The Two Souls of the Egyptian Revolution and Its Decline.
A Socio-Political Perspective

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Summary

Abstract:

Ten years since the downfall of Hosni Mubarak, the protest movement which animated Tahrir Square has failed to create an alternative path towards democracy despite the great wave of mobilisation that engaged the country. The eruption of the revolution on 25 January 2011 did not happen overnight, but was the result of ten years of contentious politics taken on by two different souls: the social soul, represented by mobilisation of the workers of state-owned companies; and the political one, composed of political activists and youth movements alongside women's defence groups and human rights defenders. Even with the great surge of activism, manifested through strikes, sit-ins and street protests, in the aftermath of the revolution these two souls rarely met. This, along with the lack of an organic political organisation, gave space to the more organised forces – the Muslim Brotherhood – and to the counterrevolutionary bloc led by the army.

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Introduction

On 25 January 2011 some 15,000 people gathered in Maidan al-Tahrir, the main square of Cairo, shouting for the removal of long-term president Muhammad Hosni Mubarak. The large protests that were sparked in Cairo soon swept to other Egyptian cities and instilled unity among different societal layers: from the educated middle class to the working class, students, the unemployed and women's movements. During the 18 glorious days of Tahrir, it seemed as if Egypt, after 30 years of authoritarian rule, could turn into a different country, free from despotism, corruption and poverty. Unsurprisingly, the slogan of the protests in Tahrir and in the whole country was *'aish, hurriyya 'adala ijtima'iyya* (bread, freedom and social justice).

Looking back today, if on the one hand the protests of 2011 triggered a deep change in the Egyptian society, on the other they have been unable to generate enduring political change. The capacity of Tahrir to mobilise millions of citizens from different social classes and areas has not produced an organic political organisation that could challenge the Egyptian *deep state*.

This is even the more surprising given that the forces gathering in Tahrir had been accumulating for more than ten years. There were new political movements, born in 2000 during the mobilisation in solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada. There were university unions, human rights organisations and the workers movement, with women active in all of them. All these components, to different extents, were victims of more than 30 years of autocracy. Workers spent more than eight years protesting against the privatisation of the national industries and seeking better working conditions. Students and youth were denouncing the high rate of unemployment and the violence of the police within campuses. Women demanded equal rights and spoke out against daily harassment. Political forces that were not part of the formal opposition – victims of the lack of political freedom – were calling for free and fair elections.

How can the lack of political change be explained? One reason lies in the hostility of some political and social movements in Egypt towards political organisation, similar to social movements that had evolved in the last decade across the globe such as the early 2000s No Global Movement,[1] the International Peace Movement[2] or movements in Europe and Latin America established after the 2008 global financial crisis among youth, industrial and public sector workers. Despite the broad mobilisation, these initiatives did not culminate in any kind of organisation, and ended up, in some cases, supporting reactionary movements (far-right and populist parties in Europe) or leaving the political arena without any alternative.[3] Indeed, all those movements, including the Egyptian ones, formed in a period in which the idea of political party and ideology was in decline at the global level.

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[1] In Egypt also activists established the Anti-Globalization Egyptian Group linked to the World Social Forum, see Gianni Del Panta, *Rivoluzione e controrivoluzione in Egitto. Da Piazza Tahrir al colpo di stato di una borghesia in armi*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2019.

[2] John Chalcraft, "Horizontalism in the Egyptian Revolutionary Process", in *Middle East Report*, No. 262 (Spring 2012), p. 6-11, https://merip.org/?p=6541.

[3] Francesco Scanni, "Populismo reattivo: un contro-eccesso alla crisi del modello di integrazione europeo" [Reactive Populism: A Counter-Excess to the Crisis of the European Integration Model], in *Europea*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (May 2019), p. 75-112.

As Asef Bayat has outlined in his latest book, *Revolution without Revolutionaries*, those who animated Tahrir Square were "rich in tactics of mobilization but poor in vision and strategy of transformation; they adopted loose, flexible, and horizontal organization but one that suffered from fragmentation".[4] These movements were characterised by the lack of vertical structure, preferring a horizontal organisation without leadership and a clear political ideology, animated by the idea of changing the world without taking power.[5] This allowed them, on one side, to bypass the capillary repression power of the regime but, on the other, made them miss the chance, in the aftermath of Mubarak's downfall, to develop a political path for the transition, leaving the field to counterrevolutionary and more organised forces such as the Egyptian army and the Muslim Brotherhood.

