

Street republic in Egypt: From bullets to ballots

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On 2 June 2012, Hosni Mubarak and his Minister of Interior were both convicted and given life sentences. This comes fifteen months after the spark of the 2011 revolution that marked a great moment of history, though it aggravated many of the suppressed problems associated with the disorientation towards democracy and the confusion about what to do next.

This sweet moment revived the notion of “street politics”,¹ where grassroots movements of young people, workers and the most downtrodden succeeded to get rid of the autocratic regime, but it brought back the notion of ballots and bullets that kept no one really knowing when or if the bitter fruits can ever sweeten.²

The Egyptian revolution has stalled causing an escalation of anger and disappointment felt by the majority of Egyptians regarding their continuous subjection to the bullets of police forces; even ballots did not serve the initial goal of the revolution of establishing a new secular and democratic Egypt. Instead, anarchism, conflicts of interests, and fragmented public opinion were reflected in the ballots giving way to Islamic fascism. As stated by a revolutionary activists in the socialist party news paper: “Egypt is like a house where the curtains have been changed but everything else is the same”.³

This perplexing situation was marked with a continuous swing between revolution and counter-revolution, often with movements in both directions taking place at the same time leading to bloody, unsettled and confusing scenarios. However, it only emphasized the weakness of the Egyptian capitalist class and its inability to stabilise a democratic and inclusive rule.

Authorities during Mubarak’s dynasty and even after the revolution represented by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), adopted pervasive means to maintain their power through the use of live bullets, to keep the exhausted public silenced, and by using various other manoeuvres to affect the ballots in their favour or at least aligning the results with their political agenda to ensure their continued control over the country’s present

¹ Assef Bayat, “Activism and social development in the Middle East”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 (2002): 1-28.

² Ibrahim Saleh, “When the sweet Arab Spring turns sour: The ties that bind”, *Insights: Journal of the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication* 1 (2012): 71-75.

³ David Johnson, “Egypt — A year of revolution and counter-revolution”, *Socialist Party Newspaper* (25 January 2012): <http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/13572>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

and future while offering them a safe exit if needed. Besides, the SCAF claimed to protect Egypt from falling into a total state of anarchy.⁴

This absence of political dynamism had dire consequences, influencing the performance of the “Majlas ElShab” (People’s Assembly) and turning it into a handpicked house of representative and thus demoralising the national police forces into suppressing religious and liberal political descent.

In this unfortunate setting, many Egyptians (liberal and conservatives, Muslims and Christians, rich and poor and old and young) found themselves plunged into civil strife and prolonged fighting. It was in fact a direct confrontation between the familiar and the strange, the visible and the vocal, wherein sentiments and outlooks are formed, spread, and expressed, particularly the suppressed views of the bitter poor, the desperate unemployed and formerly silenced actors like students, workers, and state employees.

This dilemma left Egyptians with limited choices between, not the ballot or the bullet, but the bullet and the bullet. These unfolding of events brought about a time, when ‘street republic’ represented a new space and set of dynamics for those who were structurally and functionally absent from positions of power in the past. It becomes pertinent to revisit the essence of Malcolm X’s seminal speech on social justice: “The ballot or the bullet” that declared that freedom must be attained by any means necessary.⁵

The reason is the obvious — because the parliament crowned the winning of a new Islamic fascism at the expense of all which Egyptians had fought for. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) won with 47 percent of 498 seats, the more extremist Islamist Salfist organisation “Al Nour Party” (The Light) won 25 percent, and seculars “Wafd” (Delegation) and “Egyptian block” each won 9 percent. And the two candidates going for the run off for the presidential election, (Ahmed Shafik and Mohamed Morsi) represented an odd political formula of a close friend of Mubarak (Shafik), and the head of Freedom and Justice, the political arm of MB (Morsi), and were both under the watchful eyes of SCAF.

Though both elections demonstrate how Egyptians aspire toward electoral process, it frames the increasing power of Islamic Fascism in Egypt which appeals to idealistic young people with a desire for a ‘clean’ utopian future and with a bitter nostalgia for past empires and lost glories.⁶

⁴ Kambiz Basetvat, “Will the ruling class in Egypt fundamentally transform itself?” *Global Politician*: <http://www.globalpolitician.com/print.asp?id=7311>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

⁵ Malcolm X, “The ballot or the bullet” (3 April 1964): http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

⁶ Christopher Hitchens, “Defending Islamofascism”, *Slate* (22 October 2007): http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2007/10/defending_isl

The new space is not only exploited by the ballots and bullets as a result of the military dominance over the political life, but it is also controlled by fanatics operating a fascistic concept of the “pure” and the “exclusive” over the unclean and the “kufar” (profane) that compromises the role of the moderate Islamist and secular liberal actors.

