

Egypt: Rethinking Democratization Process Between 1981 to 2011

Anthony Eniayejuni¹

Abstract

The process of democratization is happening in many different places around the world including Egypt. Its birth mean wider popular participation and greater public contestation over the right to win control of the government in a free competitive election which will determine who governs, and it is typically accompanied by much public drama. Many countries with histories of little political pluralism almost always have a harder time with transition from authoritarian or semi-democracy to a full or more democratic political regime. This study reviews Hosni Mubarak thirty years rule, democratization process and political reforms in Egypt.

Keywords: Democracy; Democratization; Authoritarian; Civil Society

Introduction

Democratization is seen as a movement in a society from less accountable to more accountable government, from less competitive elections to freer and fairer competitive elections (David, 1997); from severely restricted to better protected civil and political rights and from weak autonomous associations in civil society to more autonomous and more numerous associations that facilitate better awareness and a more informed citizenry, who make better voting choices, participate in politics, and hold government more accountable (Saikal & Schnabel, 2003). It is a transition aimed at establishing a democratic political system, initiated either by the government, the civil society or the combination of both; allowing bargaining and compromise among different political forces for the resolution of social conflicts, regularizing transfer of power, engaging in the fundamental transformation of political structure, and institutionalizing the pluralist structures and procedures by which different political forces are allowed to compete over the power (Tatu, 1997). It is best understood as a complex, long-term, dynamic and open-ended process. It consists of progress towards a more rule-based, more consensual and more participatory type of politics (Whitehead, 2002). It cannot happen without a strong established, well functioning and broadly supported civil society which produces potential leaders at all levels of governance; that will also socializes and mobilizes the general public around democratic and civic duties and responsibilities. The idea of civil society as a normative aspiration and a style of organization had a great impact or capacity to mobilize against any military or authoritarian regime. For any political system to be democratic there has to be a considerable understanding amongst the populace of the process of democratization. However, democratization and democracy are intrinsically interwoven, democracy requires the construction of a vibrant, vigorous and pluralistic civil society which are independent from state control and also denotes the participation by the mass of people in the decisions that shape their lives, government by majority rule, with recognition of the rights of minorities, freedom of speech, press and assembly, freedom to form opposition political parties and to run for office, commitment to individual dignity and equal opportunities for people to develop their full potentials (Kush, 2003). Meanwhile, if liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost; and since the people are the majority and the opinion of the majority is decisive, such a government must be a democracy (Aristotle, 2005). Whereas the

¹ Cyprus International University, Lefkosa, Mersin 10, Turkey, Email: aeniayejuni@yahoo.com

type of political regime in Egypt is characterized by state leaders who direct and regulate society without being accountable to citizens. There are no competitive elections. Citizens are denied the right to criticize officials, the government, the regime, the socioeconomic order and the prevailing ideology; citizens who express such political views run the risk of severe punishment by the security forces of the state. Alternative sources of information for citizens do not exist or are not officially allowed, secrecy in the affairs of the state is routine. Independent associations or organizations critical of the state are not allowed to form and developed and if those that exist speak or act contrary to the wishes of the state they are suppressed (David, 1997). In Egypt, the term democratization does necessarily imply the same thing as in the western society. The ideas like people's right to elect their leaders in a free and fair election periodically have not yet taking root in the country. However, democratization process is still ongoing in Egypt. This study looks at the role of indigenous movements in democratization process and political reform in Egypt: such as Egyptian Movement for Change also known as Kefaya and Muslim Brotherhood, as well as external pressure on Egypt by United States America after September 11, 2001 attack. The historical background of Egypt and democratization process under Hosni Mubarak is given in the following sections.

