Egypt's Crisis and Its Polarised Narratives

The dispersals of the Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins in Rabaa al-Adawiya and an-Nahda in Cairo have revived the images of violence and fears that have never been very far away since 25 January 2011. Once again we are challenged to make sense of strategic, political and social forces that seem to ignite into repeated episodes of violence, threatening instability and any transition to democracy. Alongside these events and controversies are heated debates concerning fundamental ideas and ethical issues, such as the meaning of democracy, the respect of rights and freedoms and the role that foreign states should play in another nation's revolution. A contributing factor to the complex political situation in Egypt is the difficulty of reconciling numerous and sometimes wildly conflicting perspectives on such concepts and the method of their implementation.

Many commentators trying to make sense of the conflict divide these views into those belonging to the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and those that do not. As a result, a series of "black or white" narratives have emerged that will be explored in this article. Such polarisation of the turbulence in Egypt is inevitably not representative of the real complexity of the crisis but the dominant ways a crisis is simplified and framed can tell us a lot about the strategic choices being made by certain actors and also about the pre-existing paradigms being mobilised for their ability to impact on events (Entman 2004).

In response to a crisis there is no inevitability about the way it will be framed and there is often a process of competing narratives, with one usually emerging as the dominant one. A good example is the 'war on terror' narrative. Croft's (2006) study of the emergence of the 'war on terror' discourse illuminates how reactions to crises are socially constructed intersubjectively via competing discourses until one eventually tends to emerge as the 'natural' or 'common sense' response. Once a narrative gains common-sense status it is able to support particularly ideological approaches and power relations (see Fairclough, 2001). In order to explore the forces operating in the Egyptian situation and its ideological drivers, three narratives will be explored here in order to indicate the narrative that is beginning to dominate the most recent phase of Egypt's fraught transition.

1. Coup Versus Continuing Revolution

In the build-up to the 30 June protests and in the immediate aftermath of Morsi's removal, the main question being asked was whether the army's intervention on 3 July was a coup or not. Theoretically speaking, a coup takes place when a government is removed by force, usually by another section of the state apparatus, which is often the military. But "coup" is a loaded term, with connotations of violence and illegitimacy, so many observers and governments preferred not to use it to describe the events in order to maintain ties with Egypt's new rulers, whoever they may be. Many Egyptians themselves rejected the term coup, criticising foreign media channels such as CNN and the BBC for using it. From their perspective, the removal of Morsi as a result of mass protests was a continuation of a revolution that started with the ouster of Mubarak, also in response to mass demonstrations.

This has given rise to the popularity of the term 'democratic coup'. Ozan Varol, writing in the Harvard International Law review in 2012, explored this concept in detail. Based on fieldwork conducted in Egypt and Turkey in 2011, Varol argues that there is a tendency to view coups as automatically and entirely against democracy. Yet he indicates that despite the anti-democratic features of military coups, they can potentially be democracy-promoting, particularly

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when they confront authoritarian governments with the support of a majority of citizens. It is this kind of reasoning that has formed the basis of the speech among supporters of the army and its actions as a painful but crucial measure to ensure the future of Egyptian democracy.

2. Democracy Versus Authoritarianism

The idea of Democracy has been central to all factions seeking to represent Egypt's revolution and guide its transition. Both pro- and anti-Morsi protesters claim to be on the side of democracy against fascism. Morsi supporters point to the fact that Morsi was elected and insist on the legitimacy of the ballot box. But perhaps considering the number of signatures collected by the "tamarod" (rebellion) campaign for early elections and the massive numbers that protested against Morsi on 30 June, the most democratic action Morsi could have taken would have been to call for early elections and re-test his legitimacy at the ballot box. However, instead of risking losing but perhaps saving a diminished political role for the Muslim Brotherhood, he preferred to let Egypt descend into violence, which was the inevitable consequence to his being deposed by force.

