EGYPT'S PARTY CRISIS

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During the first months of 2011, the authoritarian, oppressive Egyptian government

came to an end almost overnight. After decades of one-party rule where opposition parties

were heavily suppressed, the ruling National Democratic Party was disbanded, and democracy

seemed imminent. However, after decades of "de-politicization of the public sphere" (Akl,

2013), Egypt had few viable political parties that were mature enough to adequately run in an

election. In the end, the government elected after the 2011 revolution failed because there

was not enough time for political parties to form, coalesce behind specific issues and clear

leadership, and campaign in time for the 2011 elections, and a government was elected that

lacked experience, unity, and a clear agenda.

Nearly all of the political partied in Egypt are characterized by a "weak organizational

capacities, the absence of a clear party message and the lack of grassroots constituencies" (Akl,

2013). While they share many of the same problems, it is not hard to distinguish the political

parties in Egypt into three basic categories: parties that were active, yet highly suppressed

under the old Mubarak and Sadat regimes, new, largely secular and liberal parties that sprang

up following the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, and Islamist parties backed by well-established

religious organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi Call.   These categories often

overlap, and many smaller parties have either joined the Muslim Brotherhood-backed Freedom

and Justice Party in the Democratic Alliance for Egypt coalition or the Salafi Call-backed Al-Nour

Party in the Islamist Block coalition or have formed coalitions of their own to oppose the two

large Islamist coalitions (El-Din, 2012). The initial parliamentary elections saw a landslide

victory for the Islamists, with the Democratic Alliance for Egypt winning 235 seats and the more

conservative Islamist Bloc taking 121 seats (El-Din, 2012). Due to fundamental problems in the

way that Egyptian political parties formed and have acted, popular discontent once again rose,

and the summer of 2013 saw a dramatic fall of the ruling Freedom and Justice Party when

General Al-Sisi of the Egyptian Army announced that the "armed forces will be forced to

announce a new roadmap for the future" (Sennot, 2013) and subsequently led a coup d'état.

Before the revolution, the National Democratic Party led by longtime Egyptian dictator Hosni

Mubarak dominated Egyptian politics. After 1977, when then-president Anwar "Sadat legalized

political parties" (Lust, 2013, p. 455) opposition groups were technically allowed to exist, but

"requests to form political parties had to be submitted to a special committee chaired by the

NDP secretary general. The committee rarely approved such requests" (Agence France Presse,

2011). And while the few opposition parties that were approved were allowed to run in

parliamentary elections, the Egyptian government committed "massive electoral fraud" (Gelvin,

2012, p. 59) as elections "were routinely rigged to produce majorities for the ruling party" (Lust

455). The NDP ended up functioning "more like a club whose board was composed of political

and economic elites who divided political and economic spoils among themselves."   (Gelvin,

2012, p. 39). The NPD served only the NDP, and was not even "associated with an ideology"

(Gelvin, 2012, p. 39).

Despite the ruling party's dominance, opposition parties were occasionally allowed to

hold small numbers of parliamentary seats, yet they suffered "from having been created and

forced to survive under draconian laws that prevented real contact between parties and the

people" (Lally, 2011) and they never posed any real threat to the NDP or held the enough

power to influence any real decisions. The ineffectiveness of opposition parties greatly

inhibited their ability to win any serious public support, and as a result they were forced to

interact with the public in a nontraditional manner. In most modern democracies, parties gain

public support by adopting popular stances on issues with hopes of gaining the vote of citizens

who have ideas about governance that are in line with party ideology. However, the pre-2011

Egyptian legislature was weakened by decades of authoritarian rule, and as a result, "political

parties had been unable to influence meaningful policy changes" (Lust, 2013, p. 255).

 Opposition parties and independent politicians had been marginalized, and citizens under

Mubarak were unwilling to support politicians and parties based on ideology alone, as

politicians at the time were seen as unable to "deliver on policies because they could not

influence parliaments" and "because they could not influence meaningful policy changes,

incentives for parties to develop part-wide, policy-oriented perspectives were lacking" (Lust,

2013, p. 255) for most of Egypt's modern history.

