

Egypt: Back Full Circle

DHRUV C KATOCH

A young fruit seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, setting himself ablaze on December 17, 2010, in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia triggered a chain of events that were to reverberate across the Arab world. Bouazizi's protest was symbolic but it caught the imagination of an entire nation. His death on January 4, 2011, led to protests all over Tunisia, forcing President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali to flee the country ten days later. The power of the people ousted a dictator who had ruled Tunisia with an iron fist for 24 years, the revolution rippling beyond Tunisia to affect the entire Arab world¹. Its first impact was on Egypt, where protesters demanded the overthrow of the regime of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Protests in Egypt centred on political and legal issues, with people demanding freedom from repressive laws and seeking a say in the management of the country's resources. Three weeks of protests across the country, with Tahrir Square² as the focal point, left over 800 people dead and about 100,000 injured, forcing President Hosni Mubarak to step down on February 11 and hand over interim power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Called the "Revolution of 25 January"³, (marking the day the protests started), the movement, while centred against state repression, had a varied hue of Islamic, liberal, anti-capitalist, nationalist, and feminist currents.

To presume that the events in Tunisia led to the revolution in Egypt is, however, simplistic. Well before the Tunisian revolution began, Mubarak's head of military intelligence, General Sisi,⁴ delivered a prescient report to the Army's top Generals. The report stated that President Mubarak was preparing to anoint his

younger son, Gamal as Egypt's next President, perhaps as soon as May 2011, on his (Mubarak's) 83rd birthday. It further stated that this would not be acceptable to the people and they would rise up in revolt. As per Sisi's assessment, the internal security forces would prove unequal to the task of reining in the public, forcing President Mubarak to seek the military's help to quell the rebellion. Sisi advised the Army leadership to maintain a neutral stance and not back the President. The anticipated revolt erupted five months earlier, the events in Tunisia acting as a catalyst to the undersurface simmering already prevalent in the country. When the revolt took place, the Army simply executed its plan to go to the streets, moving forward to take advantage of the revolution.⁵

Morsi's authoritarian style of functioning and political ineptitude eroded his public support.

In an attempt to quell dissent, Mubarak dissolved his government, appointing the former head of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate Omar Suleiman as Vice-President and his Aviation Minister and former Chief of Egypt's Air Force, Ahmed Shafiq as Prime Minister. This was to no avail. Mohamed El Baradei became a central figure of the opposition, with all major opposition groups supporting his role as a negotiator for some form of transitional unity government. Mubarak was forced to step down on February 11, 2011. He was tried for various offences and sentenced to life imprisonment on June 02, 2012, on charges of complicity in the murder of protestors.

On November 28, 2011, Egypt went to the polls to elect the People's Assembly, consisting of 498 members. This is the Lower House and the more powerful of Parliament's two chambers. The Upper House called the Shura Council is largely a toothless body. In elections spread across two months, terminating in January 2012, the Islamists emerged as the dominant group in the Lower House.⁶ However, in June, the Supreme Constitutional Court of Egypt dissolved the Islamist-dominated Parliament. In disbanding part of the legislature, the Supreme Constitutional Court upheld a challenge to a series of recent amendments to a 1972 electoral law as being in violation of the existing, provisional Egyptian Constitution, often referred to as the "Constitutional Declaration". The Constitutional Declaration was originally issued in March 2011 by the SCAF, Egypt's effective military rulers, and later amended by the SCAF in September. Article 38 of the Constitutional Declaration, as amended, indicated that two-thirds of the seats of the People's Assembly were to be reserved for political parties, and one-third for independents.⁷ However, as the political parties themselves

put up candidates as independents, this left little room for the latter group. The Supreme Constitutional Court found this latter part unconstitutional, because it permitted party members, undoubtedly with the support of party resources and organisation, to “crowd out” the independents. The decision by the Supreme Constitutional Court – whose judges were appointed by Mubarak – brought into sharp focus the power struggle between the Muslim Brotherhood and the SCAF. This was widely seen as a double whammy to the Muslim Brotherhood, who feared that they would lose much of the political ground they had gained since Hosni Mubarak was ousted. Based on the court ruling, the military dissolved the legislature and seized all law-making and executive authority.

