

Egypt post 25th of January:

The opportunities and challenges of the transition period

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The atmosphere of the January 25th revolution unleashed an enormous amount of momentum within society, and led to heightened interest in politics and public affairs on the part of the ordinary citizen in street. However, we cannot speak about the opportunities generated by the “revolution” without also taking account of the various associated challenges and obstacles that have arisen, and how they should be tackled. The challenges include an exaggerated rise in people’s expectations, confusion among all parties, a loss of a clear vision, plans and goals, the shortcomings of existing legislation, and the shortage and fragmentation of trained professionals.

This paper is no more than an attempt by a political activist to stand back from the dynamics and rapid course of events that followed the “revolution” of January the 25th, and analyse what has occurred in Egypt since the "revolution".

1. Burgeoning opportunities

For the majority of Egyptians, the atmosphere prior to the 25th of January was one of frustration. This frustration was felt most keenly by young people who had tried to alter their reality, be it through development, social or political action, but had come into conflict with the security services, which were encroaching into the state.

However, all frustration was to come to an end with the first days of the revolution,

which stood on the shoulders of the youth and their sacrifices and proved to them that they were capable of leading change.

The cohesion of the youth during the 18-day sit-in in Tahrir Square, their ingenuity in defending it and confronting the regime’s negative media messages, and their ability to stand together as independents and activists from a wide spectrum of political parties, are all real indicators that this generation is different from its predecessors.

As soon as the protests came to an end, a flood of community initiatives of various sizes swept through the country. As the prospective new state bureaucracy lay reeling, these initiatives took advantage of influencing it, and in many cases forced it to cooperate with them, particularly in

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provinces outside Cairo. Some villages imposed supervision of local councils, while others put their own popular committees in place to manage services and the staff of local offices. In this way a state of citizens informed of their rights and duties emerged in many instances, which the bureaucracy was unable to prevent and indeed has often had to adapt itself to. In rural areas, the evolution of these experiences has been facilitated by the fact that the people knew each other, and that public employees were from the locals; while initiatives in the cities did not meet the same level of success due to the more complex social fabric there.

Raising political awareness initiatives in their various guises have also become widespread, and have availed themselves of youth centres, government cultural centres, and some of the headquarters of the dissolved National Democratic Party. University students and other educated young people have joined these initiatives and thought of many different means to deliver their messages, from street theatre to simple videos, from puppet shows to murals, and from illustrated leaflets to public seminars and conferences.

What all this activity tells us is that the energy of the youth has been unleashed without them waiting for any guidance or coordination from above, and without neglecting either rural or urban areas, the village or the city.

Growing awareness of rights, and positivity.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that the labour strikes of recent years were one of the factors that secured a critical mass for the January 25th "revolution" that the regime could not stop, and thus capitulated to. The high rate of inflation and lack of development among the lower classes was another reason for the development of this critical mass, which called for "Bread, freedom and social justice."

Thus economic demands figured relatively large among the demands of the revolution, as they impinge on the ordinary, burden-

weary man in the street. Therefore, the days following the big sit-in demonstration witnessed many protests by workers and employees in both public and private sectors.

As the Minister of Manpower in Sharaf government that has been formed few weeks after the fall of Mubarak, Ahmed Borai, sought to pass a law granting freedoms to the unions and the self-employed, many of which reflect an approach that actually translates into an effective mechanism for workers to form blocs within legitimate frameworks, thereby allowing them to defend their rights and negotiate with their employers.

The fact that many government employees took part in the "revolution" was undoubtedly one of the reasons why scores of them, especially the young, exposed corrupt practices and negligence in their departments, and sent communications to the Attorney General against their bosses who were corrupt or remained silent about corruption, gathering documentary evidence.

Therefore, the growing awareness of rights and positivity that spread through broad swathes of the public can be considered a kind of safety valve or buttress against any attempts or even alleged conspiracies by who are referred to as "counter-revolutionary forces", beneficiaries of the former regime, or people who are afraid of genuine, structural change. For if members of the public do not feel that there has been change enabling them to satisfy their economic and services demands based on a comprehensive and clear plan, they will not hesitate to go out onto the streets again to secure their economic demands, igniting a second wave of the revolution: the wave of demands.

Growing interest in politics. Among the phenomena that emerged after the 25th of January were increased rates of people reading newspapers and watching political TV shows. The names of writers, journalists and political figures have entered the

vocabulary of coffee-shop conversations and family gatherings. The numbers of people who are interested in politics and wish to join political parties or help in establishing new parties has also grown.