1. Revolution and revolutionaries: The social and political souls of the Egyptian revolution

The Egyptian revolution did not occur overnight. It was the result of more than ten years of accumulation of revolutionary energy among different social layers, which can be divided into two "souls" that rarely met in the aftermath of Mubarak downfall: political and social. These two souls reflected the main demands of the protesters in 2011. On one side, there were the political movements of the early 2000s, animated by the urban middle-class, with specific demands for political freedom and the respect of human rights; on the other side, the workers' movement which, since 2004, had initiated a long wave of struggling for better working conditions and against the privatisation of national industries.

The origins of the political movements which animated Tahrir Square on 25 January 2011 are rooted in the early 2000s, when thousands of Egyptians took to the streets to support the second Palestinian Intifada and, in 2003, the international peace movement against the US-led invasion of Iraq. These protests were sparked by extra-parliamentary forces, notably left-wing activists, who constituted the Egyptian Popular Committee in Solidarity with Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI) with Tahrir Square as the epicentre of the protests.[6]

Although the protests did not directly target the Egyptian regime, they represented the base for a first catalysation of revolutionary demands. According to Hossam El-Hamalawy (a prominent revolutionary and activist in the Egyptian revolution), the protests in supporting Palestinian Intifada "soon gained an anti-regime dimension, and police showed up to quell the peaceful protests".[7] The movement empowered when the US invaded Iraq in 2003 and furthered by the EPCPI turned into an anti-war movement which was swelled by the return of the student movement after years of silence.

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[4] Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries. Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2017, p. 18.
[5] John Foran, "Beyond Insurgency to Radical Social Change: The New Situation", in *Studies in Social Justice*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (June 2014), p. 5-25, https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v8i1.1036.
[6] Gianni Del Panta, *Rivoluzione e controrivoluzione in Egitto*, cit., p. 135.
[7] Hossam El-Hamalawy, "Egypt's Revolution Has Been 10 Years in the Making", in *The Guardian*, 2 March 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/p/2ne5v.

This slow but increasing incubation of demands culminated with the first political attempts to reunite youth, activists and extra-parliamentary political parties under a unique umbrella. The first political experiment, which emerged in 2003, was the Egyptian Movement for Change, known as *Kifaya* (Enough!), which counted political and intellectual figures amongst its ranks.[8] This movement was an alliance of 300 public personalities and political party leaders who aimed to counter the regime through street politics and political initiatives against the emergency law and the chronic corruption within high echelons of the regime.

If the protests in the early 2000 rarely targeted President Mubarak, *Kifaya* demonstrations were a direct attack against him.[9] From this movement other committees and organisations were established in other cities both linked to and separated from *Kifaya* itself. These included the Youth Committee for Change, the Lawyers' Committee for Change, the Doctors' Committee for Change and the Workers' Committee for Change.[10]

Due to the strong presence of Egyptian youth and students within the satellite organisations around *Kifaya*, this political front split in two. While the old generation of activists preferred to combine mobilisation with a reconstruction of the institutions "from below" with the aim of gaining a role in the national political arena, the young generation of activists were more inclined to continue the mobilisation and civil disobedience against the regime.[11] These new political initiatives soon clashed due to internal divisions and the regime's repression, which picked up especially after the 2005 parliamentary elections when the largest oppositional force, the Muslim Brotherhood, by filing independent candidates gained 20 per cent of the seats.

Thus, even if the political demands fell into the void due to internal splits and regime repression tactics, in 2006, given the regime's implementation of neo-liberal policies, the other soul of the 25 January revolution came to the surface with huge waves of strikes within both the industrial and public sectors. As Joel Beinin outlined, "workers were by far the largest component of the burgeoning culture of protest in the 2000s that undermined the legitimacy of the Mubarak regime".[12] The entry on the political scene of the workers' movement signalled a turning point in that "decade-long molecular process of accumulation of anti-regime energies".[13]

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[8] Manar Shorbagy, "Understanding Kefaya: The New Politics in Egypt", in *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Winter 2007), p. 39-60, at p. 43.

[9] Ibid.

[10] See transcript of a workshop on the strike movement in Egypt that took place at the sixth Cairo antiwar conference, held 27-30 March 2008: "Class Struggle in Egypt", in *International Socialist Review*, No. 59 (May-June 2008), https://isreview.org/issue/59/class-struggle-egypt.

[11] Manar Shorbagy, "Understanding Kefaya", cit.

[12] Joel Beinin, "The Rise of Egypt's Workers", in *Carnegie Papers*, June 2012, p. 1, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/48689.

[13] Gianni Del Panta, "The Role of the Egyptian Working Class in Mubarak's Ouster", in *Partecipazione e conflitto*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2016), p. 615-639, at p. 615, https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v9i2p614.

