

The January Revolution and the Future of Egypt

QIAN Xuewen^①

(Middle East Studies Institute, Shanghai International Studies University)

***Abstract:** In January 2011, a revolutionary movement fighting for political democracy broke out in Egypt, influenced by the Jasmine Revolution that had taken place in Tunisia. With the development of the January Revolution, the democratic movement gave way to an unexpected political Islamic movement, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood which has received broad civil support. In the most recent national presidential election on June 23rd – 24th, Mursi, the chairman of The Freedom and Justice Party and Shafiq, the former Prime Minister, became the candidates for the second round of the presidential election. The failure of Ahdab Sabashi, head of Nasser’s side in this competition, shows that the democratization of Egypt still has a long way to go.*

***Key Words:** Egypt; Arab Spring; January Revolution; Democratic Movement*

^① QIAN Xuewen, Professor of Middle East Studies Institute, Shanghai International Studies University. This research is the product of Chinese Educational Ministry program “China’s National Interest in the Middle East (West Asia and North Africa)” (2009JJD810010), Chinese Educational Ministry program “Islamic Middle East Region and the Transition of International System” (08JZD0039), and it is also supported by the Shanghai International Studies University “211” program (Stage III) and Key Discipline of Shanghai (B702).

Early in 2011, mass-anti-government demonstrations, soon referred to as the "Arab Spring" by western countries, broke out one after another in several Arab republics. Some domestic pro-western-style democracy scholars were quite excited about this, eying the events as another 'awakening' of the Arab people. During the course of events, we have seen a rise of political Islam^① (Graham & Fuller, 2003; Denoeux, G., 2002: June; Knudsen, 2003; Ayoob, M., 2004), tending to gain more and more momentum in and around civil society. Regretfully, the Arab democratization process has gone astray, replaced by the movement of political Islam. Although Arab states may hold similar underlying values, they nevertheless differ from each other in terms of their objective conditions, most notably regarding the distribution of oil. The uneven distribution causes great differences between rich and poor within these societies. Egypt, as a regional power amongst Arab countries, has always played an important role in the development of the Middle East., taking Egypt as a primary example, this paper will analyze the past and future of the democratization process, so as to obtain a more complete view of those democratization processes taking place across the wider Arab region.

Causes for the Democratic Movement in Egypt

Egypt was one of the first Arab states to launch the national liberation movement in the Middle East after World War II. The military coup d'état led by Nasser's Free Officer's Organization, ended the reign of the Fārūq dynasty, but the following Nasserism denied the awakening of the Egyptian people, insisting that only the military coup d'état of 1952 could be deemed as a revolutionary struggle or

^① Political Islam is a complex and broad concept, i.e. "the pursuit of the theocracy". It suggests that the Islam replaces the government and leads everything.

revolutionary movement. After the January Revolution (This name having been coined by the Egyptian press shortly after its initiation), some scholars proposed that political modernization in Egypt actually began in the 1910s, with Wafd. Over the following 50 years, the movement tended to focus on national independence and democratic constitutionalism. The movement had three main aims: democracy, independence and progress. The Anti-imperialist outline was initially proposed to be set up after the Bandung Conference in April 1952. Although Egypt had made significant progress in many aspects during the Nasser period, the political Islamic forces reappeared as a result of the outlawing of the organization, its associations and forced cancellation of all forms of their political life. During the course of the following 10 years after 1955, the Nasser regime politically leaned towards the former Soviet Union and tended to further the secularization of the nation's ideology gaining military support to deal with the Israeli threat. Suffering a stunning defeat in the Six-Day War in 1967, Nasser 'got tough-on' the Muslim Brotherhood which caused the Muslim brotherhood to radicalize (Ding, L., 2011). Such policy continued during the Sadat and Mubarak periods even going so far so to worsen the situation.

Between 1967 and 2011, the regional power that Egypt held began to fade away due to liberal globalization and the US's Middle Eastern strategy. For example, after the separate peace deal struck with Israel in 1978, Egypt, the previous head of the Arab states, gradually lost much of its influence in the region to Saudi Arabia, America's important ally.