On May 23, 2012, the people of Egypt went to the polls to elect their President, making it the first competitive Presidential election in the country’s modern history. Much hinged on these elections, as the elected President would have to deal with issues of grave import, such as the role of religion and the military in shaping Egypt’s future and the development of relations with major allies such as the United States. The main Islamist contenders were Mohammed Morsi of the powerful Brotherhood and Abdel-Moneim Aboul Fotouh, a 60-year-old moderate Islamist who was jailed under the Mubarak regime and whose inclusive platform was expected to draw the support of some liberals, leftists and minority Christians. Morsi was a member of Parliament in the People’s Assembly of Egypt from 2000 to 2005. A leading member in the Muslim Brotherhood, he became Chairman of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), founded by the Muslim Brotherhood in the wake of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. He was largely an unknown figure, but came into prominence when the Brotherhood’s top choice for the position, chief financier and strategist Khairat el-Shater, was disqualified.⁸ The two secular front-runners were both veterans of Mubarak’s regime – former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq and former Foreign Minister Amr Moussa, the 75-year-old former Arab League chief, who had served as Foreign Minister under Mubarak. Morsi won the run-off election with 51.7 percent of the vote, defeating Ahmed Shafiq and was elected as the fifth President of Egypt on June 30, 2012.

Morsi promised much but delivered little. Just nine days into office, he issued an order to restore the dissolved Parliament. However, Egypt’s highest court and its most senior Generals dismissed the President’s order, claiming it to be an affront to the rule of law, escalating in the process a raw contest for supremacy between the competing camps, each side attempting to frame the debate as a contest for ideals, legitimacy and democracy. While the President sought upholding of the popular mandate, a move hailed by his supporters as

a victory for civilian rule, the Generals asked that legal precedents be respected, with the apex court lending support, and stating that its decisions “are final and not subject to appeals.” In effect, what was on display was a power duel between the military and the Islamist organisations.⁹

With Egypt continuing to flounder, public attention shifted to the failings of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. A worsening economic situation and the belief that Morsi was leading the country to a Talibanisation of Egypt, fuelled protests against his regime. For the average citizen, the goals of the 2011 revolution remain unfulfilled, a subsidy system that keeps bread and gas cheap is on the verge of collapse, inflation is soaring, extremists attack minority groups, and Egyptians see little to indicate that the bureaucracy is working on the behalf of average citizens. Morsi’s authoritarian style of functioning and political ineptitude also did much to erode public support. To prevent the judiciary from thwarting his attempts at political reform, he declared his decrees immune from judicial review. This act was expectedly greeted with outrage. He blundered in appointing a member of the al-Gama’a al-Islamiya to the governorship of Luxor, as this was a militant group responsible for massacring dozens of foreign tourists in 1997. Even in the provision of public goods like education, electricity and security, the Muslim Brotherhood failed to live up to its potential.¹⁰ The opposition, however, had little to offer in terms of an alternate vision, largely because it consisted of many disparate elements, including liberals, secularists, members of the former regime, moderate Islamists, leftists and the like. When street protests started against the Morsi government, many in the opposition called for the military to restore order.¹¹ With the situation in Egypt getting out of hand, the military, on June 30, 2013, gave the government a 48-hour ultimatum to restore order or face the consequences. With no improvement in the situation occurring, the military seized power through a coup engineered by the Defence Minister, General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi. In this, he received support from the leader of the opposition Mohammed El-Baradei, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb and Coptic Pope Tawadros. The Constitution was suspended and an interim government was installed under the Chief Justice.