The loss of purchasing power, the worsening of labour conditions and the privatisation of historical national industries increased workers' discontent towards the regime.[14] Between July 2004 and March 2006, 80 public industries were sold and 200 industries were privatised.[15] Worker mobilisation peaked in December 2006 when more than 20,000 workers of the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in Mahalla al-Kubra went on strike after the government did not keep its promise of an annual bonus.[16] The government eventually did pay the bonuses, and the success of the workers pushed other textile sectors to stage similar protests in the following months: between December and March, more than 30,000 workers participated in strikes and protests.[17]

Despite the strong opposition to the regime's privatisation and liberalisation plans, workers at that time did not engage in direct political demands. This, however, does not mean that the strikes did not have political effects. They represented a political challenge to the regime. The great wave of strikes was, *inter alia*, a direct assault on the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), which was the only labour organisation permitted by the regime (since the Nasser era) and fully co-opted.[18] In this context, workers openly criticised the trade union and started to call, despite the strong police assaults, for the removal of the old ETUF representatives within the organisation. In Mahalla, for example, workers collected more than 14,000 signatures demanding that the state-controlled union step down.[19] The workers' mobilisation was political also in terms of challenging the regime's structures and *modus operandi* since even the "simplest expression of discontent [was] severely forbidden".[20]

Women's defence groups also played a central role in this wave of protests representing, perhaps, the only political actor able to combine civil and social rights. In many factories, notably textile production, women accounted for 15 per cent of the total labour force.[21] Women were also at the forefront of the *Kifaya* movement as well as of the workers' strikes.[22] The struggle for women's rights was backed by many civil society organisations such as Al-Nadeem Centre (Centre for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture) or by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, which supported victims of violence and harassment with legal and psychological services. The increasing violence of police against women's defence groups as well as against those who took part in the strikes augmented the discontent towards the regime. This rage increased the consciousness that women's emancipation could be reached only through the struggle against the regime and its patriarchal structure.

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[14] Joel Beinin, "Civil Society, NGOs, and Egypt's 2011 Popular Uprising", in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 113, No. 2 (2014), p. 396-406.

[15] Nadia Ramsis Farah, *Egyptian Political Economy. Power Relations in Development*, Cairo/New York, The American University in Cairo Press, 2009.

[16] Ann Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice. Workers and the Egyptian Revolution*, London, Zed Books, 2014.

[17] Joel Beinin and Hossam El-Hamalawy, "Egyptian Textile Workers Confront the New Economic Order", in *Middle East Report Online*, 25 March 2007, https://merip.org/?p=1314.

[18] Ibid.

[19] "Class Struggle in Egypt", cit.

[20] Gianni Del Panta, "The Role of the Egyptian Working Class in Mubarak's Ouster", cit., p. 620.

[21] Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt. Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2013, p. 59.

[22] Rabab El-Mahdi, "Does Political Islam Impede Gender-Based Mobilization? The Case of Egypt", in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 11, No. 3-4 (September-December 2010), p. 379-396.

Despite this great mobilisation of the social and political souls of the Egyptian revolution, these two sides rarely converged either before or in the aftermath of the Mubarak downfall. On the workers' side, the labour movement rarely advanced political demands and it always "mistrusted the opposition [political] intelligentsia as outsiders who sought to impose their own agenda".[23] This was very visible in the attempt of the newly born 6 April Movement during the strikes in Mahalla in 2008 to support workers in their demand for political reform. In 2008, the 6 April Movement started launching a solidarity campaign on Facebook for workers protesting in the Delta industrial city of Mahalla al-Kubra. The workers, however, did not welcome the 6 April Movement's support especially due to their fear of the regime's reaction.[24] Indeed, as Nadine Abdalla outlined: "Hosni Mubarak's regime carefully distinguished between peoples' demands – those referring to their socioeconomic situations and those touching on political issues. Any kind of linkage was considered a red line not to be crossed".[25]

On the political side, the extra-parliamentary political forces, such as *Kifaya* and other political parties or movements, did not regard workers as social and political change actors. This was mainly due to the elitist character of the political parties within *Kifaya* and, as for the youth movements, due to the difference in terms of mobilisation tools (for the youth movement, the new social networks) and scant trust in the new political actors in the country.[26] Only on a few occasions did political figures of the left such as Khaled Ali, director of the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights, attempt to link "workers' economic demands to political demands toward the very end of the Mubarak era".[27] This disenchantment towards the political parties and forces, not only by workers but at a broader social level, was the effect of the political legacy of the traditional political forces and the presence of another strong actor: the Muslim Brotherhood. As will be outlined in the next paragraph, the polarisation of the political forces (the so-called traditional secular forces and the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists in general) and their electoral competition within the Mubarak regime kept up, on the one hand, the facade of democracy and, on the other hand, weakened the political forces by pitting them against each other.[28]

