Hala Mustafa

Egypt: From a Closed System to an Open One

The process of democratization is not just about constitutional amendments, free elections or rather frenzied efforts to understand the political and cultural values that dominate the political scene in the region. It also entails the will and perseverance needed to bridge the gap between closed and open systems. There is always a time when a given political system heads for change – a critical moment when burgeoning changes may reach a point of no return, pushing some people forward and pulling others back. At the same time there is a moment of perplexity where the aim is to preserve and secure the status quo irrespective of its capability and strength to change or renovate itself. However, this is not a peculiar or exceptional state of events but rather a rule involving most systems however different their reactions to the challenges and responses of change.

The Middle East may be experiencing this latter type of reaction to change. It is probably a moment whose rhythms, contents and trends vary from case to case. The change that is meant here is, of course, the one of democratization. No one would claim that moving towards democracy is an easy task, or that the expected results will be ideal, especially in a region that has its own particular structures.

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Middle Eastern Features

The Middle East has very special features that may render the democratization process more complex than in any other part of the world. Most Middle Eastern societies can be identified as falling into a transitional era, in between what is by definition old or new, modern or traditional. Indeed, these differences can be easily observed within individual Middle Eastern societies and not only between them. The political, cultural, societal and productive systems generally vary to a certain degree in each individual case. The states' structures also vary both according to the degree of their institutional development and ability to perform their basic functions, and according to their capacity to achieve national integration, that is, establishing the concept of citizenship and transcending the primary familial, clan and tribal loyalties. They vary also in their ability to put into practice and win recognition for the concept of public order and thus cause factional phenomena to disappear. Such phenomena in some cases reach the level of armed struggle connected with the existence of armed political factions that transcend the system and challenge it; they are now commonly called militias.

This region has also been through the experience of radical political Islam, which has expressed itself in well-organized movements and groups, some of them armed; they imposed themselves forcefully on the political scene for more than three consecutive decades. The means of integrating or confronting such groups still represents one of the major challenges facing programs of political and democratic development in the Arab world. In other words, the rise and spread of such socio-political movements reflects a dilemma particular to the region, the increasing interaction (which has become violent in some cases) between politics and religion. Moreover, the nature of the political projects which have marked the region, defined its orientations and determined its political, cultural and social life over the past five decades, constitutes yet another specificity, posing many problems on more than one level. Let us turn now to the subject of the moment of change.

Moments of Change

The region has been through several ideological phases in its modern history. The first phase, that of liberalism, characterized the 1920s and 1930s. That era was seen as the direct outcome of the renaissance which lasted from the end of the 18th century to the dawn of it. It was followed by the second phase, the phase of Arab nationalism with a socialist orientation. It had its own ideology, rooted in Arab nationalism and Ba'thist Socialism. This movement was in harmony with the rise of the socialist tide in the 1950s and the nature of the international order, apart from it being associated with the liberation movements that came into being throughout the world in the same period.

However, we are not concerned with evaluating these experiments or the Arab nationalist and socialist experience, because each historical stage has its own motives, justifications and political and objective context, irrespective of how it is judged. But, we should assess the impact of such experiences on the present situation from the point of view of political and democratic development.

The major tasks and priorities of that time were directed to confronting the outside world. During the fifties, internal politics – and at its core democracy and freedom – was not on the agenda, which is in contrast with the priorities of the current phase of transformation. Therefore, there is an urgent need to set our priorities anew. However, reviewing the agenda should not be limited to this particular point but should embrace the whole political structure, the legal and legislative institutions, along with the political culture which was developed through the various media and forms of education dominating that era. The political experience of the past will always be there as a controlling factor in our attempts to understand and explain many of the complexities surrounding the operation of democratic change and the move towards establishing plurality and a multiparty system on the basis of the rule of law, a climate of freedom and the guaranteeing of civil rights in the public and private spheres. This past experience was based on doing away with such concepts and replacing them with a single political organization which did not reach the standard of a political party in its modern definition, whether in its process of formation, or in its membership and possession of a clear political program. It was closer to a political «front» aiming to assemble rather than represent different political trends.

Political Structures

This single organization generally relied more on the security establishment than on the political institutions. That is, the system gave priority to security considerations to preserve the status quo, despite their negative impact on the system's vitality and ability to evolve in parallel with the changes taking place on the internal and external scenes. These features created and affirmed certain political traditions hard to overcome through partial measures. For they have extended deep into the core of the political, legislative and legal structure as well as to the recruitment of the political elites and technocrats in the political and media establishments. They have also been responsible for the existence of a political mentality which is not necessarily able to cope with the requirements of a free and plural political system.

It was not a historical coincidence that the past experiment lacked both real political institutions, capable of taking initiatives or participating in the decision-making process, and a free press that valued freedom of speech and plurality. It was also no coincidence that most of the laws and legislation associated with that experiment reflected the same unilateral trend, consequently causing political participation to decrease and passivity, in-

difference and aversion to involvement in public life to spread. In return other forms of participation appeared, based on mobilization rather than free choice. In addition, a sizable section of the new generations was forced to find platforms outside the party context where they could express themselves politically. Their main method was to take refuge in religion. The religiously colored opposition thus became about the only alternative capable of expressing itself out loud in the absence of natural political channels that could allow other political and intellectual trends to take an active part in political life.

The continuation of this political structure explains why when Egypt readopted political and party pluralism from the mid 1970s on, this was defined as a 'controlled' experiment. Paradoxically, this period which witnessed relative political openness was the same one when a number of emergency laws and regulations limiting freedoms and abolishing the very domain of pluralism were promulgated. Moreover, the constitutional amendments issued in it also tended in this latter direction (one of these amendments implicitly permitted an unlimited number of terms for the president, in addition to stating that Islam is the major source of legislation for the country). The experiment was even more limited because the media and freedom of opinion were still censored, while the political elite preserved its characteristics and continued to be recruited in the same way. Consequently, that brief experiment led to what is known as the crisis of democratic transformation.

