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Much Ambiguity Overshadow Egypt's Future Route After Mubarak^(*)

(Update)

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Encouraged by a somehow successful youth uprising in Tunisia, Egypt's youth – free of any political or religious influence – organized online for the “day of anger” using the virtual social network *Facebook*. It is what came rapidly to materialize into a “Youth Revolution” taking place on January 25, not only in Cairo but also in another 11 main governorates out of the country's 29. Demonstrations initially raised the slogan of “Freedom, Dignity, Humanity” and were greatly admired and joined by various opposition currents.

The soon developed into “public revolution” came to reflect deteriorating domestic conditions and mounting state of instability that Egypt has been experiencing, particularly in the past few years. The main signs of this state were increased levels of unemployment, poverty, widespread corruption, lack of social justice, unclean control of businessmen on wealth and authority, sweeping Islamization of society, and mounting sectarian strife. The failure of state institutions to accommodate and correspond to people's needs has thus created a state of frustration among all segments of society from the ruling regime.

As anger days continued in Egypt, the situation went on in constant deterioration on all fronts.

- Increased street violence between pro and anti government protesters added to the weird opening of central prisons and massive release of approximately 17 thousand prisoners terrorizes ordinary citizens and spreads out chaos all over the country.
- The ugly economic face of the crisis rapidly developed with the dreadful lack of basic alimentary goods, fuel, and people's difficulty in accessing their bank accounts. Furthermore, destruction of properties, departure of foreign investors, fall and consequent closure of stock markets, suspension of all banks, and above all the miserable collapse of tourism came to mark the start of a huge economic crisis that Egypt would experience in the coming period even if a new democratic regime was finally destined to materialize.
- News about endangered open borders with Gaza Strip, Israel's decision to increase troops on its shared border with Egypt, Iran's applause of the ongoing revolution describing it as an Islamic rise, and the peculiar attack on the gas pipeline from Egypt to Israel at its terminal in the Sinai Peninsula are extremely alarming. These events pose endless question marks on the future path of Egypt's future foreign relations and possible implications on its integrity and

The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

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national security in an unknown fate that the long stable country seems now to await in a post-Mubarak era.

As the standoff between the government and the public continued, the fragmentation of the opposition appeared as another main challenge. There has been an evident fragmentation of the opposition, ranging from political parties, socio-political movements, and Islamists, who failed to unite or reach consensus on who should lead the change in post-Mubarak Egypt. Some were supporting the idea of a save-the-nation government that encompasses all opposition currents; some were looking for a decisive role of the army to intervene in favor of the public and safeguard a peaceful transition of authority; some went to support the idea of consenting the newly appointed Vice-president and ex-Intelligence Director, Omar Soliman, to temporarily lead a transitional phase until the next presidential elections of September 2011 take place; and others, were supporting certain individuals that suddenly – if not out of nowhere – appeared on the domestic scene. The talk regards mainly the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed el-Baradei, who came from Vienna where he was staying to join the demonstrations. Also, other individuals started to receive analysts and media attention like Egypt's ex-Foreign Minister and now Secretary General of the Arab League, Amr Moussa; and even Ahmad Zewail, the Egyptian-American Nobel Prize winner in chemistry, who decided to come from the US where he lives and works to – as he claimed – support public demands. Youth themselves, who have initiated this dignified revolution that reflects the legitimate demands of the Egyptian people, could not agree on who represents them. Conflicting wise-men committees were formed to reach a compromise between various opposition groups and the government but without success. It was a revolution without a leader and no leader succeeded to gain enough support or maintain a solid presence on the stage. In aggravation of the situation, the Islamists seemed to be out in full force. They were increasingly visible in the opposition, in various media coverage as well as in vitalizing street anger. They simply appeared to dominate the purity of the youth revolution and cease it for their own private political interests. Even with the recent Muslim Brothers' declaration that they will not run the upcoming presidential elections in September, their current status as a legitimate (rather than banned) political force is indeed a main political gain for the time being.

