



Volume 5, Number 9

May 11, 2011

Polling Post-Mubarak Egypt

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

It has been just a few months since the dramatic downfall of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, after nearly three decades of autocratic and unchallenged rule. The euphoria of the Tahrir Square "revolution" has certainly worn off, and the inevitable social and political conflicts have begun to emerge. Interestingly, even as Egyptians now face the enormous task of constructing a political order that can begin to cope with the country's deep-seated problems, they retain a considerable degree of optimism.

This more positive outlook on the future was expressed in face-to-face interviews conducted with 1,000 adults in Egypt between March 24 and April 7, 2011, by the reputable Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, with the margin of error being four percent. Sixty-five percent reported that they were satisfied with the way things were going in the country, while 34 percent were not, a complete reversal from the previous year. While many issues concerned them – foremost among them corruption, the lack of democracy, and the lack of economic prosperity – 57 percent declared that they were optimistic about the future of the country, while only 16 percent proclaimed themselves pessimistic (26 percent said they were neither).

This sense of optimism was expressed, albeit more cautiously, with regard to the Egyptian economy. Only one-third of the public thought the economy was at least somewhat good, but this was an improvement from 20 percent in 2010. Moreover,

twenty-two percent stated that they thought the economy would improve “a lot” in the coming year, while 34 percent believed it would improve “a little.” Only 17 percent thought that it would worsen. Given the damage to the economy, at least in the short-term, caused by the Tahrir uprising, this optimism apparently was due to the belief that the removal of senior corrupt officials and the establishment of a more legitimate leadership would help improve the economy.

The survey also sheds light on the Egyptian public's thinking on a variety of specific issues. With Egyptian political life now being revived, and on the way towards being more genuinely contested on a level that hasn't been seen since the 1952 Free Officer's coup put an end to multi-party politics, measuring public opinion certainly has more value. It also carries more potential implications for policy directions than in the past.

Egyptians appear to genuinely want democracy, although their understanding of the notion doesn't always conform to the way it is understood in the West, particularly with regard to matters involving religion. Seventy-one percent declared that democracy was preferable to any other kind of government, with only 17 percent opposed, and 64 percent said that a democratic system was the best way to solve the country's problems, as opposed to relying on a leader with a strong hand, a view which garnered 34 percent. (Four years earlier the public was split nearly evenly on the subject.) Regarding Egypt's future, fully 95 percent believed that it was very important or somewhat important that honest elections be held regularly with a choice of at least two political parties; 79 percent believed it very important that there be a judicial system which treated everyone the same way (an additional 18 percent declared it somewhat important). Sixty-three percent believed it very important that anyone could criticize the government and another 30 percent believed it somewhat important. Tellingly, a majority (54 percent) stated that they preferred a democratic Egypt even at the risk of some political instability, while 32 percent preferred a stable government even at the risk that it would not be fully democratic. Over 60 percent viewed -- as very or somewhat important -- proposition that the military be under the control of civilian leaders. Even when asked to choose between a good democracy and a strong economy, the split was almost 50-50, a substantial improvement for the democracy option from previous years.

However, the respondents' understanding of what makes a good democracy is somewhat problematic. Sixty-two percent favored holding presidential and

parliamentary elections as soon as possible, so that a new government could take office quickly, while only 36 percent favored delaying the elections so that political parties could have enough time to organize. This is, in fact, the path chosen by the transitional ruling military council. It is a formula preferred by those groups that possess substantial organizational capacities, namely the former ruling NDP (now officially banned, but clearly capable of reorganizing under a new banner, and shorn only of its most obvious heads), and the country's venerable Islamist movement, the long-banned, and newly legalized Muslim Brotherhood. None of the other existing parties have a mass following, while the savvy and sophisticated organizational methods of the April 6th movement, the leaders of the Tahrir uprising, are proving difficult to apply in more ordinary, long-term political operations. Interestingly, when asked which party they preferred to lead the new government, no party received more than 20 percent: the Muslim Brotherhood received 17 percent and the NDP 10 percent, while other small parties, which would benefit from delaying the elections, received a combined 46 percent (25 percent refused to specify any preference).

