president once again manifesting the close coordination between the two principal pillars of the Deep State.

Once we understand the truth about Morsi's fall it is easier to understand what has happened since then. It is true that Morsi was inept and did not play his cards well. But, it

is also true that he was dealt a bad hand. He could get a prime minister only in August 2013. With hindsight one might say that the Deep State was astute enough to get the Brotherhood to replace its original choice of presidential candidate Khairat el-Shater, an experienced and politically smart leader by Morsi, rather inexperienced. The reason given for the disqualification of el-Shater is rather strange considering that a revolution was supposed to have taken place: He had not completed six years after release from prison. It is believed that Morsi was not all wanting to take on the burden and that he wept when he was nominated.

The above account with the Deep State playing a crucial role in the post-Mubarak Egypt can be contested. But, more and more scholars are agreeing with it.

To sum up, Egypt is proving that time travel is possible in politics. From 1952 onwards Egypt had only military rulers, none elected in a free and fair election, except for Morsi for one year. Col. Nasser and General Naguib led from 1952 to 54; Nasser alone till 1970; Sadat succeeded and ruled till his assassination in 1982 when Mubarak took over. When Mubarak fell Tantawi stepped in. Morsi was an aberration that was rapidly rectified. From early 1950s, Egypt became a police state. That police state is being restored after a brief break of less than one year. It could also be said that even under Morsi the police state was not completely dismantled. He too availed of the police state at times.

Soon there will be a presidential election - Sisi will be elected either unopposed or against conveniently placed opponents to choreograph the election process. Sooner or later, the people of Egypt will realize that they have been fooled. Once again, not in the immediate future, they will try to go to Tahrir Square. But this time the Deep State will play its cards with consummate skill. The people might not be permitted to reach the Square unless they want to show support to the regime.

With Egypt's reversion to military rule, even if it is sanctified through an election process less than free and fair, one can say definitely that the pro-democracy tide in the Arab world is subsiding. The only success story so far is Tunisia where the Ennahda, an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, has shown maturity and superior political navigational skills. As of now, democracy is growing roots in Tunisia where the Arab Spring began. In Yemen the move towards democracy was stalled, but it has recovered with the successful conclusion of a broad based dialogue on the new constitution. In Libya, there is anarchy with the state lacking in authority. Egypt accounts for about a quarter of the Arab world in terms of population and its centrality is beyond question. Egypt's reversion to military rule will have its repercussions in the Arab world. Yet, it is remarkable that Tunisia and Yemen seem unlikely to follow Egypt's bad example. It will be wrong to conclude that Egypt's embrace of military rule will be invariably replicated elsewhere in the Arab world.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.