In terms of economic development, during the Nasser period, Egypt implemented an effective economic and social system. Nasser actively promoted industrialization, in the hope of Egypt getting rid of its colonial status as a cotton exporter. The social income distribution system benefited both the growing middle class and the ordinary people at that time. However Sadat and Mubarak carried out a bold reform, setting up an economic system which guaranteed

companies, among which, most were imperial monopolistic, capitalist processors, the right to pursue their greater interests while ordinary people barely benefited from it at all. Therefore, the fast increasing development rate acclaimed by the World Bank for 30 years meant nothing. Instead, it intensified social inequality, causing the unemployment rate to surge while lying in the midst of a hard hitting the crisis.

As a matter of fact, early before the Arab Spring, lots of evidence indicated that the January Revolution was unavoidable. For instance, some farmers struggled tenaciously to maintain their own land rights and interests due to the land capitalization of 2007; many Arab laborers went on strike frequently because of their replacement by Asian laborers in some oil-producing countries; within the middle classes, several democratic societies began to appear. Considering all of the above, all of the necessary social conditions for an extensive political revolution in Arab countries were present. The revolution took place just before the threshold.

Some western countries claimed that: the western-style democratic system could keep Egypt and other Arab states from turning into politically Islamic countries. However to the contrary, with time, the movement once thought as fighting for "democracy" and "justice" began to look more and more like political Islam.

The Basic Forces and the Goal of the January Revolution

There are four main basic forces at play: the one million young men standing for democratic reform who are the daring vanguard who started the demonstrations in this revolution; the radical leftists; the democratic middle classes and the Muslim brotherhood who actively argued for political Islam. They thought that the demonstrations could have been quashed in the first four days, so they first appealed to boycott the demonstrations but soon joined the movement when they found out that there were 15 million people involved.

The young men and the leftists came up with three common goals:

to establish a democratic system and end the Mubarak dictatorship; to improve the economy and set up more policies that will benefit the mass and object to the Neo-Liberal Economic Policy; to carry out an independent foreign policy and no longer succumb to hegemonism and the US's global strategy. Afterwards, this revolution became an anti-imperialism socialist democratic movement. But the middle class showed that they would not deny the current "market" organism or any international relationships (Samir, A., 2011), but fight only for political democracy.

Not only Egyptians but all the Arab people seem to show a special preference for socialism. During the socialist heyday of the world in the 1960s, Arabs insisted that only they had the real socialism i.e. Islamic Socialism, because the prophet Mohammed told his followers that wealth belonged to all, private possession was a crime, which of course supplied socialism with material guarantee in the form of petrodollars.

The January Revolution was soon met with the entire Egyptian population's response. People didn't flinch by the Mubarak government's quash, causing more than 1000 deaths; instead, more and more people joined the demonstrations on the street.

It then occurred to the western world that this was a in lifetime opportunity to interfere with the Middle East's affairs and then gain control over it. For 30 years of his administration, Mubarak had tacitly cooperated with the western countries, not through permanent friendships but rather interests; one should give up when it's the time. It was the same case with the Egyptian military. It refused to crack down on the demonstrations immediately. They abandoned Mubarak completely and to make matters worse, sent him mercilessly to the courts.

Three kinds of people made up of the basis of the January Revolution: workers, farmers and the urban poor. Among them, there were around 5 million workers, whose participation was quite vital because they had set up more than 50 independent labor unions since 2007 through a series of strikes. The participation of the farmers enlarged the revolutionary power and brought the movement to its

climax. There was also a large population of urban poor, they not only took part in the demonstrations, but also served in the neighborhood committee claiming it as a "Defend Revolution"

With the development of the January Revolution, a question was raised between the democratic forces and the Islamic allies represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, that is to say, who could really support the people from the bottom of society? And, who could get the most effective support from them? There are 5 major socialist parties in Egypt: the Egypt Socialist Party, the People's Alliance for Democracy, the democrats, the Social Revolutionary Party; the Communist Party of Egypt. These parties allied with each other and decided to fight for the common goal. At the same time, all the involved political forces including all the socialist parties, democratic parties, independent labor unions, farmer organizations, youth associations and social institutions set up a new National Assembly, which consisted of 150 members. But the Muslim Brotherhood and the right parties refused to join, strongly asserting their stand by objecting to the democratic movement but at the same time supporting the Political Islamic movement (Ali, L., 2012).

