

Egypt: on the way toward democracy?

Dietrich Jung

The recent unrest in Egypt dramatically changed the political geography of the country; yet despite the deposition of Mubarak after 30 years in power, key structures of the authoritarian regime, whose origins can be traced back to military coup of 1952, remain untouched. One of the major challenges thus consists in a revival of the traditions of liberal nationalism that had marked much of Egypt's pre-Nasserist history. In this context, a continuation of past politics that were pursued by international great powers poses additional obstacles to the new opening of Egyptian political life.

For many political observers, a democratic Egypt seemed to be a contradiction in terms. After more than 50 years of autocratic rule the country represented a paradigmatic example for the resilience of authoritarianism in the Middle East. The Mubarak regime in particular showed an enormous flexibility in maintaining its societal control against all political, economic and social challenges. Therefore, the rather quick deposition of the Egyptian president by some two weeks of popular unrest took many by surprise. Those who perceived the Egyptians as living in political apathy were apparently wrong. Yet, while Mubarak is gone, most of the regime's structures remain in place. The Egyptian military, since the revolution in 1952 the backbone of power for the three subsequent presidents Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, took not over but rather remained in place, although much more visible than before. At this point of time, the future of Egyptian politics is far from being decided. Thus the central question is whether Egypt is indeed on its way toward democracy.

To be sure, only history will answer this question. The purpose of this short essay is therefore rather modest. Reflecting upon chances for and obstacles to democratic developments in Egypt, it contributes to the current discussion in putting the recent events into historical perspective. In assessing the democratic potentials of the country, so my argument, it is wrong to be stuck in the present. It is not the first time that Egyptians rebelled against their rulers, and liberal nationalism is by far not unknown to the political history of Egypt. On the contrary, over decades liberal minded nationalists played a prominent role among the political elite pushing for Egyptian independence. Egyptians can look back on 200 years of modern state formation, shaping institutions, a people and a territory that resemble far more the structures of the modern national states in Europe than those of its neighbors Syria, Jordan or Iraq. Therefore, it seems important for Egypt's democratic transformation to link up with the country's own historical heritage of political liberalism. In addition, the problematic support of Egyptian autocrats by international powers is not new. To a certain extent, western support of the Mubarak regime resembled a historical pattern which was introduced already in the nineteenth century. It is instrumental, though, that the international relations of a democratizing Egypt have to break with this pattern once established under colonial rule.

In 1811, exactly 200 years ago, the Ottoman governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, massacred the leadership of the Mamluks, the traditional military establishment that for centuries controlled power in the Ottoman province of Egypt. It is convenient to perceive this event as foundational for the formation of the modern Egyptian national state. Muhammad Ali tried to monopolize power and made Egypt practically autonomous from the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul.

He embarked on a conscious program to transform the economic and political structures of the country according to European standards and launched a long-lasting reform project under which he sent several study groups to Paris and ordered the translation of French literature on science, law and the military into Arabic. In selectively borrowing from European models, the early Egyptian state elite engaged in a deliberate reform of public institutions with a particular focus on the military and on education. There can be no doubt that these top-down reforms to a large part were experienced in the population as rather repressive acts, and were not beneficial for all parts of society. However, in this respect Muhammad Ali's reforms hardly differed from other processes of modern state formation. Also in Europe state-building was rarely a bottom-up process, but often attempts of "defensive modernization" through which the political and economic elite tried to safeguard their power position by institutional adjustments.

It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the European powers began to seriously interfere with Egypt's administration. At the request of the Khedive Ismail, in 1876, European controllers took over the direction of the "Caisse de la Dette Publique", supervising the strained public finances of Egypt. The establishment of this foreign control over Egypt's state finances was a prelude to the eventual occupation of the country by Great Britain in 1882. The immediate cause to impose direct British rule on Egypt, however, was the nationalist uprising of the officer group around Ahmad Urabi, initiating a project of parliamentary rule. The nationalist movement turned against foreign domination, epitomized in the foreign fiscal control of Egypt, and against the autocratic nature of the khedive's domestic rule. Together with British troops, the Egyptian aristocracy suppressed the revolt in summer 1882, and leading figures of the national movement went into exile. The events of 1882 established a pattern of interaction between Egyptian leaders and international great powers that also marked President Mubarak's rule: in order to safeguard their own interests, international powers supported autocratic rulers at the expense of the nationalist and constitutionalist aspiration of domestic political movements.

This pattern again surfaced after the First World War. During the war, representatives of the legislative assembly formed a nationalist pressure group around Saad Zaghlul, mobilizing the population to demand independence from British rule. Zaghlul and his supporters became known under the name *wafd* (delegation), demanding to represent Egypt at the negotiations in Versailles. Great Britain, however, rejected Wafd's demands and Saad Zaghlul was arrested in March 1919. His deportation to Malta eventually sparked the Egyptian revolution from 1919 in which for the first time in Egyptian history a mass movement engaged in country-wide demonstrations. In 1922, Egypt achieved

partial independence under British tutelage and Saad Zaghlul served as prime minister in 1924. Until the military coup in 1952, Egypt experienced an era of semi-liberal rule. However, the liberal nationalists, predominantly identified with the Wafd Party that used to win national elections, failed to reach full independence and to improve the living conditions of the broader population. Moreover, the British authorities controlling the military conspired together with the king against the liberal government, eventually discrediting bourgeois politics. The failure of Egyptian liberal nationalism, as well as the frustrating experience of European totalitarianism and the humane disasters of the First and the Second World Wars, facilitated the rise of Islamist politics, since its foundation in 1928 epitomized in the Muslim Brotherhood.

The coup of the so-called Free Officers in 1952 and the rise to presidency of Gamal Abd al-Nasser in 1954 eventually terminated a period of almost 70 years of constitutional monarchism in Egypt. The following republican regime was of a populist nature, replacing liberal nationalism by Arab state-led socialism. In the context of the Cold War, however, the new regime soon found itself again in an asymmetric relationship to the international great powers. Facing the emerging bipolar system, Nasser was driven to side with the Soviet Union before Anwar al-Sadat shifted toward the USA. Sadat's successor, Husni Mubarak, continued and enhanced the strategic relationship to the USA and used its economic rents to stabilize his almost 30 years of rule. From an ideological point of view, republican Egypt experienced three rather different autocratic rulers subsequently employing Arab Socialism, religious nationalism and authoritarian pragmatism in running the country. Yet the regimes of all the three of them rested on the power of the military and the utilization of the country's strategic position in international politics. From Nasser to Mubarak the military continued to play a crucial role in politics and also developed into a central player in the Egyptian economy. Thus, Egypt will not be able to head toward democracy without its military; however, will the military indeed pave the way into a democratic future?

In the 1960s, many scholars perceived the military as a modernizing agent in post-colonial states. Due to their professionalism in institutional, technological and terms of organization – so the assumption – the officers could play a major role in transforming “traditional societies”. With its professional ethics, the military appeared to be an ideal facilitator of change. Unfortunately, the generals largely did not live up to the expectations of scholars. In Argentina, Chile or Turkey, democracy was eventually achieved against rather than with the military. Whether the Egyptian officer corps will act differently remains to be seen. The history of liberal nationalism in Egypt, however, could provide Egyptian officers with a historical narrative for this task. Liberal nationalism gained

strength under the leadership of the officer Ahmad Urabi, before the military under Nasser in 1952 brought it to an end. With regard to Egypt's way toward democracy, it is important that this time international powers side with the country's political movements. Moreover, one should hope that the Egyptian military will take Urabi and not Nasser as its example.