Increase of critical thinking and a reduced culture of passive reception. The biased coverage by Egyptian state television against the protestors in Tahrir Square in the early days of the revolution and the bogus news stories it circulated about them played a major role in encouraging citizens to question what they watched and heard. It also led them to vary their sources of information, instead of relying on a single source, which is not to say that people who are convinced by conspiratorial, simplified explanations simply disappeared.

2. Challenges and obstacles

One cannot speak of the opportunities that were triggered by the “revolution” without also considering the associated challenges and opportunities.

Between the blundering and foot-dragging of decision-makers, which have been followed by strong million-demonstrations and sit-in protests to demand more rapid change, and a nation that has found that time is passing, security is lacking and prices are rising, the current state of uncertainty is leading to growing polarisation within society. The “stability” movement wants the regime to return as quickly as possible, but another is rushing towards comprehensive and revolutionary change. In the middle, lies a bewildered majority that wavers between the two, while the fog of uncertainty increasingly hangs over the country’s future.

Priorities' difference between the people and the old and new elites. I begin with a question: Has politics been practised in Egypt over the past sixty years? And has the single party that has ruled the country over that period – under various names – or the opposition parties bothered to go down to the streets to find out what people think in order to win their support or their votes in

elections? clearly a NO is closest to the truth.

Unfortunately, those who practice politics today are repeating the same mistake and gradually isolating themselves from the street. And as a result of this withdrawal, the street is gradually breaking away from them. Politicians have become preoccupied with their own political disputes over the course that the transfer of power is taking, and the question of what should come first, elections or constitution. They have failed to heed the real demands from the street and the demands and plans for social justice have faded.

Politicians are now debating and arguing with themselves, and have forgotten about their presence in the streets. In turn, people have wearied them and come to see them as merely pursuing their slice of the “power pie”.

A raised ceiling of expectations. The expectations and aspirations of the people were greatly elevated after the protest movement succeeded to oust Mubarak. No party even attempted to rein these expectations in. Demands grew for the government to appoint young people to high-salaried positions in their various fields and to house them in apartments at cut-price rates, as if the transitional government had unlimited resources with which to meet these demands in the blink of an eye.

The political and revolutionary forces in turn played their part in raising the ceiling of expectations, without doing any prior planning or research. For example, they are competing to meet demands for a minimum wage without conducting any serious study into how to finance it.

As most of these demands and expectations have gone unmet, a sense of restlessness and frustration with the “revolution” has naturally swept the streets. Furthermore, the exaggeratedly high ceiling of expectations will constitute an obstacle not only during the transitional phase, but also

for the elected government that will come after it.

Confusion among all parties and loss of a clear vision, plans and goals.—The government appears incompetent and blundering. Does Prime Minister Dr. Essam Sharaf or his government know whether the government is a caretaker government, a transitional government, or a national salvation government? I would argue no, they do not.

Does the Prime Minister have a vision, goals or priorities for his government, or is the government merely following a policy of putting out fires and inertia? It seems that the latter is closest to the truth.

The process of preparing a draft state budget for the fiscal year 2011-2012 is the best concrete example in answer to the questions posed above. The objectives of the budget were more for propaganda than being realistic and practical. The budget was drafted just as it had been in previous years, by the same team, and relying on the same sources of information and data.

There is no integrating plan for the transition period for the economic sectors of the state; indeed, there is not even any effective coordination between the various ministries and public institutions.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces appears to be a “black box” that only grudgingly acknowledges its errors or accepts criticism. For large sectors of the people, the council is infallible and sacrosanct, the last remaining column of the Egyptian state still standing. Views towards the council range from seeing it being a partner and protector of the “revolution” to an institution that joined it only because it lacked other options.

The Supreme Council has suddenly found itself in the political arena, which it is not trained for, and has therefore floundered. It has sought the assistance of military and civilian advisers, who have put it in a difficult position and made it appear even

more erratic. Furthermore, the government that it appointed has only left it more fragmented and confused. The council has sufficed with making modest, slow changes, fearing that it would be unable to bear the political cost of more radical decisions. However, given increased uncertainty, the greater portion of the people still trusts it, even if some have their doubts.

The political and revolutionary forces are also fragmented and confused, especially regarding the priorities of purging the government and re-building. Should the revolution's youth simply keep up the pressure in order to accelerate the fulfilment of the revolution demands through protest? Or are there other roles that they should play, such as organising themselves into political parties or civil society organisations, so that after the elections they do not find themselves relegated to the status of soap-box speakers who represent no one, while the traditional forces assume power?