The Obstructions in the Democratic Movement

Not everyone agreed with the January Revolution, and there was no surprise at all of the existence of the oppositions, which were mainly organized and led by the bourgeoisie. Samir Amin, an Egyptian Leftist scholar, director of the Third World Forum and head of the Alternative Road Forum, held that these people were not the so-called thousands of innovative entrepreneurs stated by the World Bank, but the zillionaires who made much of their fortune by colluding the apparatus of the state. They were the comprador forces. They, being the absolute ally of America (Omulu, A., 2012: May 13), actively promoting that Egypt should join the "imperial globalization". Among them, there were head officers from the army or the police; the civilian workers closely related to the government and the ruling party (the national democrats) and the frenetic and radical clergy.

Word from the press was that almost all the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood were billionaires. Many from the bourgeoisies were small and medium-sized entrepreneurs dealing with processing agent businesses. They were under the control of local monopoly groups who were at the mercy of foreign monopoly forces. As a result of which, only these people, as victims of the privileged comprador system and suffering long-term compression, showed preference to the democratic revolution and hoped that it could change the social circumstances.

Rich farmers made up the anti-democracy forces in rural areas in Egypt. They were the benefitters of land reforms under Nasser and superseded the previous big landlord classes. The agricultural cooperative policy launched during the Nasser era, combined the small farmers and the rich ones. It set up corresponding restricted clauses in case the rich farmers suppressed small ones, appropriate precautions for the government to take. But these clauses were abolished under the suggestion of the World Bank during the Sadat and Mubarak period, which enabled the rich farmers merger to weed out the small farmers at an even faster pace. The rich farmers colluding with the conservative forces was an infamous event in the modern history of Egypt. Unexceptionally, being the main supporters of the Political Islamic movement, they controlled all rural areas and held close relations with the upper classes of politics and religion. What is more, among the urban middle class, many people had been rich farmers or were born into rich farmers' families.

These varying political forces were widespread throughout Egypt. Shortly after the breakout of the January Revolution, The Egyptian military made an announcement that they refused to crack down but were going to remain "neutral". While it was not the truth, the cabinet controlled by the military took a series of measures to prevent the further development of the movement for the sake of social security and stabilization. For instance, they set up a series of clauses which went against the strikes and put strict limitations on organizing new associations or parties. The former were under the pretext of protecting and restoring economy and the later to ensure that the

previous Islamic parties still enjoyed the right to put forward candidates for the presidential election. With the further development of the democratic movement, some democrats started to worry about some phenomenon. Though Mubarak had stepped down and went to trial several times, there were only some cosmetic changes in the system. The new leaders were the same ones from the old, the police were well-preserved and none of the police chiefs were charged by the law. Though the National Democratic Party was dismissed by the Supreme Court, people believed that it would soon re-emerge on the political stage however going by another name (Akram, H., 2012: May 18).

The Muslim Brotherhood

During the latest Mubarak period, the Muslim Brotherhood was legalized and was allowed to develop its own forces within limits. Later on however, it was entrusted with an important post to be in charge of education, judiciary and television departments. People thought that the radical Muslim Brotherhood was neither moderate nor democratic. It was constructed as such: the leader proclaimed himself, the whole organization was based on the principle of absolute obedience and execution of the orders of the leaders; all the leaders were millionaires; financial resources mainly came from Saudi Arab and America. The periphery part was the radical middle class of people, with a characteristic of being folly and obeying blindly; the basis was the mass, recruited through charity events held by the religious associations. Armed personnel were hired, most of whom were lumpen-proletarians (Abu, F., 2012: April 9).