The bigger dilemma now is to try to predict the future of an ongoing revolution with these divergent extremist political forces like Islamists and leftist who united to overrun the military and annihilate the last bastion of law and order to pursue an interruption of political democracy.

It is thus very important to cast a backwards glance to try and figure out, with some perspective, the dynamics of what has happened, physically and conceptually. It is also important to comprehend how the “street republic” was used as a space for negotiating freedom and democracy via ballots, though bullets remained front stage of such negotiations.

Institutions cannot be accurately analyzed and studied without recurring to the individual actions that shaped and transformed them. The whole state, groups in civil society and traditional authorities only become tangible and effective through the agency of people who oriented their actions towards them.

One keeps wondering how the promise of a democratic future was simply sullied and turned into permanent confrontations between progressive (if sometimes underspecified) politics and tenacious authoritarian rulers. It is probably the fault of the ‘demeanor’ of the military rather than the vibrancy of the public spheres.⁷

How the street republic redefined politics

Time has already passed since the beginning of the 2011 popular protests, when Egyptians assumed the beginning of democratic era based on free and fair elections. Indeed, both the parliamentary elections and presidential elections could have captured this fresh start of ‘street republic’.

In Imbaba, one of Cairo’s poorest residential areas, excitement and positive vibes were felt from the queues formed outside the gates of the ‘Gihad secondary school’, which served as a polling station. This euphoria hinted at the establishment of Egypt’s ‘second republic’.⁸ And in Abdeen, the

amofascism.html. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

⁷ Barrie Axford, “Talk about a revolution: Social media and the MENA uprisings”, *Globalizations* 8, 5 (2011): 681-686: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14747731.2011.621281>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

⁸ Ian Black “Egyptians head to polls in presidential election ushering in ‘second republic’”, *The Guardian* (23 May 2012): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/23/egypt-elections-voters-polling-stations>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

Cairo district where King Farouk lived until he was overthrown by Nasser and the 'Free Officers' in 1952, voters streamed into the polling stations in the shadow of the wall of concrete blocks protecting the hated interior ministry from attack. On the corner of Tahrir Square, images of 'martyrs' stared down from every slogan-scarred wall. The nearby Muhammad Mahmoud Street was renamed as 'Ayoun al-Hurra' (eyes of freedom), a grim tribute to protesters who were blinded when soldiers fired birdshot at them last year. It is thus explainable to make connections between the media ecologies of protest and political change as the interlocking of political discourses⁹ for destabilising and delegitimising authoritarian power structures theoretically,¹⁰ as well as empirically.¹¹ This emergence of new forms of resistance culture catered to the desperate need for change in the post-uprising phase,¹² which was affected by the Iron Cage of Liberalism¹³ and explains the discrepancy between the insincere commitment to the liberal democratic principles of the former regime and its actual performance.¹⁴ The situation was further intensified with the crippling of the economy as a result of corruption and inept bureaucracies.¹⁵

The use of a common language and the sharing of skills through local/indigenous knowledge (Local or indigenous knowledge refers to the social, historical, and cultural experience of individuals within a distinct culture or locality that differs from the westernized/scientific epistemology that usually often excludes local knowledge, ignores cultural values, and disregards the needs of local communities. These local experiences, identities, and definitions need to be encouraged and empowered as a necessary ingredient to truly sustainable development) enabled the marginalised and disregarded voices to speak, be heard, and become valuable contributors to events,¹⁶ especially through the use of 'open sources'

⁹ Jürgen Habermas *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: 1989).

¹⁰ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press: 1998).

¹¹ Philip Howard, *The digital origins of dictatorship and democracy: Information technology and political Islam* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹² Simon Cottle, "Media and the Arab uprisings of 2011: Research notes", *Journalism* 12, 5 (2011): 647-659. <http://jou.sagepub.com/content/12/5/647.full.pdf+html>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

¹³ Charles Tilly, *From mobilization to revolution* (New York: Random House, 1978).

¹⁴ Daniel Ritter, *Why the Iranian Revolution was nonviolent: Internationalized social change and the iron cage of Liberalism* [Dissertation], (University of Texas at Austin, 2010).

¹⁵ Tarek Elswaei, "A revolution of the imagination", *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1197-1206.