This raises questions about the difference between a commitment to democracy as a mechanism to gain power and democracy as a value that overrides self-interest of any one political group, even if it has won a majority of the votes in an election. Although he was elected, large numbers of Egyptians felt that Morsi had simply replaced Mubarak and that elections were continuing to act as a veneer of democracy over a non-inclusive system dominated by one party. After the presidential election and particularly through the process of drafting a new constitution, Morsi's critics argued that he failed to fulfil his part of the democratic bargain when he began to gather power to himself and the Muslim Brotherhood and to force an Islamic project on the country at the expense of securing stability and democracy.

All sides of the debate used the discourse of democracy but one side prioritised the electoral process while the other focused on the operation of democratic values to support their position. The dilemma in domestic and international debates can perhaps be summarised by the question of which come first in democratisation processes, the process or the values. Elections are a tangible sign of democratic process but in many political regimes, elections do not automatically equal democracy and can even become a vehicle for its abuse when democratic values are absent and election victories are used to legitimise authoritarian behaviour.

3. Religious Fascism Versus Freedom

One of the main arguments used by the transitional government that replaced Morsi in its tough stance with Muslim brotherhood protesters is that the Brotherhood represents religious fascism that threatens the safety and stability of Egypt. For many Egyptians, even those that had supported and voted for Morsi, the constitution indicated to them that the Muslim Brotherhood was primarily concerned with implementing an 'Islamic project'. Articles in the constitution giving the state a role in determining the moral and religious values of the nation raised concerns and were understood as antithetical to democracy and the demands of the January 2011 revolution. This contributed to producing the massive numbers that participated in the 30 June protests against Morsi.

The use of a narrative of religious fascism as a threat to the stability of the nation did not emerge from 2011 but it was well used in the years before Mubarak's ouster and very visible in state media (Iskander 2012b). In one example, a newspaper article published in 2007 presented the idea of the religious state as intolerant and extremist (ʿAsfūr 2007). Its polar opposite is constructed as a state that guards citizenship that upholds moderate Egyptian values in tolerance. This longstanding usage indicates why this narrative of moderation at war with religious fascism for the sake of freedom has become so influential since 3 July.

The influence of this narrative points to the entrenched problem of using religion and religious slogans in the political process. Often squeezed in the middle of this narrative are Egypt's religious minorities. Chief among these are the Coptic Orthodox Christians, an autochthonous community that have often been a soft target during times of political turbulence in Egypt. Since Morsi's ouster there has been a spike in attacks against churches, Christians and Christian homes and businesses. These attacks increased again dramatically when the Muslim brotherhood sit-ins

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were dispersed.

According to the Muslim Brotherhood, Copts were among the key supporters of the army and their actions against Morsi. In a statement on their website, the Brotherhood indicate that Copts seek to destroy Egypt's Islamic identity by removing all references to Islam in the constitution and this is their motivation in seeking the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from power. This indicates both that the Brotherhood view democracy as providing them the means to implement political Islam in a way that privileges the majority on the basis of religion. The fact that they view non-Muslims automatically as the enemy of their political project suggests a difficulty with the idea of equality on the basis of religion and is problematic with concepts such as equality of citizens before the law. It is normally taken for granted that such ideas of rights and equality are automatically part of the foundation of a democratic order.

Conclusion

It is certain that the future status of all Egyptians, not only its minorities, is fundamentally linked to the way democracy is interpreted and eventually applied in Egypt (Iskander 2012a p. 191). While the first two narratives examined here have been central to the development of responses to the latest phase of Egypt's crisis that began with the 30 June protests, it is the battle over the religious identity and the future role of religion in Egypt's political system that is once more coming to the fore and framing the challenges that Egypt and its transition to democracy is facing. The narrative is not new and its challenge to Egyptian society and politics predates the January 2011 revolution. It has also been central in all phases of Egypt's transition, as Egyptians addressed what it means to have a Muslim Brotherhood government, what is necessary in a new constitution, what the appropriate role of the army is and how democracy should operate. The main danger of relying on such a binary of 'the state versus religious fascism' is that democracy promotion gets lost in an ideological conflict dominated by two actors, while the diverse range of perspectives and interests that make up Egyptian society is forced to choose sides or withdraw from the transition process altogether. This surely constricts the development of a democratic culture.

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