        Due to the inability for politicians and parties to bring about political change under

Mubarak's rule, politicians won over constituents "at election time through the distribution of

clientelistic prerequisites and benefits" (Lust, 2013, p. 255). Yet even the best attempts at pork-

barrel politics of Mubarak-era parties failed to inspire much confidence in the Egyptian public;

shortly before the uprising, fewer than 35 percent of the Egyptian population reported that

they had anything more than a "limited" trust in political parties (Jamal & Tessler, 2010).

After years of suppression, the 20 or so political parties that existed prior to the 2011 revolution

and subsequent disbanding of the NDP were left weak. Most of the already existing parties

"lost whatever base they had" (Lally, 2011) The lacked definitive stances on issues and due to

suffering from tarnished reputations from years of being "active under the previous

authoritarian regime" (Rohac), they were left with constituents that didn't "trust them" (Lally,

2011). Many of the parties "remain personalistic, tribal, kin-based, and narrow." (Lust, 2013, p.

258) There has not been a wholesale departure from the rent-seeking behavior of the NDP, and

the old parties lend "themselves to a model of clientelistic distribution" (Lust, 2013, p. 258).

Following the first revolution and the constitutional changes that were adopted after the March

19, 2011 referendum on constitutional reform, political parties could legally be formed through

"simple notification of the authorities" (Agence France Presse, 2011). Parliamentary elections

were initially set for September (Fam, 2011), giving only 6 months between the March 19, 2011

referendum and election day. This short electoral timeline would eventually be pushed back to

November due to concerns that such a short timeframe would "benefit established forces such

as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood" at the expense of newly formed groups, but the perceived

need to organize quickly for the elections coupled with the newfound ease in which Egyptians

could form political parties caused a frenzy of new parties to appear, and "more than 70 had

been declared by mid-2011" (Rutherford, 2013, p. 38). However, all of the post-revolutionary

parties that were not created out of pre-existing religious groups faced similar problems. Even

today, the parties that were created following the revolution are plagued by a lack of both

political and organizational experience, the fact that they "do not have well-developed political

platforms with wide appeal to the population" (Lust, 2013, p. 255), and a lack of an established

reputation and credibility.

The organizational capacity of newly formed Egyptian political parties are severely limited, due in part to decades of authoritarian rule that greatly limited the development of Egyptian civil society, leaving Egypt with as Egypt has "civil society organizations that are weak, fragmented, and divided" (Alk, 2013). After the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981 until after the 2011 revolution, "Egypt was kept in a formal state of emergency, which enabled the regime to legally restrict the civil liberties enumerated in the constitution in the name of public order" (Lust, 2013, p. 459). While more than 15,000 various civil society groups were active in Egypt in the decade before the revolution (Pratt, 2005, p. 125), they have always been under the authority of the government, "which has the legal authority to license (or de-license) them, influence the selection of their leaders, limit their funding, and veto their activities" (Rutherford, 2013, p. 39).

This suppression of civil society has continued beyond the revolution, and in 2012 the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (unsuccessfully) attempted to expand the government's power to monitor and disband civil society groups (Human Rights Watch, 2012). The burdens and regulations placed on civil society groups in Egypt has proved to be a "problem with Egyptian party politics" (Akl, 2013) and has left Egyptian political parties "largely disconnected from the daily lives of ordinary citizens" (Akl, 2013) Furthermore, the economy in Egypt has been subject to government involvement and control. The Egyptian military, which receives about $1.3 billion dollars per year in US military aid, controls 40 percent of the economy and runs large-scale manufacturing and agriculture operations (Sennot, 2013). The result of long-suppressed civil society groups and government control of business is a civilian population with

limited management and organizational experience, rendering Egyptian parties "unable to

organize at the grassroots level to build a broad electoral base to back their goals" (Rutherford,

2013, p. 43) and full of wildly different values and ideas about governance.

The newly formed liberal secular parties in Egypt also suffer from a lack of ideological

unity and a marked "absence of a clear party message" (Akl, 2013). Business leaders in Egypt's

private sector, who could potentially unify under the banner of market reform and privatization

of military-controlled economic assets, have "not yet coalesced into a coherent political force"

(Rutherford, 2013, p. 43). Instead, businessmen have generally stayed out of politics, perhaps

in fear that they would "draw the attention of a prosecutor or a hostile public (Rutherford,

2013, p. 43).