¹⁶ Victoria Annewsom, Lara Lengel and Catherine Cassara, "Local knowledge and the revolutions: A framework for social media information flow", *International Journal of*

to overcome communication barriers (offline and online).¹⁷ This encouraged the protests to build up alternative flows to aid and perpetuate the established systems of communication, by connecting and overcoming any gaps along the way.¹⁸

In this context, “Al-Tahrir Square” (Liberation Square) has become an emblem of popular struggles in a sort of re-appropriation of physical centers of the polis within the notion of ‘cybernetics’¹⁹ to produce and reproduce the structure of political community and experiment with collaborative administration.²⁰

The square was officially the epicentre of the ‘street republic’, where all players, voices and actors shared their dreams and fears regarding the ballots and bullets. As the Iraqi poet and critic, Sinan Antoon put it eloquently: “Cairo commune, ready to conquer the skies to achieve the legitimate demands of the popular revolution”. It was a heroic struggle of “ordinary” people in “extraordinary” times.²¹ The occupation of the square helped Egyptians join forces and generate a brute force which was expressed in riots and mob violence that echoed their long overdue anger and frustration with their harsh and miserable lives.

Many groups of activists, including Islamists, agreed to hold a joint demonstration on 29 July motivated by their demands for an end to the emergency law, for the putting of Mubarak and his close circles on public trial, for the prosecution of police officers and soldiers who had attacked the peaceful protestors, and for the establishment of a free secular civilian government.

To serve that goal, more than one million Egyptians took part in the ‘Day of Kandahar’. In July 2011 alone there were 22 sit-ins, 19 strikes, 20 demonstrations, ten protests and four short-term protest gatherings

Communication 5 (2011): 1303-1312.

¹⁷ Brian Katulis and Susan Brooks-Thistlethwaite, “Power shift: WikiLeaks illustrates a new dynamic at play across the globe”, *Centre for American Progress* (16 December 2010): http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/12/power_shift.html. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

¹⁸ Max Rousseau, “Le mouvement des immobiles”, *Le Monde Diplomatique* (July 2011): <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2011/07/ROUSSEAU/20762>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

¹⁹ Pedro Noel, “A new culture of resistance: From WikiLeaks to the squares”, *Reflections on Revolutions* (11 November 2011): <http://roarmag.org/2011/11/from-wikileaks-to-the-squares-a-new-culture-of-resistance/>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

²⁰ Stewart Umpleby, “The science of cybernetics and the cybernetics of science”, *Cybernetics and Systems* 21, 1 (1989): 109-121.

²¹ Mona Anis, “Of bullets, ballots and counter-revolution”, *Al-Ahram Weekly online*, (29 December 2011): <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2011/1078/eg4.htm>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

counted,²² motivated by their aim to improve their wages, secure permanent contracts, and clear out Mubarak's stooges from senior management.

Egyptians' hopes for change, the future and democracy faded away with the beginning of the deadly mass protests against the pace of democratic reform that erupted everywhere. The 'street republic' blamed the failure of traditional media to respond to the citizens' needs. Egyptian private media was weak, while the public media are still (after transition) captured by the state/ruling party.

Voter turnout decreased from 52 percent in the first round to less than half, though the SCAF threatened to enforce a fine for not voting. However, activists remained very present in the election meetings, questioning and challenging candidates in front of their audiences that clearly helping them gain a better understanding of how to win support among the masses.

But pertinent questions remained unanswered: How suitable is the current political environment for allowing people to express themselves? Is it safe for the public to vote? The fact is, the former sweet 'street republic' has turned sour as a result of the fragmented views of the public and that the Egyptian revolution made a detour from its original goals and visions. In brief, there is a complete dissintigration of the social contract in Egypt that used to reconcile differences.

The broken social contract: Ballot and bullet

Since the 1952 coup d'état the Egyptian state has always used its economic power to manipulate the public, this as a result of its being the main provider of everything and that which kept the society divided between two poles, namely the elite and the militants, while leaving the third sector (the grassroots) completely marginalised and neglected.²³

Violence coloured this broken social contract resulting from among other reasons, police brutality against civilians, the emergence of Islamists, and attacks against Egyptian Christians/secular movements. The 'street republic' underlined the frustration with the revolution felt by many Egyptians that resulted from continuous chaos, a shipwrecked economy, a breakdown in public services, increasing crime and persistent protests that turned into bloody riots. That has left many craving stability.²⁴

²² David Johnson, "Egypt — A year of revolution and counter-revolution", *Socialist Party Newspaper* (25 January 2012): <http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/13572>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

²³ Ibrahim Saleh, "Sitting in the shadows of subsidization in Egypt: Revisiting the notion of street politics", *Democracy and Security* 4, 3 (2008): 245-267.