2. From Mubarak to al-Sisi: Playing with traditional oppositions

People on the eve of the 25 January revolution were disenchanted with political forces in Egypt due to their strict relations with the ruling party and regime. Among those who called for demonstrations there was not, formally, any opposition force. On that day the Tagammu' Party closed its headquarters in respect for the police forces,[29] and the Wafd Party stayed out of the protests.[30] This was different for the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). While the organisation officially refused to participate in the protests, a majority of its youth activists did take to the streets and were among the demonstrators.

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[23] Joel Beinin, "The Rise of Egypt's Workers", cit., p. 6-7.
[24] Nadine Abdalla, "Egypt's Workers – From Protest Movement to Organized Labor", in *SWP Comments*, No. 32 (October 2012), https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/egypts-workers.
[25] Ibid., p. 2.
[26] Holger Albrecht, *Raging Against the Machine. Political Opposition under Authoritarianism in Egypt*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2013, p. 89.
[27] Joel Beinin, "The Rise of Egypt's Workers", cit., p. 6.
[28] Maye Kassem, *Egyptian Politics. The Dynamics of Authoritarian Rule*, Boulder/London, Lynne Rienner, 2004, p. 141-145.
[29] 25 January was originally the police celebration.
[30] Gianni Del Panta, *Rivoluzione e controrivoluzione*, cit., 159-160.

This reluctant behaviour of the traditional political forces was mainly due to their relationship with the regime. Their presence within the political arena was useful to maintain and legitimate the façade of democracy, which made them pawns and therefore, agents of the regime.[31] They were pawns because they passively legitimised the fake democracy of the regime through their participation in elections, while also making agreements on parliamentary seats. They were agents because they used the regime's capacity to repress opposition if one of the two main rivalries (secularists and Islamists) demonstrated a supremacy in terms of presence within professional associations or in electoral turnouts.[32] If the traditional secularist forces maintained their political presence within the political arena thanks to the regime's support, the Muslim Brotherhood developed during the 1980s and 1990s a gradual capillary penetration of the society.

The MB, since the 1970s, has been characterised by two internal currents. One was the conservative wing, linked to the Guidance Council, which led them for example speak about religion in ideological terms and depict the installation of Islamic State as major goal. The other, born within university campuses, self-defined as reformist and was more active and inclined to penetrate the society, notably the unions and professional organisations.[33]

The crisis of Nasserism and the initial liberalisation under Anwar al-Sadat in the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a rapid decline of all the social services, which were gradually replaced with charity associations run by the Brotherhood. These activities went in parallel with political engagement, especially within the professional associations where they were able to guarantee services. Insurance, benefits and social protection were the backbone of the popularity of the MB among public workers and middle-class professionals.[34]

If during the 1990s the movement maintained a conservative vision of the power, starting from the 2000s it shifted towards more secular issues such as political rights, socioeconomic policies and human rights violations.[35] This corresponded also to the ambition of the MB to form its own political party. The key moment was the 2005 elections when the MB won 20 per cent of the parliament seats. From this moment on the organisation pushed for political reform, especially related to the political freedoms.[36] The Egyptian regime responded by pushing through constitutional amendments that would limit political parties linked to religious ideology and by repressing all those who were opposing the regime.[37]

The National Security (*Amn al-Marzkazi*) and the police became more and more violent towards anyone who expressed hostility to the regime. The assassination by the police forces of an innocent youth, Khaled Said, in Alexandria in 2010 fuelled the rage of millions of Egyptians after his tormented body was published by his family on Facebook. Discontent grew especially after the fraudulent nature of the parliamentary elections in November 2010 and after Muhammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Tunisia, kicking off the Tunisian revolution in December 2010.

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[31] Holger Albrecht, *Raging Against the Machine*, cit.
[32] Hesham Al-Awadi, *The Muslim Brothers in Pursuit of Legitimacy. Power and Political Islam in Egypt Under Mubarak*, London/New York, I.B. Tauris, 2014.
[33] Barbara Zollner, "The Brotherhood in Transition: An Analysis of the Organization's Mobilizing Capacity", in Peter Lintl, Christian Thuselt and Christian Wolff (eds), *Religiöse Bewegungen als politische Akteure im Nahen Osten*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2016, p. 43-70.
[34] Ibid., p. 51.
[35] Amr Hamzawi and Nathan J. Brown, "The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Islamist Participation in a Closing Political Environment", in *Carnegie Papers*, No. 19 (March 2010), https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/40318.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

The downfall of the Mubarak regime was possible thanks to several factors, which combined altogether during the glorious 18 days of Tahrir. All political forces together with the urban proletariat and the workers contributed to putting an end to three decades of authoritarian rule. Although the final say was in the hands of the army, which refused to crack down on workers and common Egyptians, the huge wave of mass protests led to Mubarak's resignation and to the start of the political transition.