Historical Background

Egypt formally gained independence from Great Britain in 1922 and acquired full sovereignty following World War II. Even though, the formal independence was wrested from the British by countrywide uprisings and demonstrations, under the leadership of Wafd Party in 1922, the party continued to dominate and occupy Egypt political system until the 1952, when free officers led by Abdel Nasser took control of the government in 1952, removed king Faruk from power, abolished the monarchy and declared the country a republic (Dandelion, 2011). Since then the political and economic structures in Egypt were exposed to radical change. The constitution was abolished, political parties were banned and one party state instituted. The three presidents the country has had Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, faces different challenges and concerns, each endorsing different directions and policies. All the three presidents rose to power not through election but through and with the assistance of the military. Under Nasser Egypt adopted a socialist but repressive system of government. During his administration Egypt aligned with Soviet Union, joined Syria to form the United Arab Republic and he was a strong proponent of Pan-Arabism. Political parties were not tolerated and numerous cases have been recorded of journalists and opponents being tortured, jailed or even executed. Political parties including Muslim Brotherhood which had supported Nasser's regime were banned and thousands of its dissidents were imprisoned (Sriramesh, 2009). After his death in 1970 he was succeeded by his vice Anwar Sadat. Under Sadat, Egypt began to liberalize both politically and economically at least initially. In the early years of Sadat administration, many of those imprisoned for political reasons during Nasser's rule were released and restrictions on the formation of political parties were eased. Anwar Sadat is best known for the Camp David peace agreement he signed with Israel (Sriramesh, 2009). Although international reaction to this move was largely favorable but opinion at home and in the Arab world was less enthusiastic. The backlash among those who disagreed with the peace agreement was so great that many of the domestic reforms and moves towards pluralism were reversed by the government. The dissatisfaction among the people with the peace agreement, coupled with economic reasons and government restriction on free flow of information and openness resulted in the rise of a strong Islamists movements. This led Sadat regime further crackdowns on open expression and activities deemed threatening the regime. On October 6, 1981 Anwar Sadat was assassinated. After his death, he was succeeded by Hosni Mubarak.

Under Mubarak's administration Egypt re-emerged as a force within the Arab world. Egypt was readmitted to League of Arab States in 1989 after explosion from the union as a result of Sadat peace deal with Israel. His government was able to restore Egyptian Arab relations and at the same time maintaining good relations with the west. Egypt benefited from Gulf war in 1990, its participation in the international alliance for the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation resulted in the forgiveness of some of its external debt (Zezeza and Eyoh, 2002). Mubarak administration reinforced the exclusion of political opposition from any real political power or influence. He did not relinquish state or NDP control over all aspects of political parties, with the implementation of emergency laws which is still in effect, and which further helps concentrate power into the president's hand (Kleinberg and Clark, 2000). However, the security apparatus including the secret police along with the legislative and judicial processes, particularly the emergency law and military courts are tools used to prevent the exercise of human rights, political activities and to curtail them. The combination of all the security apparatus had served the interest of the regimes rather than the republic or the population, which has ensured long reigns for all the three leaders (Kelly et.al, 2008).

Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt, as a social and religious organization whose members regarded Islam as a way of life. Its establishment was to promote implementing of traditional Islamic Sharia law and a social renewal based on an Islamic ethos of altruism and civic duty in opposition to political and social injustice and to British Imperial rule. The organization operates initially as a religious charitable and educational institution but later grew to become a major political force. When President Hosni Mubarak succeeded Anwar Sadat as president in 1981, he continued openness towards Muslim Brotherhood while cracking down on militancy. This legitimized the Muslim Brotherhood and allowed it to resurface and promote its political and economic agendas. Muslim Brotherhood has long been involved in national politics and social welfare in Egypt, and also one of the most important opposition groups to Mubarak's ruling party. Although, not legally registered as a political party, the group participation in national and other elections was tolerated by Mubarak between 1984 and 1995, until when the regime reversed its earlier tolerance. Muslim Brotherhood support and alliance with the New Wafd party in 1984 and socialist party in 1987 translated into sizeable numbers of opposition representing about 20 percent in the parliament. The group members are quite successful in union elections; their candidates have dominated the executive's boards of lawyers, doctors and engineers unions until Mubarak government began to reverse this trend in the mid 1990's in order to circumscribe the Muslim Brotherhood dominant position in the professional associations (Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, 1999). Even if Muslim Brotherhood were to apply for legalization as a political party, the regime would almost certainly not approve it (Katerina, 2011). However, Muslim brotherhood was commonly regarded as the only major alternative to the ruling party of President Hosni Mubarak. The Brotherhood positioned itself at the forefront of opposition forces calling on the president Mubarak to open up the political space, amending Article 77 in order to shorten the presidential term to four years and to establish a limit of two consecutive terms, as well as to reduce repressive measures of the regime (Al-Ahram, 2005). Many Muslim brotherhood members run for elective posts as independent candidates in the 1990's and 2000's. In 2000 parliamentary elections, 17 independent candidates who were regarded as Brotherhood sympathizers were elected. In 2005, the group affiliated candidates won 88 seats in the parliament. Over the years, the group members have been periodically imprisoned and the group activities banned particularly around the sensitive period of elections. The Egyptian government has been alternating between tolerating and suppressing the Muslim Brotherhood, due to its active

participant in the demonstrations and its ability to inflame the street represents a constant threat to the Mubarak regime (Sharp, 2009 & Palmer and Palmer, 2008).

The Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya)

The Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya) is self described as an indigenous movement for political reform organized in late 2004 in opposition to the Emergency law, persistence of authoritarian rule of President Hosni Mubarak and the inheritance of presidential power. On 22nd September 2004, group of intellectuals and non-NDP political leaders called for a conference on a state of affairs in the country. The conference leaders created what they called a movement of opposition rather than a political party. So, Kefaya was crystallized when this group of prominent intellectuals came together and alarmed that President Mubarak would seek a fifth term of six years as president and that he was preparing for his son to succeed him. Its formal name was 'The Egyptian Movement for Change' but it quickly became known by its nickname Kefaya which in Arabic means 'Enough'. Kefaya brought together a host of disparate elements such as Islamists, New Wafd members, Labor supporters, Nasserists and the Ghad party led by Ayman Nour (Tignor, 2010). Kefaya employed means not previously seen in Egyptian politics, means that may have some promise for future democratic movements. Kefaya kept its message simple as its name 'enough' crystallized Egyptian frustration with the government. Its slogan 'No to Inheritance, No to Extension', helped focuses public attention in Egypt on the issue of hereditary rule raised by Mubarak's government. It presented a simple analysis of the situation that any citizen could understand and was able to unite diverse groups in its pursuit of broadly acceptable democratic reforms. Kefaya skillfully exploited information technology, using electronic messages including text messages between cell phone users to publicize its rallies among members and the general public. It pursued a multifaceted internet strategy to disseminate its message. It published advertisements online, finding these to be more effective than print advertisements in publications the authorities could confiscate. It propagated banners and political cartoons using its own website and those of sympathetic bloggers. It documented abuses by state security officers using digital photography and distributed the images online. Kefaya leaders see their greatest accomplishment as having broken down the population's aversion to direct confrontation with the regime (Nadia, 2008). Kefaya also staged a demonstration by children in support of an estimated 30,000 political detainees. The demonstration was the first ever public demonstration by children aged between 5 and 16 demanding for political change and the release of their love ones, who had been detained without trial on the footsteps of the Prosecutor-General's Headquarters in Cairo. In one of the placard carried by the children reads 'we want to live in a free country and be free people and we need our detained fathers, cousins and relatives return them to us' (Amira, 2005). Kefaya was widely diverse, uniting communist, nationalist and Islamist members. The union was historic and there had never been such a coalescence of Egyptian political groups around any set of issues, much less in direct response to the ruler and his potential successor. Kefaya was unique in calling for regime change. Instead of demanding efforts to reform the current regime, the movement demand complete change of the regime as well as a call for establishing a parliamentary republic in which there would be real separation of power, a judicial system with administrative and financial independence which would not be subservient to the Ministry of Justice and an elected government which would be accountable to the parliament (Nadia, 2008). Although Kefaya failed to win at the polls but it did achieve some striking victories. The movement forced President Mubarak to alter the procedures for selecting and electing the president by allowing other candidates to run and contest for presidency, instead of the old way of electing the president.

US Foreign Policy in Egypt after 9/11

After the 9/11, 2001 attack in United States by al-Qaida, the US government along with bundle of strategies came out and advocated to democratize the Arab world including Egypt. In contrast to what was being taught before by the west that democratization in the Middle-East would be inimical to security interests, and at the same time the ruling elites in this countries also felt that the Islamists stand well positioned to reap the benefits of more open and genuinely competitive elections, this led them to introduce legislative and administrative measures to render such electoral victory a remote possibility (Elbadawi and Makdisi, 2010). In November 2003, President W. Bush administration presented was it is called the 'Greater Middle-East Democracy Initiative' and said it wants to make democracy-building in Middle-East a central part of the US led war on terrorism. In his speech, President W. Bush condemned the authoritarian regimes in the region and called upon Egypt to lead Arab nations towards greater freedoms in middle-east. He said many Middle-Eastern governments now understand that military dictatorship and theocratic rule is a straight, smooth highway to nowhere. But some governments still cling to the old habits of central control. There are governments that still fear and repress independent thought, creativity, and private enterprise, the human qualities that make for a strong and successful society. Even when these nations have vast natural resources they do not respect or develop their greatest resources, the talent and energy of men and women working and living in freedom. The good and capable people of middle-east all deserve responsible leadership (Bush and Dietrich, 2005). The great and proud nation of Egypt has shown the way toward peace in the Middle-East and now should show the way toward democracy in the region (Angel, 2004). The main strategy and rationale behind democratization in the Middle-East now is the US government security interest in promoting freedom and democracy to reduce anti-Americanism. The logic of this policy lay in the belief that undemocratic regimes in middle-east provided the breeding ground for terrorists and terrorist organizations. This policy contrasted with previous, largely unconditional US government support of authoritarian regimes in the region. Meanwhile, the Mubarak regime took US pressure to democratize as an opportunity to institutionalize dominant party succession mechanisms which actually reflect in 2005 election and subsequent municipal and parliamentary elections (Lisa, 2010).