The lack of unity in newly formed parties has resulted in an inability "to formulate wide

and encompassing issue-oriented policies or outlooks" (Lust, 2013, p255). Because the newly

formed secular parties "remain fragmented politically, unable to unify behind a single

leadership or a shared platform" (Rutherford, 2013, p. 43), there is confusion among everyday

citizens and party leaders alike as to what specific parties' goals' are and how to achieve them.

In the past year, the new secular parties seem to have made strides in this area, came together

to form the National Salvation Front, an "opposition coalition" (BBC Monitoring, 2012) against

the Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party. The NSF was founded by a wide

variety of liberal, secular, and leftist parties including "the Egyptian Popular Current, al-Dustour,

al-Tajammu, Free Egyptians, New Wafd, Democratic Front, the Egyptian Social Democratic

Party, Nasserist Democratic Party and the Conference Party" (BBC Monitoring, 2012). The NSF

was initially seen as a unifying movement that had "brought together the country's fractious

and divided opposition factions" in response to what they saw as a "power grab by the

president and his Islamist allies" (BBC Monitoring, 2012) in the days leading up to the national

vote on the proposed 2012 constitution.

The 2012 constitution, which was "drawn up exclusively by the Muslim Brotherhood and

its Salafi-jihadi allies" (Shukrallah, 2013) would eventually prove "to be potentially even more

authoritarian than the 1971 constitution under which Mubarak consolidated his rule"

(Shukrallah, 2013).   However the NSF was unable to act as a single unified body, and after

being "stalled by internal debate over whether to boycott a process many believed would be

rigged" (Shukrallah, 2012), the group finally made a decision to make a "public call to vote "no"

just three days before the referendum" (Hill, 2012). The NSF proved to be unable to adequately

mobilize enough support to defeat the new constitution. Once again, the secular forces had

been plagued by slow decision making, with "disagreements within the NSF" (BBC Monitoring,

2012) hampering the opposition group's ability to "either rally voters or organize a boycott"

(Hill, 2012).

The absence of public trust in politicians in Egypt further compounds the other

problems that many of the new parties face. Politicians in Egypt tend to lack credibility because

they are either "new, with no political history or reputation, or old, in which case they were

probably active under the previous authoritarian regime" (Rohac, 2012). As a result, it is not

immediately clear to the Egyptian voters which politicians can be entrusted with the

responsibility of elected office. This lack of credibility of the politicians themselves extends to

their parties as well; unlike in established democracies, where specific parties have been active

for multiple rounds of elections, in Egypt there is a distinct "lack of trusted 'brand name'

political parties that voters can reliably associate with specific policy agendas" (Rohac, 2012).

Islamist organizations, like the Muslim Brotherhood that established the FJP and the Salafi Call

that the Al-Nour party was founded on, don't face many of the same struggles that the new

secular parties are forced to deal with; they had a "long history of organization" (Rohac, 2012)

and were therefore familiar to voters, yet unlike members of the old Mubarak regime, the

Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi Call "were not part of the official rent-seeking structure of the

old regimes" (Rohac, 2012).

Although the Muslim Brotherhood was politically repressed under Hosni Mubarak, it

was still able to operate on a charitable and humanitarian basis. The Muslim Brotherhood was

running "22 hospitals and schools in every governate of the country" (Rohac, 2012) in 2006, and

in 2012 it ran an estimated "20 percent" of all "legally registered NGO's and associations"

within Egypt (Rohac, 2012). It is this organizational ability and experience that placed the

Brotherhood at the forefront of the 2011 revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood began by

offering humanitarian assistance to protesters in Tahrir Square, and as the movement grew, the

Brotherhood gradually took the lead in organizing the resistance (Sennot, 2013). While it

seems now like a natural role for the Brotherhood to fill, some Egyptians were afraid that the

revolution would take the identity of an Iran-like Islamic revolution (Sennot, 2013). Initially, the

Muslim Brotherhood attempted to stop the 2011 revolution from taking an Islamic identity and

even instructed protestors not to hold up copies of the Koran in front of television cameras (Sennot, 2013).