In addition, the move of the army came after talks with the US administration which called, through the then President Obama, on the military to make concrete steps towards the transition.

The army in Egypt symbolised for both the people and some political parties a progressive body which could direct the transition.[38] Indeed, the army, notably in the last decade before the revolution, remained a relatively distant partner of the Mubarak regime and this sheltered it from the people's rage.[39] The target of the Tahrir demonstrations was the old dictator and his inner circle represented by his son Gamal and the National Democratic Party (NDP). Furthermore, the choice of the army to support the removal of the long-standing president was due to Mubarak's attempts to discriminate against it in favour of the police and to diminish its economic weight by favouring the emergence, since the early 2000s, of a super-capitalist class[40] sponsored by Mubarak's son Gamal. Gamal's intent was to create his own inner circle to engage support for his future presidency, while limiting the role of the old guard of the regime represented partly by figures linked to the army who could obstruct his ambition to be the new president.

> Before the revolution two main factions have been fighting within the regime: on one side, the old guard which considered the State capitalism, even in a neo-liberal form, a stronghold to be maintained; on the other, the new guard, led by Gamal Mubarak more opened to the West, and other global powers.[41]

The platform to realise this project was the NDP which, since the 1980s, gave the regime the political base within both the institutions and the society. The party, in addition, was a vehicle to promote Gamal Mubarak's aspirations as his father's successor. This political move weakened the NDP especially after Gamal Mubarak created, in 2002, the "Future Generation" project within the party with the aim of promoting himself as the new leader and the "natural successor" of his father for the presidency.[42]

This was one of the main reasons which led the Egyptian military and part of the old guard of the regime to abandon Mubarak and back his downfall from above, as the protesters were demanding. The objective of the army was to protect its huge economic interests, prevent any civilian force from controlling the defence budget, and avoid a dangerous power vacuum. Indeed, the decision not to repress the protests earned the army the title of "saviour of the nation" and led some groups to launch the slogan in Tahrir "*al-gaish w al-sha'ab yid wahda*" (the army and the people are one thing).

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[38] Gianni Del Panta, *Rivoluzione e controrivoluzione*, cit., p. 192.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Daniela Pioppi, "Playing with Fire. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian Leviathan", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (December 2013), p. 51-68.
[41] Gennaro Gervasio interview, "Uno sguardo sull'Egitto", in *Potere al Popolo*, 16 October 2019, https://poterealpopolo.org/?p=45577.
[42] Gianni Del Panta, *Rivoluzione e controrivoluzione*, cit., p. 127.

Beyond this narrative, what legitimated the leading role of the army was the rapid splitting of the Square protesters and the marriage between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood. With Mubarak's resignation, the movements which animated the revolution were divided between those who wanted to continue to occupy the Square (6 April Movement, leftist parties and other youth movements) and those who expressed their willingness to initiate the political transition (liberals, Islamists and right- wing parties).[43]

The lack of political experience of these new political actors and their internal disorganisation favoured the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. The downfall of Mubarak gave the MB the possibility to build its own political party, *Hizb al-hurriya wa al-'adala* (the Freedom and Justice Party, FJP) and formally enter the political arena.[44] Despite the MB being prevented from creating its own political party, the organisation, since its return to the social-political scene in 1970s, was able to build and develop what many scholars defined as *al-Tanzim* (the organisation),[45] namely a rigid and vertical structure that enabled the MB to penetrate the whole fabric of the Egyptian society, from neighbourhoods to governorates and economic sectors. This rigid structure and the experience acquired in the last decade within the political institution under Mubarak allowed the MB to deal with the politics of the transition.

The "arranged marriage" between the MB and the Egyptian army[46] (more precisely the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, or SCAF) was of the result of these two actors seizing the opportunity that the revolution had given them. The arrangement would give the military the political platform to lead the transition and avoid the revolutionary movements, while the MB was given the chance to establish a real party in the political context[47] and to extend its cultural and moral views within the society.[48] This alliance, however, declined at the end of 2011 and in 2012 during the parliamentary and presidential elections, when the Muslim Brotherhood conquered the majority of seats in the parliament and the presidency with Muhammed Morsi.