Realms of Reform

For all these reasons, the political and democratic developments cannot be reduced to calls for free elections, because if elections take place in an unsuitable legal, political, and media context, they will only reflect the status quo, which practically means that the needs of democratic change and plurality – also known as constitutional liberalism – have gone unheeded. In this context, reshaping the political experiment to move towards democratic transformation raised se-

veral issues. Major among them is the restructuring of the political, institutional and media structures, in addition to the carrying out of legal and legislative revisions, which is a fundamental complement. Overall reform means the need to:

- reform the legal and legislative systems, eliminating emergency laws and regulations, and redrawing the party map so as to allow for the existence of real active parties providing a competitive basis through which the democratization process can be developed;

- restructure the cultural and media institutions to enhance trends of pluralism and overcome the rhetoric of mobilization which has only produced a censored, not a free press;

- activate the political organizations, infusing them and their leadership with new blood, to bring them out of the long stagnation which they suffered from in the shadow of the one-party system;

- renew the political elite, which should play a leading role in the process of the political development of society. It thus needs to be more open-minded and able to express the needs for change. Its base should also be expanded, no longer hampered by security and administrative-bureaucratic considerations in recruiting new members. These considerations, dominant during the decades of the one-party experience, were responsible for keeping highly qualified politicians at a distance; thus they were prevented from playing an active role in the process of constructing society. It is a question not of a revolution but of a transition from the 'absolute' to the 'relative' method. If those considerations were dominant for so long, scope should now be given to new and different supporting elements to lend greater credit to the existence of real development;

- develop a new political discourse, speaking with a different language and using different terms from those of the past. There are terms which the current political vocabulary has abandoned and others which have been overtaken by events. Political speech or language is like a living language that cannot be regenerated or cloned. If it does not change and adapt to the new reality, it will loose its content and appeal;

- give ample opportunity for new political forces to emerge and develop, reflecting the needs of

the new generations. Such a trend will leave behind the one-party period of the past when the political system enabled only Islamic forces to occupy the wider political arena, presenting themselves as the sole alternative to the system.

Islamic Forces

The political crisis of the past three decades which has revealed the extreme impoverishment of the elite and the political and intellectual forces in society cannot be reduced to the simple equation of whether or not to integrate the Islamists. It goes far beyond that, raising the question of how to put an end to the ongoing polarization between the administrative bureaucracy, on the one hand, and the Islamic forces on the other, as a means to open up new possibilities for other political trends to be represented. The issue of the Islamists' representation has not aroused interest in the corresponding issue of the integration and representation of liberal factions on the individu-

al, organizational or party levels in political life. The liberal tendency has been marginalized and has suffered injustice in the past, despite the fact that it was the major political trend contributing to the region's resurgence. Traditions of liberalism in the legal, constitutional and political spheres still enrich many experiments of Arab civil society. A quick look at the current political scene in the Arab World shows that the trends associated with the dominant ideology of the past, whether Arab nationalism or political Islam, are the only ones permitted to grow, orientate public opinion and monopolize political discourse, while others are marginalized.

Finally, two major issues remain, connected with how to rethink the interaction between what is defined as 'security' in the strict sense and what is 'politics,' and also between 'religion' and 'politics'. Open and free debate about such vital issues and re-examining the 'old' foundations of the 'old' experiment, can guarantee that the gap will be bridged from a closed system to an open one.
<div align="right">revised by Hilary Waardenburg-Kilpatrick</div>

Jasmina El-Sonbati, Mein Ägypten

Abreisen

Mein Aufenthalt ist bald vorbei, ich muss wieder zurück. Zurück in die beschauliche Schweiz, wo alles funktioniert, wo es sauber ist und wo niemand wirklich hungert. Dennoch. Ich habe den Blues, bevor ich richtig abreise. «Die Zeit ist so schnell vergangen, wann kommst du denn für immer nach Ägypten zurück?», meint meine Nachbarin wehmütig. Für immer? Es ist schwierig zurückzukommen, aber es ist unmöglich, fern zu bleiben Und während ich meine Koffer packe, die Möbel zudecke, fege ich mit einem Schweizer Besen die Strassen Kairos sauber von Bevormundung, von Unfreiheit und von Dreck. Im Gegenzug fülle ich Säcke mit ägyptischer Herzlichkeit und Gastfreundschaft und schütte sie über die Schweiz. «Du weisst doch, Tante, ich komme bald wieder», vertröste ich uns beide. Dabei würde ich gerade jetzt bleiben, so allmählich habe ich

May Telmissany, L'oasis

moins nostalgique du temps de mon enfance que du lieu de mon enfance. Un lieu qui ne cesse de se mouvoir, de se déraciner, de se calquer sur d'autres lieux et d'autres époques. Un lieu qui surprend ma mémoire en flagrant délit de sentimentalité, que Dieu nous préserve tous! Ce lieu mouvant et mouvementé est devenu mon pays. Quand j'y retourne, je suis dépaysée, démunie de mes souvenirs et confrontée à une réalité assaillante, beaucoup plus banale, décevante, épuisante. Cependant, j'y retourne et je nourris mon souvenir de nouvelles images, de nouvelles sensations. En me disant que tout est à refaire, tout est à rêver de nouveau.

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mich an die Verhältnisse heran gelebt. Ich muss gehen, aber ich komme wieder, in mein Ägypten.