As the protests wore on, two distinct sides of the Muslim Brotherhood began to emerge. The organizational wing, which controlled "recruitment, indoctrination, and the internal hierarchy" of the organization began to separate from the "political wing, which was involved in day-to-day political activism, including collaboration with other non-Islamist political forces" (Shukrallah, 2013). As the Muslim Brotherhood's influence and power rapidly grew, the organizational wing grew to dominate the more reformist members of the political wing, which was involved in day-to-day political activism (Shukrallah, 2013). The organizational wing, which was "made up of Salafists and hard-line followers" (Shukrallah, 2013) of the late Islamist author and politician Sayyid Qutb, was undoubtedly more regressive and far less politically competent (Shukrallah, 2013). This seizure of power by some of the more conservative Islamist members of the Muslim Brotherhood lead to splintering within the group, and many of the reformist members of the group found themselves "outside the Brotherhood altogether," ultimately joining other parties like the newly formed Strong Egypt Party and the Egyptian Current party (Shukrallah, 2013).

Unlike the smaller parties, however, the Muslim Brotherhood was big enough to still maintain a sizeable presence after splitting, and after shedding its reformist members, the Brotherhood emerged more unified than before. This unity, however, came at a price. After the shedding of the political wing, while the Brotherhood still retained its organizational experience and brand recognition, their lack of political experience rendered them lacking

"clear policy platforms" and economic platforms that are "generally vague" (Rohac, 2013). The

Freedom and Justice Party doesn't present any type of specific political platform other than a

general Islamic one, stating on their website that their Egypt "relies on religious institutions and

expects them to play a prominent role in promoting the various cultural, political, social, and

other aspects of Egyptian life (FJP Online, 2013), yet the FJP website remains vague on specific

plans for promoting those aspects. The Salafi Call found itself in a similar situation, with a

popular base of support, but lacking real political experience. Ultimately, the two major

Islamist political parties didn't succeed because of their stances on issues, but rather because of

organizational experience and the presence of "a well-established political brand" (Rohac,

2013).

Doctrinally, the Muslim Brotherhood "does not have any revolutionary ideology" and

instead believes in "gradual reform" (Sennot, 2013). In fact, the Freedom and Justice Party

initially declared that it would not be fielding a presidential candidate (Sennot, 2013). The FJP

went back on its decision not to field a presidential candidate, and a runoff left Egyptians

choosing Morsi not necessarily because they wanted him to be president, but simply because

they saw the second-place Ahmen Shafik as a holdover from the Mubarak era, leaving Morsi as

the lesser of two evils (Sennot, 2013). The policy of pursuing gradual reform would ultimately

lead to popular discontent with the Brotherhood, as some believed that the "Brotherhood

chose to pursue a formalistic procedural transition that saw elections alone as democracy,

while ignoring substantive reform of a failing system" (Wahid, 2013). The revolution of 2011

was not a complete revolution, and although free and fair elections took place, they took place

in the context of a larger "system without functioning checks and balances" (Wahid, 2013) that

allowed Muslim Brotherhood slowly began to consolidate power and "set out on a course to

retool Mubarak's authoritarian state and co-opt its tools of repression, with the Brotherhood

itself in the helm" (Wahid, 2013).

In the end, the large number of secular political parties that formed in the frenzy after

Mubarak's fall did not have enough time and effective leadership to consolidate behind a

particular ideology and were unable to mobilize voters at the ground level. As a result, a

parliament and president were elected that did not accurately represent the will of the people.

When Egyptians went to the polls in late 2011, instead of voting for parties based on clear-well

communicated issues, they had to choose between parties known for working with the

Mubarak regime they had just overthrown, largely unknown, newly formed parties with an

unproven record and lack of clear ideology, or the Islamist organizations that had been running

schools and hospitals for years. Ultimately, the Islamist leaders that were elected failed to

change Egypt's "legal framework and state structures" that were "thoroughly authoritarian in

their basic framework and modes of operation" (Brown, 2013). Instead of representing the will

of the people, Morsi gave himself the power to take "any and all actions he alone deemed

necessary to protect the state and people" (Sennot, 2013) and those actions "generated

increasing levels of polarization, destroying trust and crippling the state" (Brown, 2013).

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