In the first phase of his presidency, Morsi had limited powers (the SCAF was still in control), but things changed as the newly elected president fired all top brass and appointed General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi as minister of defence. Matters worsened as the economic crisis increased. In 2012 the unemployment rate reached a peak of 12.60 per cent (the highest since 1995), and prices increased by 36 per cent in 2013. In addition, national reserves decreased from 36 billion dollars in January 2011 to 15 billion dollars in 2012, while the annual deficit skyrocketed to 30 billion dollars in the same year.[49] The last straw was the constitutional declaration in November 2012, when President Morsi assumed full powers and put himself above any control from other institutions.[50]

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[43] Brecht de Smet, *Gramsci on Tahrir. Revolution and Counter Revolution in Egypt*, London, Pluto Press, 2016.
[44] Daniela Pioppi, "Playing with Fire", cit., p. 57.
[45] Hesham Al-Awadi, *The Muslim Brothers in Pursuit of Legitimacy*, cit.
[46] Gennaro Gervasio, "Egitto, la transizione interrotta", in *Critica marxista*, Vol. 43, No. 2-3 (2015), p. 72-78.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Gianni Del Panta, *Rivoluzione e controrivoluzione*, cit., p. 193.
[49] For figures, see: Macrotrends: *Egypt Unemployment Rate 1991-2021*, https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/EGY/egypt/unemployment-rate; Philip Marfleet, *Egypt. Contested Revolution*, London, Pluto Press, 2016, p. 136-137.
[50] Gennaro Gervasio, "Egitto, la transizione interrotta", cit., p. 73; Daniela Pioppi, "Playing with Fire", cit., p. 61.

Morsi's move provoked a wrathful response from the opposition parties, which constituted the *Jabhat al-inqadh al-watani* (National Salvation Front). This political initiative was constituted by the traditional opposition forces, among them al-Wafd, al-Tagammu', Free Egyptians Party (led by the businessmen Sawaris) and the Constitution Party (led by former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohamed ElBaradei). The aim of the National Salvation Front was to restore the democratic transition in Egypt and avoid the "Brotherisation" of the country.

Protests and marches spread all over the country. In April 2013, five activists formed *Tamarrud* (Rebellion), which brought together traditional political forces, youth movements, the former members of the so-called *Fulul* (figures linked to the ancient regime) and also embittered MB supporters, with the aim of bringing Morsi down.[51] *Tamarrud* culminated with General al-Sisi's coup on 3 July 2013, which marked the end of the revolutionary process and the triumph of the counterrevolutionary phase. The unpopular political decision of Morsi pushed the army to intervene in order to preserve their own interests and avoid a perennial unstable situation.

Al-Sisi was able to present himself to the people as their saviour from the barbarity of the Islamist forces. The worker leader Kamal Abu Aita (a prominent figure and leader of the Egyptian Federation of the Independent Trade Unions) became Labour Minister while the Socialist Hamdin Sabbahi (former presidential candidate and one of the most popular figures in Tahrir) and Mohamed ElBaradei (the first figure to challenge the Mubarak regime in 2010 as presidential candidate) were appointed as vice-presidents of the first presidency of Adly Mansour.

The support of those political figures, who were protagonists in the Square, provoked a gradual de-mobilisation of the movements and the Square itself. Only few continued to mobilise but the rise in power of al-Sisi marked the capitulation of the revolutionary movements. The increasing political polarisation of the country between Islamist and non-Islamist forces exacerbated the social and political contradictions. The revolution and revolutionaries, from that moment on, were but agents of external powers, such as Turkey or Qatar (sympathetic to the MB), while the new regime elevated itself as the unique force to avoid a "Syria scenario" and the spread of radical groups. Many who supported the protests and had been protagonists of the great popular movements in 2011 now felt in the hands of the counterrevolutionary forces.

3. The US, EU and regional powers in the transition

The Egyptian uprising took Europe by surprise. Catherine Ashton, the former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, issued the EU's first declaration on Egyptian events only on 27 January 2011, claiming:

> I call on the Egyptian authorities to fully respect and protect the rights of their citizens to manifest their political aspirations by means of peaceful demonstrations. The voices calling for the full respect of their political, social and economic rights should be listened to carefully.[52]

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[51] Daniela Pioppi, "Playing with Fire", cit., p. 74.

[52] European External Action Service (EEAS), *Statement by the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the Events in Egypt*, 27 January 2011, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/118963.pdf.

