

In Egypt, Nothing Has Changed – But Perhaps Everything Has

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Can we venture to declare that Egypt has arrived at a new and dangerous turning point? Yes and no. For although nothing significant has materialized recently, the specter of a major shift looms. While our capacity to act, to take initiative, or even to think has been completely crippled, conditions on the ground are moving in the opposite direction, as if history has a mind of its own and is imposing its will on this current state of stagnation to declare the beginning of the end of an era.

It is no exaggeration to say that all aspects of Egypt's civic life — its institutions, organizations, media, civil society, universities and political parties — have been degraded, damaged, besieged and humiliated over the last few years. There is nothing left to attack, but there is something happening now that is different.

The end of the 2013 mandate

On July 3rd, 2013, former President Mohamed Morsi was ousted with the promise of a vague transitional process. But the current regime was actually established on July 26th, two days after then-Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi called upon citizens to take to the streets to grant him a mandate to undertake resolute and exceptional measures in his military capacity to fight terrorism.

The turnout on July 26th was not as large as the mass mobilization on June 30th, but it was enough to legitimize the presence of the Armed Forces on the streets and the aggressive return of the security state. The problem was that the conditions of the mandate were rudimentary and vague, and the military leader who was granted it was not actually bound by its terms. The mandate to fight terrorism turned into a mandate to rule over everything — to assume all political, economic and social decision-making at all levels.

The smaller crowds on July 26th constituted the most extreme segment of the June 30th protesters. They were unorganized and angry, and they readily endorsed a process that would come to completely dominate political life. Although they were not the majority, they immediately sapped public will and helped to legitimize military rule as the one and only solution to the political failures of the Muslim Brotherhood and their alienating form of governance.

The Armed Forces welcomed the public's response to Sisi's urgent appeal. The large demonstration allowed the military to declare that the masses stood behind them; everyone who took to the streets that day was deemed to be in favor of the mandate. When citizens were stopped at police checkpoints, interactions were friendly and accommodating, even if they were only superficial.

Six years later, in September 2019, police deployed in full force across Egypt to prevent any anti-Sisi protests. Security forces randomly stopped citizens and searched their phones for any political content. Thousands were arrested, including anyone caught taking photos in downtown Cairo. A live

broadcast captured a Sisi supporter being detained as he tried to record footage showing that downtown was safe and free of protesters. Every citizen was considered a suspect, regardless of age, gender or socioeconomic background. Every neighborhood was considered dangerous, except for Fifth Settlement and similar outlying suburbs. The country was effectively under curfew.

This marked the end of the July 2013 mandate: The moment when thousands of security forces were mobilized to evacuate Cairo's streets of its residents. The moment in which every walking citizen was treated as a potential enemy. The moment that ushered in an authority more closely resembling an occupying force, an authority whose legitimacy is based, above all, on naked power. The phantom political opposition was fully terminated and the July 2013 mandate dissolved to make way for a more cruel, humiliating and dangerous era.

Our defeat and the breakdown of the military's totalitarian media

The current media landscape in Egypt is unprecedented in its deterioration and decay. It cannot be compared to the media landscape of the 1960s, which was totalitarian, but still of high quality, and of a different era. The current media landscape is instead a fierce reaction to the slow but steady effort that began over 40 years ago to open up the media in Egypt.

Outside voices first began to be allowed into state media in the 1970s, particularly in newspapers. This was followed by opposition parties being allowed to publish their own newspapers, which pushed the boundaries of dissent according to the political circumstances of the moment. Then came satellite television and digital media, which significantly opened up media discourse. Additional private satellite channels were created and the margin for freer forms of expression widened. Online media outlets and independent print newspapers began to multiply.

The current media clampdown is not a response to the completely open post-January 2011 media landscape. It is a response to the media of Safwat al-Sherif (the former speaker of the Shura Council, former head of the Supreme Press Council and former Information Minister, who was a close aide to former President Hosni Mubarak) and Mohamed Abdel Qader Hatem (Egypt's first Information Minister under former President Gamal Abdel Nasser).

It is a response to the relative degree of openness in the media under Mubarak and his predecessor, former President Anwar al-Sadat. In those eras, freedom of speech and expression was not so severely and outrageously curtailed as it is today — newspapers did not print identical headlines on their front pages.