The supreme political outline of the Muslim Brotherhood is to rule the country by Islamic law, so as to establish a true Islamic state (Ding, L., 2011). Ironically, according to America's Greater Middle East Initiative, its strategic goal was not to establish an Islamic regime but to carry out its western-style system. Obviously, the political views of the Muslim Brotherhood were inconsistent with its strategic goals, but according to Arab News Press on May 24, 2012, the

Obama administration had made clear that America would be willing to cooperate with any Egyptian president elected democratically, which actually paved the way for the Muslim Brotherhood who might then take control over the country.

There is a saying in the Arab countries that all would change. If the Muslim Brotherhood won the election eventually, we could buy that all would change just like the Palestinian Hamas. The Muslim Brotherhood would accept the American's global strategy and the military deployment in Middle East in order to improve its image in America and become an ally of America. As a matter of fact, America came with an intention, it hoped that the legislation of the "long term anti-terrorists" would be truly recognized by Muslims so America wouldn't become the target of public criticism by the Islamic forces. Whether America likes it or not, in the minds of Muslims, the real aim of this revolution was: control of the world militarily; ensuring America-Europe and Japan to enjoy the world's resources exclusively; and to spread "Islamic threat theory" (Abdullah, H., 2012).

In terms of economy, Muslim Brotherhood represented the comprador bourgeoisie, therefore, it favored a market economy, nor did it object to Neo-Liberal Economic Policy nor did it rely upon foreign aid. However it denied resolutely the strike or the struggle for land rights.

Frustration of the Democratic Parties

Seeing the political influence of the Muslim Brotherhood increase, the democratic parties felt frustrated and outraged for not getting enough attention and support from the western countries. They felt that America and the Europe Union were unwilling to see Egypt achieve democratization, because a democratic Egypt would definitely doubt the Neo-Liberal Economic Policy and their military intention, which could explain why America spared no efforts to support the Muslim Brotherhood effortlessly.

Since its establishment in 1927, the Muslim Brotherhood has

gained favors from the old colonial countries and the feudal dynasty; it therefore became the enemy of the democrats. As for some Islamic radical forces or organizations, the western countries never drew a line according to justice but their own interests and needs. They would supply weapons, capital for the Taliban or al-Qaeda if necessary, calling them the fighters for freedom, however to the contrary, they could also regard them as the Islamic terrorists.

The democrats also held that, America, Saudi Arabia and Israel had been playing important roles on the Middle East stage since the 1970s. These three countries came together with their own national interests but with a common goal: they all didn't want to see the rise of a democratic Egypt. The reasons for this were as follows: Saudi Arabia worried that it would challenge its and the other gulf countries' status; Israel was afraid of Egypt reuniting the Arab people to force it to recognize a Palestinian state; America feared that Egypt might become the obstacle of its global strategy.

Therefore since the breakout of the January Revolution, the three countries had looked forward to the failure of the democratic movement. They would be happy to see the Islamic regime led by the Muslim Brotherhood, which would be the best way to control Egypt for good. While the democrats were struggling for a longer time for a democratic transition so as to make themselves politically clear to the ordinary people, Obama made the decision: the transition should be concise and organized, and should hold a national election. The democrats regarded it as the way to ensure the intended success for Islam. They lamented that such an election was not the best solution for the establishment of democracy but the best to end it (Abdullah, S., 2012).

The Ideological Debate during the Democratic Movement

The focus was mainly on article II in the Old Constitution: The Islamic laws were the resources for the national legislation, which was

concerned with the political system of Egypt. Neither the 1923 Constitution nor that of the 1953 Nasser Constitution mentioned this point, which was added by President Sadat under the pressure of America, Saudi Arabia and Israel. America suggested "respect for the tradition"; Saudi Arabia proposed to "replace Constitution with the *Koran*"; Israel held that "Israel is a Jewish state", namely, Egypt is an Islamic country. As for this, the Muslim Brotherhood firmly supported it. It first wished to establish theocracy, then proposed to set up an "Islamic Scholars Committee", in charge of checking whether all the articles conform with the Islamic laws. From America's attitude and standpoint, it aimed to establish an Islamic regime not a democratic one, because the former could ensure that Egypt can still be under the control of America but the other might not accept the subordinate status of Egypt.

