

Viewpoints
No. 31

Egypt: Islamist Ascent, Islamist Descent

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The last week in Egypt was yet another breathtaking moment in the history of the Arab Spring. For the second time in two years, the Egyptian people have emerged victorious in a major confrontation with their government. Yet the road ahead is bumpy. Events in Egypt suggest that the Islamist ascendancy of the last few years has peaked and is now in decline. Yet the jury is still out on that question, and developments in Egypt will do much to answer it.

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The last week in Egypt was yet another breathtaking moment in the history of the Arab Spring. A year ago, I asked my young friend Dalia Ziada, the head of the Ibn Khaldun Center in Egypt, what would happen if the newly-installed Islamist government ignored the wishes of the people for a democratic, inclusive government. She looked at me and said, “We have Tahrir,” meaning the demonstrations in Tahrir Square that brought down President Hosni Mubarak’s regime in 2011. She meant the people could always resort to mass, public protests.

I thought to myself “how naïve?” I could not imagine that the Egyptian people could bring down yet another government by returning to Tahrir Square. I confess, I was the naïve person. I had gone through the ups and downs of the most important revolution in the Middle East, the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Iranian people had taken to the streets in 1978 for a year of protests that toppled the monarchy. They proved unable to repeat that success when the monarchy was replaced by a repressive Islamic regime. Now, the Egyptian people, young and old, secular and religious, have displayed a political maturity and sophistication that should make any Middle Easterner proud and also envious.

They deposed their democratically-elected president who was on the way to becoming a mini-autocrat. They could not wait three years to vote out President Morsi through the ballot box. But they used democratic means, nevertheless. They went after Morsi and his cronies by collecting 22 million signatures in a movement called “Tamarrod,” Arabic for “rebellion,” and by once again taking to the streets and heading to Tahrir Square. Yet again, they looked to the army to facilitate deposing their new mini-autocrat. These Egyptians do not refer to the role of the army in the ouster of Morsi as a coup. “I wish the Americans would stop calling it a ‘coup,’” said my friend, Moushira Khattab. The former member of parliament, Mohammad Anwar Sadat, a nephew of the late President Anwar Sadat, prefers instead to refer to these momentous events as a “correction.”

For the second time in two years, the Egyptian people have emerged victorious in a major confrontation with their government. Yet the road ahead is bumpy. Morsi’s party, the Muslim Brotherhood, has been defeated, but it will not sink without a trace in the Nile. The Brotherhood is sure to pull its act together, choose a new leadership, and contest the promised but not-yet-scheduled elections for a new president and a new parliament. The extremists among them may revert to violence.

The most important task ahead for the interim president, Adly Mansour, is to form a government that is inclusive and oversees the writing of a constitution that guarantees human rights, minority rights, religious freedom, and equality for all of Egypt’s citizens. This should be a document that will make every Egyptian proud and serve as a model for the rest of the Middle East. The ripple effects of Egypt’s “tamarrod” are already being felt throughout the region. A similar movement is underway in Tunisia, aimed at dissolving the assembly currently debating the third draft of its new constitution. In Turkey, Prime Minister Erdogan is having to reconsider his policies of gradual Islamization and the autocratic behavior that has brought his

people into the streets. In Iran, a sense of envy is emerging that Iranians did not succeed through mass protests in 2009 to change the behavior of the regime; but there is also hope that president-elect Hassan Rouhani will succeed in loosening the grip of the conservative Islamists over the country and usher in an era of moderate reform. They also hope that Iran's Revolutionary Guards will not emulate the role of the military in Egypt, suspecting that if the military comes to power in Iran they will establish a military theocracy that will dominate Iran for years to come. This is surely a concern that democrats and liberals in Egypt share. For the time being, they have welcomed the army's intervention, but they look for a restoration of the democratic principles for which they fought at the beginning of the Arab Spring.

Events in Egypt suggest that the Islamist ascendancy of the last few years has peaked and is now in decline. Yet the jury is still out on that question, and developments in Egypt will do much to answer it.



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