Should all the revolutionaries' ranks devote themselves to pressing, purely political issues, or should a large portion of them search for other, no less important, roles such as offering alternatives to state public policy in various sectors? Or going out onto the streets to consolidate their ties to the various social interest groups in order to mobilise and represent them?

Is the person who leaves the task of purging the system to others and devotes himself to preparing for the elections and making deals, opportunistic, or is the person who restricts himself to purging the system foolish?

I think the answers to these questions are clear, as the relative importance of the issues that need to be worked on should be carefully determined, and human and financial resources assigned to them in an orderly fashion.

The challenges of restructuring the state and revising existing legalisation and regulations. The successive governments of

the former regime assiduously shunned the benefits of restructuring the state apparatus and its bloated bureaucracy in order to avoid having to take unpopular measures that carry a high political price tag. This approach played a role in aggravating the problems faced by the state administration.

One would not necessarily have expected the administration's reaction to the "revolution" to be wholly positive or wholly negative, given its own complexity and the different interests of its staff. Hence the calls now by many political forces for the government structure to be purged – amid a lack of clarity over the goals and extent thereof, and the ignorance of the fact that it must be complemented by an integrated plan for restructuring – has resulted in conflicting messages from state officials. Such messages are adding to a surrounding environment that has intensified anger towards the revolution. Prices have risen while wages have stayed the same or modestly increased, and work has practically stopped in many institutions as bosses fear taking responsibility for any decisions they make.

There is also the additional problem of the shortcomings of numerous laws and regulations which were tailored to the needs of certain powerful bodies and had loopholes written into them for their benefit. In addition, several laws enacted in former times need amending to fit the changing times.

Of course, the process of amending this legislation cannot be completed immediately and is a mission for future parliaments. However, it is significant that while numerous amendments or laws are needed for the purpose of urgent reform and purging, such demands have been rejected by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which has assumed the role of legislator in the current period. In doing so, it claims that it wishes to impose only the minimum amount of legislation necessary to get it through the current phase, and that the necessary legislation should be handed to

the next parliament, in order for it to receive the stamp of democratic legitimacy that the council lacks.

The generational problem. "Only you have demonstrated our lack of resourcefulness and ineptitude" is a saying that I often heard from people in their fifties and sixties in the days after Mubarak's resignation. With this saying they were thanking the young generation for standing up to and then overthrowing the repressive regime, while their generation had merely acclimatised to conditions in the country or travelled abroad for work. Of course, these sentiments are not shared by all. There are also ordinary citizens who long for stability in any form and eschew all risk.

Among the younger generation that led this revolution, there are those who bear responsibility for the decline in the state of the country for this section of the older generation. They think that the older generation should step down and give them the opportunity to reform what they have destroyed, and restore the country's status and role.

The obvious problem here – though I have used two extreme examples – is the ease with which generalisations and stereotypes are adopted and generations excluded.

The stagnation of the old elite and rapid rise of the new elite, and the shortage and fragmentation of trained professionals. The Egyptian political experience of the past thirty years has been a charade of party politics played out by the opposition parties, accompanied by perpetual internal conflict. The opposition parties have had a negligible influence on or interaction with the general public. However, they have created a negative mental image of political parties among the public because of their predilection for playing the role of the victim, denied contact with the public by the security forces, while at the same time picking up the crumbs left for them by the regime.

At the same time, the opposition parties did not practice politics in the conventional sense. They understood that they were not going to come to power, which casted them in a limited role that consisted of criticising and sometimes exposing corruption. This role is far removed from the basic definition of a political party, which is to develop alternatives to public policies and plans for the various state sectors, and work to mobilise and represent social interest in order to compete over power.

Thus a culture of criticism became entrenched and it was easier for them to enter into verbal bidding wars than to do serious party political work by coming up with alternative policies and communicating with the people in the street. After the revolution, the political parties, old and new alike, were quick to engage in contrived political battles over the details and arrangements of the political plan for the transitional period, and in doing so reproduced the negative image of political parties.

Most political youth groups are focusing on the mechanisms of popular pressure – demonstrations and protests – and overplaying their demands for purging the government. Meanwhile, they are setting aside their duty to work methodically on the field in the different local communities, and leaving the field for the Muslim Brotherhood and other religious movements to shape according to flawed conceptions, or at least issues that are not of priority in the current phase. The self-evident fact that these forces must understand is that unless they organise themselves to be able to exercise some influence within the society, they will squander their opportunity in the coming elections. Hence they will not be entitled to speak on behalf of anyone, since the elections are the ultimate arbiter.