The Egyptians also argued heatedly over the challenges confronted by the Islamic "culture". After several weeks of free discussion, the slogan of "Islam solving the problem" was replaced by some specific request over social reform, for example: freedom for comment, for the foundation of a party or labor union; work, land and education rights; abolishment of privatization and implementation of nationalization etc.

The Future Political Mode of Egypt

At one time, the Turkish model was the heated topic because of the possibility of the Muslim Brotherhood organizing the cabinet. However the "secular regime" of Turkey was guaranteed by military force, and supported by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Therefore, America wanted to establish a "Palestinian style system": the Islamic army takes a back seat and the "elected" Islamic parties are in charge of appointing the cabinet. Such kind of government would of course neither object the Neo-Liberal Economic Policy nor plot to overthrow the Peace Treaty which was good to the territorial

expansion of Israel, but devote itself to the national and political Islamization. Such kind of a model would have been easy to obtain financial support from Saudi Arabia with, which has always been striving to be the head of the Arab and Muslim world; in addition, it would do good to both America who gave 1.5 billion dollars to Egypt and Egypt itself. Such a model might be practical but also comes at severe costs, possibly leading to catastrophic violent confrontations.

Recently (June 23 to 24) Egypt held the first presidential election after the January Revolution. The top two vote-getters were Mursi, chairman of Freedom and Justice Party and Shafiq, the former Prime Minister. Mursi was one of the leading members of the bureau, guiding the supreme decision-making institution for the Muslim Brotherhood; while Shafiq, to some degree, represented the force of the previous regime. Neither of them won over 50% of the vote during the first election, there were still severe competitions awaiting them in the middle of June 2012. If either of them were to win the election, will both of them influence the political development of Egypt? The failure of Ahdad Sabashi from the Nasser party indicated that the democratization of Egypt still has a long way to go.

Conclusion

Both the democratic movements and the current political systems of the Arab world vary from one to another. Most of the monarchies transited smoothly and peacefully while it was not the case with the republics. The Tunisian Revolution ignited the fuse, which greatly encouraged the Egyptian people and led to the January Revolution. Libya was neither like Tunisia nor Egypt, whose political parties have nothing in common but are more likely to fight for their own tribal interests. The Syrian crisis is the important part of "Arab Spring", and there remain many disagreements both openly and secretly over the Syrian issue. In conclusion, western countries hate seeing the development and democratization of developing countries. It seems

suspicious of their true intentions to interfere with other countries' domestic affairs. Currently, the Arab countries want democracy and refuse to step back, which undoubtedly holds tremendous realistic significance for the future of the democratic movement.

References

- Abdullah, H.(2012). *The status quo and the future of political Islam in Egypt (Arabic version)*. Cairo: Knowledge Tract Society.
- Abdullah, S. (2012). The analysis of culture in the Egyptian revolution. Cairo: *Democracy*. No.46. (Arabic edition).
- Abu, F. (2012: April 9). Divisive elements in the political Islamic thought in Egypt. Cairo: *International Politics* (Arabic version).
- Akram, H. (2012: May 18). The influence of Egyptian Presidential candidate. Cairo: *International Politics* (Arabic version).
- Ali, L. (2012). The provisions and change in the Egyptian Constitution. Cairo: *Democracy*, No.46. (Arabic version).
- Ding, L. (2011). Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's rise and its impact. Beijing: *International Politics Studies*. No.4.
- Graham & Fuller.(2003). The future of political Islam. New York: *Palgrave*.
- Denoeux., G. (2002: June). The forgotten swamp: Navigating political Islam. *Middle East Policy*.
- Knudsen. (2003). Political Islam in the Middle East.
- Ayood, M. (2004). Political Islam: Image and reality. *World Policy Journal*.
- Omulu, A. (2012: May 13) The factors of US in the Egyptian elections. Cairo: *International Politics* (Arabic version).
- Samir, A. (2011). The root causes and future of political instability in the Arab region. Translated by Gao Lu. Beijing: *Foreign Theoretical Trend*. No.9.