Democratization Process under Hosni Mubarak

Since President Hosni Mubarak became the president after the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981, three referendums were held in 1987, 1993 and 1999 extending his tenure as president for six years each, and the constitution did not permit any other candidates to contest. But as a result of domestic pressure by interest groups on his regime to democratize and also for the amendment of article 76 and 77 of the country's constitution, as well as international pressure by United States made Mubarak's government to announce an amendment in February 2005. The President announced his decision to secure a revision of Article 76, which for the first time in the history of Egypt legally allowed the framework that the people shall elect their president by choosing from a multiple candidates in the presidential election, the constitution now requires that all presidential candidate nominations must obtain the support of members of the two houses of the national parliament, the People's Assembly, the Consultative Council and of local councils, the precise number of such endorsements to be specified by a law (ICG, 2005). The president declared that the amendment were intended to give opportunity to other political parties to enter the presidential elections and given guarantees that allow more than one candidate to be put forward to the presidency for the people to choose among them freely (Maye, 2006). The main goal of this change is to replace the referendum system in selecting the president to a more democratic system in selecting the president. Meanwhile, the amendment is structured

in a manner that would under the circumstances make it difficult to actually challenge the political status quo. The article does not put limits on how many terms the president could serve and at the same time the majority of the Egyptian parliamentary members has always consist of members of National Democratic Party (NDP) which is the ruling party and is headed by Hosni Mubarak and family. In September 2005 election, President Mubarak was re-elected according to official results with 88 percent of the vote. His two principal challengers got 7 and 3 percent respectively. While in the parliament the Brotherhood candidates got 20 percent of the total vote. In 2007 elections for the upper chamber of the parliament in which the group participated, Mubarak's government used its heavy hand to prevent Brotherhood candidates from winning any seat. The government also introduced several constitutional amendments that would increase presidential power and more significantly, ban any political parties based on religion, race or ethnicity. Later, in 2008 municipal elections, Mubarak's government refused to register almost all Brotherhood candidates and also unleashed a wave of arrests. This made the group to boycott the elections at the last moment (Ottaway and Hamzawy, 2009). According to President Mubarak's statement in his early years in office, he said: 'We are providing doses of democracy in proportion to our ability to absorb them. We are forging ahead but we need time for our democracy to develop fully' (Joshua, 2005). This means that given an overdose of democracy would likely be harmful to the country's stability and it also implies that, it is the people that are the key factor in determining the level of democracy to be injected into the country. That is, President Mubarak is carefully adapting to the international democratization agenda without losing control over the political realm. His administration introduces political reforms which have been partial, selective and unilaterally decided by the ruling party without consultation with the interest groups and widens participation without modifying the center of power (Florian, 2006). However, a popular uprising began on 25th January 2011 in Egypt as a result of people's discontent against Hosni Mubarak's regime which finally resulted in his removal from office after spending nearly three decades in power. The main objective of the pro-democracy movement was the removal of Mubarak from power, demand for political reforms, as well as abolition of the ruling party NDP (BBC, 2011). On 16th April 2011, an Egyptian court ordered the dissolution of the ruling party NDP which had dominated Egyptian politics since it was founded by Anwar Sadat in 1978, meeting the demand of the pro-democracy movement that ousted President Mubarak. The court also ordered the liquidation of NDP assets with funds to be returned to the state as this money is actually the money of the people (Shaimaa and Patrick, 2011). Since, it is the people that are the key factor in determining the level of democracy to be injected into the country. Then, the uprising on 25th January 2011 shows that the desire and will of the people to be free in Egypt proved more powerful than the writ of a dictator, which means that no regime is immune from peoples will and power.

Conclusion

Democracy cannot be imposed and it cannot thrive if the local foundations are lacking. Democratization is not only about allowing multi-party elections or enabling the independence of the judiciary, but also about reconfiguring relations of power in order to open spaces for pluralism, diversity and inclusiveness (Francisco, 2009). The 'Ruling party NDP wins the majority' syndrome persist in Egypt as a result of the absence of genuine political openness and competition in all the elections and this actually created room for former President Mubarak to hold on to power for a very long time. The Egyptian government needs to engage in a national dialogue involving all interests groups and political forces. The opposition should be a partner in the democratization process and not merely an observer. Ending the emergency law in Egypt would allow freedom of assembly and would

also limit the powers of the state. All successful democracy needs freedom of speech, equality and freedom of assembly, so that citizens can gather and organize in free associations to press for reform. In a nutshell, democratization process under President Hosni Mubarak is democratization without democracy.

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