With the overthrow of Morsi, Egypt came back to temporary martial law. The military cracked the whip on the Muslim Brotherhood, arresting thousands of their supporters. Morsi was placed under arrest and he currently faces charges of espionage and incitement to murder and violence. Supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood are being tried for various offences and hundreds have been sentenced by the courts to death.¹² The wheels indeed appear to have turned

full circle. First, the crowds filled Tahrir Square to demand the end of a military-backed dictatorship. Then, just two years later, the crowds filled Tahrir Square again to demand the restoration of a military-backed dictatorship. Conflict between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood continues to fester throughout Egypt. A year after Morsi was overthrown, General Sisi has been elected as the new President of Egypt. His move into the Presidential palace formally returns Egypt to the rule of a paternalistic military strongman in the tradition of Gamal Abdal Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. As chief of military intelligence, it was Sisi's strategy that was used by the Generals during the 2011 uprisings, siding with "the people" against President Mubarak while ensuring the Army stayed in control. Now, as President of Egypt, Mr Sisi stands elevated to the status of national hero by a broad section of the public and all of the state and private media, on his promise of order and stability after three years of upheaval.¹³

The new President believes his job includes "improving public morals" and "presenting God" correctly. Protests remain banned as he believes the "state has to be in control." The ideological structure of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sisi argues, makes confrontation with the organisation inevitable, as the Brotherhood does not consider other Muslims as "real Muslims".

What then, for the future of Egypt? The Arab Spring was supposed to usher in a more democratic political order but what it did was to expose multiple conflicts between different and sometimes overlapping groups. Initially, conflicts veered around economic issues and political freedoms. This led to the overthrow of Mubarak. These issues still matter, but other issues have now also come to the fore. The first is the issue of identity. Should this be based on Arab nationalism or is an Islamic religious identity more important? Here too, there are many sub-divisions, to include pan-Arabists, socialists, militarists, and secularists, favouring the separation of religion and state. The pan-Islamists are united in their endeavour to apply the *Sharia* but disagree about how soon and how literally that should be done. Then there is the urban versus rural divide, with people in the cities tending to be less religious and more Western oriented. Third is sectarianism, bringing into conflict the Sunni and Shiite brands of Islam. In such circumstances, it has been argued, societies would have to revert to the rule of "strongmen" for stability and growth, and that democracy is bound to fail. Mr Sisi's election as President is a pointer towards that direction.

In that sense then, the Arab Spring has failed in Egypt, but the seeds for its regeneration have not disappeared. Most individuals now have multiple identities as a result of urbanisation, young demographics, spread of literacy,

impact of the media and the like, enabling people to defy traditional authority, which perhaps was unthinkable just a generation earlier. Second, whilst Islamists continue to enjoy considerable grassroots loyalty, the experience of countries where Islamists have come to power such as Iran and Afghanistan under the Taliban have done much to undermine the view that the *Sharia* is the path to progress. Thirdly, globalisation and the spread of the media have impacted on the lives of the people, bringing them a glimpse of life in democracies the world over. In addition, oppressed interest groups such as women, religious minorities and the like, though still vulnerable, are getting increasingly organised and are better placed to fight for their rights. In effect, what we are witnessing is greater awareness amongst the population of the type of life which they have the right to lead. Tradition, in a sense is giving way to modernity, but the road ahead remains long and slippery. Sisi will rule with a firm hand, but that is unlikely to guarantee an avoidance of conflict between the aspirations of the people and the desire of the military to remain in control. While Sisi may have quelled the resistance put up by the Muslim Brotherhood, the effects will only be temporary. The battle between the Islamists and the military will be a long drawn affair, though the Brotherhood for the moment may look weak. The larger battle, however, will be a battle of ideas and aspirations where the people will be looking for the freedoms they fought for which led to Mubarak being deposed. The years ahead will see prolonged conflict as revolutionary and religious ideas coincide and interact. However, a return to the old days seems unlikely. Sisi's government would have to be sensitive to the requirements of the public. Else, in the words of a protestor who took part in the movement against Mubarak, "We know the way to Tahrir Square".

General Sisi advised the Army leadership to maintain a neutral stance and not back President Mubarak.

Maj Gen Dhruv C Katoch, SM, VSM is Director, CLAWS.