Egyptian media has been reshaped in such a severe way as to completely destroy all the gains accumulated over decades of hard work. And all for one purpose — to prevent any dissenting voice of any kind from having a platform, and to deliver a message to every Egyptian: "Surrender, we control everything."

Media policy over the last six years has been akin to the policy of a totalitarian media in a time of war. It is based on a relentless onslaught, a systematic spreading of terror and despair, and a fomenting of distrust among citizens. This policy does not seek to win hearts and minds, but to produce submission through terror and compulsion. It is a policy that does not care about truth; it does not want people to believe its proclamations, but rather to be incapable of denying them. It wants them to surrender to a never-ending stream of senseless news and information that leaves them feeling helpless in the face of a gigantic security apparatus — one that has waged a vicious propaganda war against what is left of the Muslim Brotherhood's media.

Regime operatives have infiltrated social media and the parallel world of WhatsApp, spreading

fantastical content such as the capture of the commander of the United States Sixth Fleet, or military victories over Turkey and Israel.

In her reflections on totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt once said that people subjected to a totalitarian media do not believe or trust anything. Yet they nonetheless echo it enthusiastically and admire the ruler who wields it, even if they privately mock it. And if it so happens that the information is proven to be a lie, people congratulate themselves for having known the truth all along. In the Egyptian context, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi epitomizes this philosophical framework, with his claims that knowing the truth does not mean believing it.

The current regime has effectively shattered the media's credibility and its mechanisms for survival — like disarming a soldier and then asking him to continue fighting. At the same time, the level of obedience required from this exceptionally repressive regime can never be achieved through a media whose only message only consists of intimidation, threats, and a constant assault on the concept of dignity.

We must not forget the countless times when media personalities criticized the average citizen for eating too much, with one of them going so far as to proclaim that eating dates and drinking water is a sufficient meal to break the fast in Ramadan. These cases are not the exception — they have been the norm for years now.

Giant media conglomerates with huge financial resources are owned exclusively by businessmen who pride themselves on acting as a front for the security apparatus to censor, coerce, and abuse any and all dissenting voices. It has reached the stage where websites are blocked by the hundreds, including even sports and entertainment outlets.

It was under these circumstances that the videos of Mohamed Ali emerged — a relatively unknown figure, who managed to ignite such a firestorm of controversy that the full weight of the state media apparatus was mobilized to respond. What's more, a conference was hastily organized so that Sisi could personally address the videos, which had quickly gone viral.

What a resounding failure of a totalitarian media apparatus that presumed it could bring people to their knees and completely paralyze their ability to think, critique and freely express their opinions — even on seemingly trivial issues such as the national football team or a particular movie. What happened over the last several weeks has unquestionably dealt a severe blow to the self-image of this tyrannical force and its perception that it has everything under control.

Awareness of a new reality materializing

The regime that emerged from the 2013 coup and ensuing public mandate waged a violent campaign against Egypt's long-established political forces to create a state of exception. A strategic decision was taken to crush the most important of them, the Muslim Brotherhood, who became hysterical after the events of June 30th. This decision and its repercussions created a general state of fear and panic, and a desire to return to some kind of formula that would preserve the safety of the country, no matter the cost. Terrible concessions were made by those supporting military rule — who comprised the majority at the time — at the expense of freedom, dignity and participation in governance.

The price that was paid was enormous. While people were busy chasing off the ghosts of the Brotherhood, the new regime quickly established the foundations of its rule. Amid a general state of distraction, disorientation and mass surrender, the regime embarked on a series of aggressive, far-right economic measures that impoverished millions while also launching massive, long-term

projects with no public debate or oversight. “Congratulations! Egypt will have a new capital” was the sort of news people would suddenly hear. Egypt’s economy and its future were tied to speculative real estate expansion; and while unemployment rates have decreased, few are actually better off and there is little hope for the future.

One of the problems with the current regime is that it is inherently contradictory. Any “state of exception” cannot become stable unless it normalizes the exception in a way that is widely accepted. At the same time, the regime knows that it cannot take aggressive economic, social, and security measures without continuing the state of exception. The question then becomes: what is the appropriate time to end this phase? How many years of a silenced citizenry will it take? And what happens after the mission is accomplished? Will the leaders of the state of exception retain their positions when things become stable? Or will they be replaced?