²⁴ Michael Vincent, "The full story... From bullets to the ballot box", *The World Today*

The unavailability of *tawzir* (ballot fraud) critically shaped the regime's calculated decision to relinquish its commitment to peaceful elections. Ballot fraud, or ballot-box stuffing, is not only common in authoritarian elections, but constituted the most effective tool to correct unexpected and/or undesired opposition inroads until very late in the election process. In any event, however, the presence of judicial supervision rendered it very difficult, if not impossible, for the Egyptian authorities to resort to this illegitimate electioneering device.

This has come in contrast to the earlier of SCAF's views that the second republic offers the first opportunity to participate in relatively free elections. Such public discontent caused the enthusiastic public to become very wary of the possible outcomes. An omen that proved valid by 2013, but even then the positive street atmosphere faded and was turned violent, while the less active audience (usually called the 'Al-Kanbah' or "The Sofa Party", an Egyptian slang term for disinterested supporters of the revolution) became reluctantly supportive of to the former positive atmosphere of the early days of the revolution and many decided to abstain from the voting.

In the final days before voting began Egyptians looked for an alternative to both Islamists and the 'feloul' (the old guard associated with the former regime).

Violence escalated in the face of an SCAF that used force against the opposition groups posing the gravest threat to itself. Before the revolution, violence was mainly directed towards an MB that had a strong showing at the ballot box, which endangered the National Democratic Party's (NDP) stranglehold over the legislature which in turn constituted a key pillar of authoritarian survival.

At the time, Egypt endured several violent confrontations, such as the "Bloody Sunday" protests; where at least 27 civilians were killed and 300 were wounded,²⁵ which left Egypt on the brink of sectarian violence between the army and the Egyptian people. In another instance of sectarian violence,²⁶ Christian Egyptians marched peacefully against religious persecution but the protesters were attacked. The army used tear gas to disperse protesters at Maspero (the state TV building in downtown Cairo), and where rocks were thrown down from the October 6 bridge by police and armed forces.

(28 November 2011): <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2011/s3378044.htm>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

²⁵ Roni Durkan, "Egypt's troubled road from revolution to chaos", *Big Peace* (24 October 2011): <http://bigpeace.com/rdrukan/2011/10/24/egypts-troubled-road-from-revolution-to-chaos/>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

²⁶ Yasmine Fathi, Lina El-Wardani, Mostafa Ali and Nada El-Kouny, "Protest against persecution of Copts in Egypt attacked with bloody force", *Ahram online* (9 October 2011): <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/23714.aspx>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

Islamists quickly jumped front of stage which reflected the increasing role of the MB in various academic institutions and socialist guilds that seemed to pursue an “Islamic democracy” formula.

Later, many more incidents occurred of peaceful protests being broken up by the riot or the military police as well as a continuous pattern of arbitrary arrests of demonstrators, journalists and sometimes activists. These recurrences of attacks did not stop the fight for freedom, but only served to further radicalise the activists.

The escalation of violence emanated primarily from the ‘revolution block’, which felt betrayed by the SCAF and other religious groups. The anger and growing frustration was a result of the marginalisation and seclusion instead of inclusion and recognition within the polity. Besides, the polarisation and conflict within the religious groups, especially by the ‘Salafist’ and later by the Islamists terrorised the young secular grassroots movements and created many violent confrontations between the two fractions smearing the revolution with blood and violence. Later, the ‘fatwa’ or religious legislations against the secular groups turned Egypt into a complete religious inquisition.²⁷ In a desperate attempt to rectify things, young protesters decided to take matters into their own hands and went into other neighbourhoods to convince people to gather at the square. As stated by Tawfik Gamal: “We’re going to go out on the streets and start screaming and ask people to join us”.²⁸

In these reciprocating agitations of the ballots and bullets, the ‘street republic’ was compromised as a result of the widening gap between different constituents and political colours in Egypt. It was further shaken by the absence of viable alternatives to manufacture desired election outcomes so late in the voting process and at minimal external cost.

When the SCAF insisted on maintaining its control over the army budget, massive demonstration were off on 18 November, in which the MB and hard-line Islamist ‘Salafists’ participated. Sadly, activists endured more aggressive attacks over the following five days by the army and security forces, leaving seventy killed, some of whom were suffocated from unusually strong tear gas. Hundreds were injured.

Further brutal attacks took place on 16 December that left at least another 17 dead. But among the shocking scenes was that of a female demonstrator dragged along the ground and being repeatedly kicked by security personnel. An angry march by 10 000 women took place a few days

²⁷ Hendrik Kraetzschmar and Francesco Cavatorta, “Bullets over ballots: Islamist Groups, the State and Electoral Violence in Egypt and Morocco”, *Democratization* 17, 2 (2010): 326-349.