For Egyptians, it is clear that religion, and religious parties, should play a significant role in public life. Eighty-eight percent stated that it was very or somewhat important that religious parties be allowed to be part of the government, while 62 percent stated that laws should strictly follow the teachings of the Qur'an; another 27 percent stated that laws should follow the values and principles of Islam, but not strictly follow the Qur'an's teachings. Over 80 percent felt that religious leaders were having a positive influence on the way things were going in the country. Seventy-five percent held a very or somewhat favorable image of the Muslim Brotherhood; interestingly, the numbers were similar for the April 6th movement and even higher with regard to the military, indicating that Egyptians were still basking in the glow of the national unity engendered in Tahrir Square.

Whereas religion is deemed a central pillar for the country's social and political organization, Muslim Egyptians are divided almost evenly in their views of "fundamentalists" (*usuliyyun*): 31 percent expressed sympathy with them, 30 percent sympathized with those who disagree with them, 11 percent said they sympathized with both and 15 percent with neither. Only more detailed questioning would enable a sorting out of how Egyptians distinguish between the various strands of Islamic thought and practice, particularly with regard to political and social matters.

Two important measures of the depth of democratic values are the views towards minorities and women. With regard to the former, when asked to think about Egypt's future, 36 percent of Egyptian Muslims thought that it was very important that Egyptian Copts, who make up approximately 10 percent of the population, as well as other religious minorities, be allowed to practice their religion; another 48 percent said that it was "somewhat important", while 11 percent said that it wasn't too important, and 2 percent said that it wasn't important at all. Similarly, a decisive majority, 76 percent, thought that it was very or somewhat important (39 and 37 percent, respectively) that women have the same rights as men, while 19 percent thought that it wasn't too important, and 3 percent not at all.

The survey also tested a variety of propositions with regard to Egyptians' views of the U.S. and President Obama, both in general and regarding regional developments. Overall, an overwhelming majority maintain an unfavorable opinion of the U.S. (79 percent), and 62 percent have little or no confidence in Obama. There is greater division with regard to the effect of U.S. actions on Egyptian developments: 39 percent stated that the U.S. response has had a negative impact on their direction, 22 percent said it had a positive one, and 35 percent said neither.

One other foreign policy question was included in the survey: 54 percent favored the annulment of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, while 36 percent favored maintaining it, a sobering result. The Muslim Brotherhood has since called for a review of the treaty, saying it should be resubmitted to a "freely elected" parliament. Normalization with Israel, said its head, Mohamed Badie, should be brought to an end, because it has given "our enemy" stability. In that vein, Egypt, he said, should stop trying to prevent infiltrators from crossing into Israel.

Raising the subject of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty provides one more indication that post-Mubarak Egypt is in the throes of transition. Senior politicians and business tycoons are in prison awaiting trial, including Mubarak's two sons. Former Interior Minister Habib El Adli has already been convicted of various offenses and sentenced to 12 years. Both he and Mubarak himself may well face charges of ordering police to shoot protestors; a conviction that would carry a possible death sentence. Economically, the country's large foreign currency reserves are being drawn down, in the face of a steep decline in the rate of growth, owing to the country's political uncertainty. Sectarian clashes between Muslims and Copts claimed 12 lives over the last weekend in Cairo, and more than a dozen more in earlier incidents.

Senior Egyptian analyst Abdel Moneim Said warned recently that the country's tradition of a centralized, homogeneous and tolerant state was in danger of disintegration. The course by which events in Egypt unfold in the coming months will have major consequences for the whole region. It will be interesting to see the findings of next year's Pew survey of Egyptian opinion.

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman is a senior research fellow of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University.

The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at www.dayan.org, under "Commentary."

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il, with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."