In other words, does the current regime actually fear stability? Does it fear a return to normal life? A “normal” life in its simplest form, with football fans allowed in stadiums, and movies and television dramas not directly produced by the state.

We need only to assess the regime’s performance during this phase to answer these questions. Was it effective and beneficial to the public interest? Or did the regime use the state of exception to drive us into a darker place? Was six years not enough? Will the chase after the Brotherhood’s ghosts continue forever?

It seems to me that the current regime is increasingly unable to convince people with its performance. Trust is eroding. Calls for some form of accountability are increasing. People have become aware that over the past six years, a new system has been established, complete with its own operators, networks, interests, and spoils. Ahmed Moussa calls on people to eat only dates for Ramadan while others amass untold wealth. The public is blamed for any setback while the men in uniform get credit for any achievement.

This is where the figure of Mohamed Ali becomes significant. For he is not a downtrodden, poor citizen, nor is he a member of the opposition. He worked with the regime and believed in it. His defiance means that even the fortunate ones who profited from corruption are objecting and are willing to risk their safety and the safety of their families to speak out.

This means that not only is the current regime corrupt, secretive and exclusive, but it is also incapable of settling disputes within its own circle of interests. The problems in the regime’s own system of cronyism run so deep that a millionaire profiteer sacrificed more riches just to expose its operations and burn it to the ground. Even this man of fortune came to believe that he has no hopeful prospects with our current rulers. Mohamed Ali was not speaking only for himself, but for a wider network of people working with this system. The regime was shown to be weak, incompetent and only trusted by a tight, corrupt inner circle. And with that, the popular mood shifted.

The beginning of a new and bitter war

The response to this shift was to instill terror: thousands of random arrests, reimprisoning political detainees like Alaa Abd El Fattah, arresting lawyers at the prosecutor’s office like Mohamed al-Baqer, torturing detainees like Esraa Abdel Fattah and others, creating a state of fear where simply walking on the street is a dangerous undertaking.

All this was meager compared to what would have happened had there been a real mass mobilization on the streets. The regime would have violently crushed it, then pushed a terrified middle class to further align with military rule as the only guarantor of stability, as they understand

it.

Yet the shift in popular sentiment in itself had a real impact. It redrew the political boundaries more clearly, creating a specter of possibility. Everything and nothing seem simultaneously possible in Egypt right now. The realization that the July 26 “mandate era” has irrevocably ended has pushed both the regime and the people into a corner.

One response could have been a policy of containment — to appease people by adopting a more rational approach to governance, even if only by taking simple and symbolic measures. The other option was to deepen the crisis and to escalate the war against any potential threat, superficial or otherwise.

I don't mean to be pessimistic, but I do not believe the current regime believes in negotiation, compromise, or half measures. If it did, Egypt would have been in a far better place than it is today. At best, the regime views the efforts of its outer circles to call for the introduction of moderate freedoms as well-intentioned but naive.

The truth of this regime is that it is not aiming for a decisive victory over its enemies or for their surrender. It prefers to wage war on the ghosts of its victims. It brings the dead back to life because it cannot survive without them — the phantoms provide the regime with the sole justification for its own existence.

For that reason, I believe the regime will turn more extreme. It will view the masses as a permanent potential threat. It will recognize there is a real socioeconomic basis for popular anger and will therefore derive its meaning as a ruling authority from notions of class and social solidarity. It will more closely resemble a colonial power that derives its legitimacy from the bourgeoisie in the suburbs, creating a framework similar to the one between foreign settlers and colonial governments.

The prevailing mentality is to completely crush any and all opponents, to routinely arrest people on an indiscriminate basis. Going forward, social media sites may be blocked and owning a smartphone may become a criminal offense, as it offers a means of communication that cannot be fully controlled by authorities.

This is not inevitable. This is not our destiny. And of course, none of this is necessary. But it is what we have experienced over the past six years. Initially, this approach was seen as a sign of strength for a regime that had not yet fully established its rule, but with time, it has come to be seen as unjustified tyranny.

In a country as big as Egypt, this repressive regime has set itself an unattainable goal: to silence everyone all the time, forever. On both theoretical and practical levels, this is impossible. And it will give birth to nothing less than a massive and confrontational uprising sooner or later.