This was due to the Union's tendency to look first at what the US would do. The Council Conclusions on Egypt, in which the EU called for a political transition, came only after the Obama administration decided, after talks with the high ranks of the army, to sideline Mubarak and his inner circle.[53]

The victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in parliamentary and presidential elections represented both a continuity and a rupture with the past in terms of foreign policy and international relations. Morsi's presidency was characterised by a rapprochement with Iran, marked by the president's visit to Tehran in 2012, the first since 1979,[54] and the tight relations with the Palestinian branch of the MB, Hamas. At the same time, even though the Iranian-Egyptian rapprochement alarmed the US administration, Morsi maintained strong links with then President Barak Obama who saw the Muslim Brotherhood as an actor which could deliver reforms.[55] Furthermore, in his 2009 speech in Cairo Obama underlined the change, at least on paper, in the approach of the US to the Middle East and more particularly in terms of democracy:

> I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq. […] No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation by any other. That does not lessen my commitment, however, to governments that reflect the will of the people.[56]

Things also improved as Morsi mediated a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel in 2012. This move was welcomed by Washington, representing the green light for the external legitimisation that Morsi needed. At the same time, this US endorsement created discontent, and even rage, in the conservative regimes in the Gulf, which have always considered the MB as a threat to their dynastic security.[57] Headed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Gulf countries accused the Obama administration of being a lackey of the MB.[58] This rhetoric, along with the one whereby Morsi wanted to transform Egypt into an Islamic Republic, was then reinforced by the centralisation of powers by the MB President, which opened the way, as we have seen above, to the huge wave of protests followed by the coup of the Minister of Defence al-Sisi in July 2013. In the eyes of the Gulf monarchies, al-Sisi represents the stabilising figure that has prevented the rise of Islamism (i.e., the MB) in Egypt.

On the regional level, the July 2013 massacre of Rabaa al-Adawiyya, in which about 900 pro-Morsi protesters were killed by the Egyptian security forces, was one followed by al-Sisi's attacks against Qatar and Turkey, which, in the eyes of the regime, were plotting against Egypt by supporting the MB. In this context, the Egyptian internal polarisation was deeply influenced by the regional split among the "conservative bloc" (the KSA and the UAE) and the Islamist one.

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[53] Edmund Blair and Samia Nakhoul, "Obama Demands Change as Mubarak Meets Army", in *Reuters*, 30 January 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-idUSTRE70O3UW20110130.

[54] Azzurra Meringolo, "From Morsi to Al-Sisi: Foreign Policy at the Service of Domestic Policy", in *Insight Egypt*, No. 8 (March 2015), p. 3, https://www.iai.it/en/node/3965.

[55] Alain Gresh, "Barack Obama, 'Lackey' of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood", in *Orient XXI*, 13 September 2018, https://orientxxi.info/magazine/barack-obama-lackey-of-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood,2623.

[56] US Presidency, *Remarks by the President on a New Beginning*, Cairo University, 4 June 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09.

[57] Eric Trager, "The Muslim Brotherhood Is the Root of the Qatar Crisis", in *The Atlantic*, 2 July 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/muslim-brotherhood-qatar/532380; Alexey Khlebnikov, "The New Ideological Threat to the GCC: Implications for the Qatari-Saudi Rivalry", in *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (January 2015), p. 17-28, https://www.inss.org.il/?p=62216.

[58] Alain Gresh, "Barack Obama, 'Lackey' of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood", cit.

This does not mean that the actual regime is a champion of laicism. This is demonstrated by the presence among the government's supporters of Salafi *Hizb al-Nur* (The Light Party), which serves on one side as an internal legitimator in the eyes of the conservative portions of society and on the other represents accountability towards the Gulf states where Salafists have their roots.[59] Not surprisingly, the Gulf monarchies became the main sponsors of the new regime by pledging billions of dollars and investments in Egypt.[60] Indeed, since 2015 Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been the two main partners of al-Sisi. In 2015 Saudi Arabia signed an agreement with the Egyptian regime for 30 billion rials (8 billion dollars) to be invested in infrastructure and a free trade zone in Sinai,[61] while in the same year the UAE contributed to the reinvigoration of the Egyptian economy with a 4 billion dollars investment in Sharm al-Shaykh and in the new administrative capital.[62]

On the international level, despite the initial cold reaction by the EU and the US, the period following the coup was characterised by their full recognition of the regime. The Obama administration did not recognise it as a coup. Former Secretary of State John Kerry claimed that the military intervention was taken to restore democracy in the country.[63] As for the EU, its reaction was similar. The Union did not recognise the army manoeuvre as a military coup but something more complex especially due to the huge mobilisation of the people against the Morsi presidency.[64]

Furthermore, the real watershed came with the 2014 presidential elections, when the EU and the US fully recognised al-Sisi as president despite fraud, violence and a drastic reduction of political freedom during the electoral period. This legitimisation of al-Sisi needs to be seen in the context of the effects of "instability" on Europe. The transformation of the Libyan revolution into a civil war, the increasing polarisation between Turkey and Qatar (supporters of the MB) and Saudi and the UAE, mounting flows of migrants landing on European shores, as well as the spread of terrorism and non-state actors in Syria and Libya, pushed Western powers to support the new regime.