²⁸ Tawfik Gamal, *Social Capital Blog* (26 January 2011): <http://socialcapital.wordpress.com/tag/hosni-mubarak/>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

later in what was considered to be the biggest women's demonstration in Egypt's history

The episodes of violence can be divided into two parts: The first episode began on 19 November, which took place mainly around the ministry of the interior building and involved riot police who wanted to clear the Square, while the second episode began on 16 December outside the offices of the cabinet, where military personnel were beating up women, children and the elderly and were apparently undeterred by the news cameras in a desperate attempt to stop or at least delay the mass mediatisation of events.

The first battle ended with a concrete wall being built across Mohamed Mahmoud Street to separate the two sides, imposing a truce of sorts; and the second ended with another wall being built at the entrance of Tahrir Square across Qasr al-Aini Street.

During these two weeks of bloody clashes, demonstrators were killed and injured by Egyptian State bullets with many maimed or blinded, while simultaneously millions of Egyptians were making their way to the polling stations.

Somehow these two sets of events seemed disconnected, as if they were taking place in two different countries. Egyptians kept resorting to protesting in the square and the subsequent violence which led the scene because they did not seem to find either the parliamentary nor the presidential elections enough of a guarantee of a transition to civilian power. The SCAF declared that the parliament was incompetent to establish its own government and passed a number of super constitutional principles that gave it a special status and also limited parliamentary oversight over the SCAF's budget and over legislation related to the military. In addition, the SCAF did not retain the right to ratify any legislation.

Conclusion

Egypt started down the path toward democracy with a high risk of a bloody and confusing civil war that might be confusing for the public, who are still ill prepared for the journey.²⁹ Elections were instigated without orienting the institutions to accommodate with political competition.

Before the revolution, Islamist candidates were banned, monitors were kept away from the polls and Mubarak's regime used to win in a landslide. After the revolution the SCAF gambled on the appeal of nationalists as a way of hanging onto power, which caused violent nationalism and

²⁹ Ibrahim Saleh, "Living in a lie and dying in silence: The trauma of civil society in the Middle East and North Africa", *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* 11, 4 (2009): 30-38.

sectarianism to thrive in this turbulent politics.

Many Egyptians still perceive the emerging power of the street as only a development of the postcolonial eruptions of the 1950s and 1960s, when they were fed up with the idea of cohesive whole that eventually³⁰ this caused their anger to explode regarding their being mere objects of the colonial history.³¹ The 'regular people' used the street to initiate change in ballots but had to confront the bullets of the military in their fight to stop the military hegemony.

The Egyptian authorities have always resorted to violence to manage legislative elections, there being previously an absence of a basic framework of law, effective government and consensus on which all political colours get to exercise the right of self-determination, elections became an opportunity for political-baiting.

Many things seem uncertain in the current fluid post-revolutionary politics, however the 'street republic' was not engineered through decorous elite pacts, wise political leadership, or committed democrats full of trust for one another. Instead, it was composed of many vigilant, mistrustful ordinary players.

The fight should continue for social justice and a free democratic Egypt, though many questions remain unresolved, such as: Who presented the court cases with insufficient evidences? Who made a wrong choice with the ballots? Who used bullets against fellow Egyptians? The first revolution has only 'changed the curtains' so there is need for a second revolution to take into public ownership and place under democratic workers' control and management to reduce the risk of strengthening democracy's foes. The focus should be directed towards putting in place the preconditions of democracy in the proper sequence, starting with economic reform and the development of a competent, impartial state administration, echoing what Abraham Lincoln said: "Ballots are the rightful and peaceful successors to bullets".³²

The street republic attempted to link political and economic grievances in an attempt to address the complex problems of corruption and injustice in Egypt. But the cross-class and cross-ideology coalition that united behind the initial phases of the second republic has predictably fragmented, and different groups now have divergent views on the applicability of the Egyptian State causing an acute case of identity crisis and thus putting to an end the hope for a better life for

³⁰ Douglas Boyd, "Development of Egypt's radio: Voice of the Arabs under Nasser", *Journalism Quarterly* 52, 4 (1975): 645-653.

³¹ Tarek Elswaei, "A Revolution of the imagination", *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1197-1206.

³² Abraham Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln Vol. II*, Roy P. Basler, ed. (1953) 454. <http://www.bartleby.com/73/1903.html>. (Accessed 24 January 2013).

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Egyptians, at least in the short and medium terms.

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