



Egypt Adrift

CAIRO'S TAHRIR SQUARE HAS PROVIDED SOME of the most arresting images of 2011. The latest one was particularly shocking – a woman lying on her back, her black abaya pulled over her head exposing a blue bra and otherwise bare upper half of her body, which was being stomped upon repeatedly by Egyptian security forces.

The outrage was such that the ruling Supreme Command of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which had initially pooh-poohed the matter, issued a belated apology, while more than 10,000 Egyptian women, in both Western and traditional garb, marched in protest against ongoing abuses by the authorities. Protected by a bevy of men, the “spirit of Tahrir,” the widespread social solidarity that had cut across class, religion and gender and had been crucial in toppling Hosni Mubarak from power at the beginning of the year, seemed to have been momentarily recaptured.

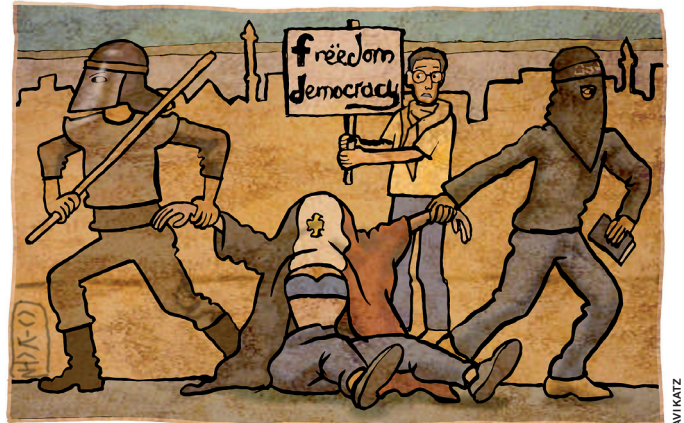
The bigger picture, however, is that Egypt is adrift, in which competing social and political forces are jockeying to shape the post-Mubarak order, and whose outcome is anything but certain.

Back in Egypt’s “liberal age,” the decades before the 1952 Free Officers’ coup which propelled Gamal Abdel Nasser to power, political life was pluralist, lively and extremely unstable. It was marked by a three-cornered struggle between the monarchy and allied parties, the more mass-based nationalist Wafd party, and British representatives, who wielded preponderant power until the end of World War II.

Over time, the nominally democratic system of government lost its legitimacy, owing to massive corruption, fraud and poor performance, while extra-parliamentary associations and youth movements, from the Muslim Brotherhood to the fascist-oriented Young Egypt, undermined the existing order. Much of Cairo’s central business district was torched on January 26, 1952, in response to the killing by British troops of 50 auxiliary Egyptian policemen a day earlier in Ismailia. Six months later, Nasser and his cohort of junior officers brought an end to the era, to widely popular acclaim.

Sixty years and four presidents later (Naguib, Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak), the Egyptian military is still in charge, but is no longer unchallenged. Egypt’s latest three-cornered political competition involves the military and remnants of the former ruling National Democratic Party; the powerful Islamist current, which between the veteran Muslim Brotherhood and newcomer Salafi movement garnered between 60 and 70 percent of the votes in the recent two rounds of parliamentary elections (the third and final one will be held this month); and Egypt’s liberal elements, including its Coptic minority and youth activists, who were trounced in the elections, winning a total of only 20 percent of the votes.

The new parliament, once it is seated, is supposed to write a new constitution, something that promises to be a highly charged affair. In fact, it already has been for many months. SCAF representatives clearly would like the constitution to preserve the army’s privileged status as the guardian of the state (see Kemalist Turkey, or modern-day Pakistan), which would also preserve its large economic holdings in both the civilian and military sectors.



Liberals are torn between their outrage over SCAF’s behavior and their concern that Islamist-dominated civilian rule will give short shrift to protecting basic freedoms, including for minorities and women. The Muslim Brotherhood, for its part, is on the verge of a historic victory, more than 80 years after its founding and almost continuous repression, and is thus unwilling to challenge the SCAF too strongly.

For example, the Brotherhood opposes the call of other parties to move up the scheduled date of presidential elections from June to January, so as to advance the transfer of power to civilian hands. At times, in fact, the Brotherhood’s reticence to challenge the SCAF has been so pronounced as to damage its image among ordinary Egyptians, and has driven some erstwhile Brotherhood supporters into the arms of the “more honest,” and more militant, Salafis.

While the Egyptian public’s desire for an accountable, elected government is genuine, large segments are also tired of the unrest and well aware of the economic damage being wrought. Indeed, the overall economic picture is grim. Foreign currency reserves have dropped by \$2 billion a month since the beginning of the year, which may eventually result in a sharp depreciation of the Egyptian pound and higher inflation, which has already accelerated to 9.1% annually, and 50% in the food sector. Crucial tourism revenues fell 33%. Unemployment is at its highest rate in a decade (officially, 11.9%, unofficially, much higher). The economy grew at a rate of just 1.2% in 2011, and the projected growth rate for 2012, 3.1%, is far short of the 6% necessary for the kind of job creation required for Egypt’s young and restless population. Most telling of all is that almost 90% of Egyptian households have an annual income of less than \$1,000, and only 3% have more than \$2,000.

Debt forgiveness by the US and international loans will be crucial for Egypt in the coming year, but cannot, by themselves, provide the answers for Egypt’s economic woes. Indeed, there may be no such answers. Egypt’s leaders, whether civilian or military, will thus be hard-pressed to deliver on their promises for a better life, materially and spiritually, and Egyptian political life is likely to remain fraught with tension. This, in turn, will continue to limit Egypt’s ability to play its traditional, self-defined role as the leader of the Arab world. •

The writer is the Marcia Israel Principal Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University.