Egypt became one of the watchdogs of the EU in terms of migration and security. Its fight against radical Islamists and its commitment to avoiding flows of migrants permitted al-Sisi to acquire the external legitimacy he needed. His capacity to maintain "order" within the country through capillary repression of every form of opposition has allowed him to become a central partner for the EU member states. However, while Egypt could appear in the eyes of many as a strong country, it is extremely weak. The chronic economic crisis affecting it keeps fuelling deep discontent. Indeed, in the last two years the country has witnessed, although limited in numbers and duration, two waves of protests due to economic crisis and the government policies that have disrupted the already weakened public sector. The loans from the IMF in 2016 and 2020 provoked a series of structural reforms that triggered a cut to public services and a rise in the cost of living.

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[59] Azzurra Meringolo, "From Morsi to Al-Sisi: Foreign Policy at the Service of Domestic Policy", cit., p. 5.
[60] Ibid., p. 4.
[61] Ali Abdelaty, "Egypt, Saudi Arabia Sign 60 Billion Saudi Riyal Investment Fund Pact", in *Reuters*, 9 April 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-saudi-idUSKCN0X60VQ.
[62] Mary Sophia, "UAE to Build Egypt's New Capital City", in *Gulf Business*, 15 March 2015, https://gulfbusiness.com/?p=65619.
[63] "Egypt Army 'Restoring Democracy', Says John Kerry", in *BBC News*, 1 August 2013, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23543744.
[64] Luis Doncel, "Lo ocurrido en Egipto es más complejo que un golpe de Estado", in *El País*, 20 August 2013, https://elpais.com/internacional/2013/08/20/actualidad/1377012594_718800.html.

Despite the IMF's enthusiasm about the Egyptian government's performance in terms of economic reforms,[65] poverty has skyrocketed. According to the World Bank, poverty in Egypt accounted for 32.5 per cent (30 million Egyptians) in 2020,[66] while since 2019 the government has been liquidating some historical national industries, provoking the rage of thousands of workers.[67] These moves by the regime are the result of the failure of neo-liberal policies. While such policies permitted the country to avoid default, they have also generated great discontent among impoverished social classes, over whom authoritarian rule has strengthened.

Conclusion

The Egyptian 2011 revolution did not happen overnight, but was the outcome of more than a decade of an accumulation process which engaged, as outlined, both the social and political sides of the Egyptian society. Demonstrations against the Mubarak regime, the organisation of different political platforms (separated from the traditional parties) and the great waves of strikes in the factories and in the public sector constituted the political and the social souls of the revolution. However, despite mass participation in the protests, the Square has not been able to create an alternative political project to challenge the Egyptian deep state. Three reasons explain this disappointing outcome.

First, the incapacity of both souls of the revolution to unite their demands under a political umbrella opened the doors to counterrevolutionary forces, namely the MB and the Egyptian army.

Second, far from being victims of the army, the MB proved incapable of dealing with democracy (at least in its procedural aspects), reflecting partly its authoritarian nature. The army, which in Egypt is still considered the protector of the country, did not want to appear as part of this instability. In this context, the removal of Morsi from the presidency was aimed at safeguarding the role of the army in the Egyptian political scene.

Third, the nightmare of a Syrian or Libyan scenario in Egypt has strengthened the perception that the army is the sole actor capable of challenging terrorism and avoiding the worst. This has been strengthened by the support of regional and international powers which, in order to preserve their interests, have preferred to restore old approaches and forms of government rather than to support a real democratic transition.

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[65] International Monetary Fund (IMF), *IMF Executive Board Approves US$2.772 Billion in Emergency Support to Egypt to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 11 May 2020, https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/05/11/pr20215-egypt-imf-executive-board-approves-us-2-772b-in-emergency-support-to-address-the-covid19.

[66] World Bank, *Poverty & Equity Brief: Arab Republic of Egypt*, April 2021, http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/AM2020/Global_POVEQ_EGY.pdf.

[67] Beesan Kassab, "Explainer: Too Much Steel? What Are the Market Conditions Behind the Decision to Liquidate Egyptian Iron and Steel", in *Mada Masr*, 15 February 2021, https://www.madamasr.com/en/?p=320980.

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