Even after Mubarak finally stepped down on February 11, there is still no consensus among various national forces on the proper scenario to adopt for a transition phase led and protected by the military. Despite this disagreement, the question that seems to currently dominate the scene is «What after Mubarak?».

In fact, much ambiguity seems to dominate the future of Egypt on both the country's internal and foreign fronts:

- **On the domestic level**, it is not clear that a peaceful transition of authority, and eventually fair parliamentary and presidential elections, would produce a democratic government that would be able to guarantee basic rights and significantly improve the economic conditions of the country. The current domestic scene does not actually suggest a very optimistic vision. Opposition forces are fragile, with poor organization, unclear programs elaborated, and no presidential candidates renowned. Islamists, on the other side, seem more organized and determined to form more than one religiously-inspired political party. So far, Al-Wasat (Center) Party has been established after around 15 years of unsuccessful attempts to emerge, while the Muslim Brothers has declared their intent to form their own "Freedom and Justice" Party. Although, both assure their support for a secular/civic nature of the country, their agendas and future directions are domestically observed with much apprehension. What further fuels public anxiety is the fact that a genuine constitutional amendment assuring the secular/civic nature of the state – which is a guarantor of equal citizenship rights for both Muslims and Christian factions of the country and necessary for authentic democratic practice – has been disregarded by the committee currently working on amending the constitution with the claim that there is not enough time to consider too many constitutional articles. Furthermore, while the youth revolution started by calling for

economic and political reforms, now only political reforms dominate the domestic scene. Issues like raising the minimum limit of wages, controlling high prices of basic goods, and institutionalizing the process of curbing corruption remain topics that appear only in intellectuals' debates while are receiving no government or political parties' attention. Besides, inherent socio-economic and cultural challenges - such as the high level of literacy, prevailing poverty, and absence of dialogue culture - seem to blight a smooth emergence of a democracy.

- **On the external level**, the foreign policy orientation of the next regime is equally a major subject for debate and controversy whether at home or abroad. In specific, the future relations with Israel and a reinvigorated regional role are two key issues for aspiration and concern at the same time. Egypt's historical, and now potential, ability to mobilize the Arab public and regimes has been usually considered an element of power for the Arab unity and, hence, a source of troubles for Israel. The recent reactions of certain regional actors – including Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah – to the collapse of Mubarak's regime indicate that there is now much hope for a new Egyptian foreign policy that pays heed to Arab and Islamic causes compared to narrow Egyptian interests.

It is therefore inevitable that the next regime will have to introduce reforms and adopt a “different” foreign policy outlook to regain people's trust. The authenticity of this new outlook may, however, remain a matter of style rather than substance. It is probable that it would be another version of the “Middle Way” adopted by Mubarak at the beginning of the 1980s, which came to reflect a change of style rather than a substantive modification of foreign policy orientation. Similar to Mubarak, who worked to initiate a “cold peace” with Israel and to detach himself from the United States in his first years of power, the coming regime is expected to take similar steps. For instance, a revision of the Egyptian-Israeli gas deal is expected. The earlier regime's decision to sell Egyptian gas to Israel with prices below market standards has been indeed a blow to the pride of all Egyptians and source of controversy at home. The attack on the gas pipeline's terminal in the Sinai Peninsula on February 5 has brought the entire issue back to the attention of the general public and the political elite.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that with Egypt's strategic location and weight in the wide Arab region, a radical foreign policy agenda would eventually work against Egypt's own national interests. For instance, common wisdom suggests that Egypt's future role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, for instance, should be determined not only by an embrace of the Arab cause, but also by a rational perception of the troubled situation in Gaza, the previous massive in-flow of Palestinians into Sinai, and the role played by Hamas on Egypt's own national security.

In any case, any future scenario for the future path of Egypt's foreign policy suggests that it is now crucial than it has ever been before for the United States, Europe, and key regional powers to dedicate serious effort to settle the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

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