Right now, I don't see a light at the end of the tunnel

Armies play an important role in both developing and developed countries if they are at risk of destabilizing: to maintain social order, even if it requires some form of intervention to reform — or completely overhaul — the political structure, which is what the Free Officers did in 1952.

The Free Officers' role was twofold: to align with and unify the people, and to preserve the basis of the existing social order at the lowest revolutionary cost. This came in the wake of riots that broke out across Cairo in January 1952, when hundreds of buildings were burned in response to the killing of 50 Egyptian policemen by British soldiers in Ismailia two days earlier.

Now, the military is instead exacerbating the social crisis in Egypt. It is deepening the moral and material alienation of the widest class base in society. It presents itself to the dominant classes as the sole guarantor of their material interests and tells them to remain silent in exchange for their protection. If the army continues its mismanagement, its secrecy, and its colonial-like stranglehold on the economy, it will also become a burden on the bourgeoisie, as opposed to its source of support. With time, the military will become the adversary of the people. Yet through conscription, it is the people who make up the strength of the Armed Forces; they are still the military's main source of legitimacy and power. All of this poses a real threat to modern Egyptian society. In the absence of a new national project to overcome this impasse and move forward, we can expect nothing less than more deterioration and death.

In our present moment, there is nothing that can be done, but there are things that need to be avoided. Dialogue, truce and an end to ruthlessness are all rational approaches in such a delicate moment as this. But the regime does not favor this approach, and its inherently paranoid nature is pushing the country further into crisis. Yet this approach is crucial to preserve Egypt's future.

Avoiding a popular uprising in the current moment is a top priority, for it will only be driven by anger and vengeance. This would end up strengthening the regime and alienating vast segments of the middle class, which will side with the military in fear of the poor, angry masses. The ensuing violence might further awaken right-wing, fascistic tendencies among the bourgeoisie, paving the way for something even more dangerous.

An even darker prospect would be the army resorting to indiscriminate and uncontrolled violence against broader segments of the public, which would forever bloody Egypt's body politic and threaten to tear apart the very fabric of society. This would result in a complete loss of public trust in the army and a collapse of the military's perception of itself as an army of the people. Such a scenario carries a cost so high that it cannot be conceived of by people with narrow imaginations.

Let us postpone the battle of wills until after we have dialogue.

Syria is the nightmare scenario we want to avoid, yet Egypt seems to have already started down this path. Poisoning society, sowing mistrust, and a perpetual fear of engaging in any serious dialogue will eventually lead everything to suddenly blow up — and we will all wonder at the cause and the motives. What happened in September was a good indication of this: when “nothing” threatened “everything.”

The Armed Forces must not slip into the quagmire of tyrannical and colonial practices that could ultimately lead to actual foreign colonialism. The Egyptian army is a manifestation of the will of the people to live together and is a force that protects this coexistence. Egypt is united by the will of its inhabitants, not by force of weapons, unless you believe that Egyptians are like cattle that can only move when whipped.

Meanwhile, democratic opposition groups have no goal right now except to survive. They are not a player in anything that is happening. The regime is making an example out of them — of their loss of freedom and dignity — while the public expresses little sympathy or support. The opposition was defeated when the January 2011 revolution was defeated. They have nothing to offer but to avoid repression, or to withstand it, with their heads held high, and to take this as a moment for long-delayed self-reflection and critique. Without this, the opposition will be hollowed out with no role whatsoever except to endure the humiliation in a never-ending saga of repression.

As for civil society, they still have an opportunity to carry on, survive and engage with real issues, though not in any politically confrontational way. Despite the persecution and constant denunciation,

there are still responsibilities only civil society can fulfill, albeit only after a long process of self-examination and revision.

The current regime used the Muslim Brotherhood's fanaticism to stir up a wave of chauvinistic anger. People were driven to believe that violence was the only answer, and rejected any rational approach as lenient and weak. Blunt power, weapons and the use of force were championed over any alternative. We all contributed to our current plight, but it is the current regime that bears primary responsibility for the utterly horrendous direction Egypt has taken.

Former US Vice President Henry Wallace once said that "The source of all our mistakes is fear." Led by fear, great nations act like monsters trapped in a corner whose only concern is survival. Today, Egypt is drowning in fear, led by a regime that fears Egyptians — the same Egyptians who once lavished it with unprecedented support.

This nonsense must stop.

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