

CDDRL Conference on Democratic Transition in Egypt

The Program on Arab Reform and Democracy (ARD) at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) continued its activities for the 2010-11 academic year with a conference entitled *Democratic Transition in Egypt*, held April 29th, 2011. The conference, co-sponsored by Stanford University's Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies, brought together leading academics and experts on Egypt from American, European, and Egyptian universities and think tanks to discuss this pivotal moment in Egypt's political history and the prospects for reform. The conference was organized into four panels: the popular revolt, the process of regime transition, the changing political landscape, and the future of democratic transition. Throughout the day, conference participants debated and discussed these and other topics.

Background to the Revolution

Conference participants discussed what had fueled the protests, who the protestors were, and how they had succeeded in ousting former president Husni Mubarak. A year ago, few would have predicted that Mubarak would be out of power with key regime figures in jail. Yet, while the timing had taken many by surprise, the anger against the regime had not. In addition to the complaints of corruption and political and economic repression common to many Arab states experiencing uprisings, Egyptians feared the succession of Mubarak by his son and viewed the regime as a "vassal" for US policy in the region.¹ Some participants felt that an uprising had been "inevitable", if not this January than in September around the presidential elections,² though others disagreed.³ The status quo was widely considered untenable, but exactly how change could be effected was less apparent.⁴

The overthrow of former President Ben Ali in Tunisia was the spark, providing a model and giving hope to Egyptians.⁵ But rather than spontaneous, the protest movement was the result of a long accumulative process of mobilization among a wide set of pre-existing movements. Though most who took to the streets were not mobilized through social media, the social media were significant in opening new spaces for debate, bringing in new actors, and disseminating new tactics.⁶ Regime attempts to quash protests with a mix of repression, propaganda, and concessions were unsuccessful, and created a dynamic of increasing demands, until the military forced out Mubarak, a move described by one participant, Prof. Samer Shehata from Georgetown University, as "one aspect of the regime trying to save itself".⁷ The degree to which power was centralized made that transition relatively easy compared to the ongoing strife in Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, or Syria.⁸

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The Current Political Landscape

Though the Egyptian revolution has achieved much, it is clear that parts of the old regime and power structure still retain power, inspiring some debate among conference participants over use of the term “revolution” to the movement thus far. Some pointed to the achievements thus far – Mubarak, the NDP, and some security forces gone – as evidence of a revolution.⁹ Most felt that there had not been change to the social structure necessary for revolution or that too much of the former regime remained.¹⁰ The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which took power after forcing out Mubarak, includes those who were in and benefitted from the former regime.¹¹ While hopes were high initially and the army had large popular support, SCAF has made arbitrary decisions and proven to be a poor communicator and non-transparent.¹² While there have been changes in the relative power between security services, and to the names of security apparatus, repression continues.¹³ Prof. Jason Brownlee called the current situation a “change in faces, not in regime, not in how government deals with the people overall”.

Existing parties are largely weak and fragmented,¹⁴ though the situation is constantly evolving, and new political parties and groups are being formed everyday.¹⁵ However, there was general consensus that successfully building a new party and winning a significant share of seats by the September parliamentary elections will be difficult. A notable exception to the weakness of existing parties is the Muslim Brotherhood, which is also benefitting from accommodation with the military. Recent polls indicate that most Egyptians are sympathetic to the Brotherhood, though the extent to which this will drive votes, over other concerns, such as economic ones, is unknown.¹⁶ The Brotherhood however, is not exempt from fragmentation, and is experiencing generational conflict within its ranks.¹⁷ Secular parties are especially rife with fractionalization and conference participants debated whether liberals and leftists should unite or try to focus political contestation on economic issues that differ between them.¹⁸ Liberals and secular forces also have had difficulty connecting to the average Egyptian, as seen in the failure to garner much opposition to the constitutional amendments on the March referendum.¹⁹ Outside of the more ideological groups, social hierarchies and traditional elites remain. While the old NDP elite secretariat is no longer in power, those who used the party merely as a mechanism to enter politics are expected to continue to be powerful political forces.²⁰

⁹ Emad Shahin and Samer Soliman

¹⁰ Larry Diamond, Jason Brownlee, Joel Beinin and Joshua Stacher

¹¹ Samer Shehata

¹² Joshua Stacher

¹³ Jason Brownlee

¹⁴ Emad Shahin

¹⁵ Hesham Sallam

¹⁶ Omar Ashour

¹⁷ Omar Ashour

¹⁸ Samer Soliman

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²⁰ Samer Shehata

The youth movement is under tremendous pressure to do *something*, whether join existing parties or form their own parties, yet many remain wary of formal politics.²¹ Much of the current political dynamic revolves around continuing mobilization and pressure through weekly protests, which have resulted in concessions from SCAF including the removal and arrest of former regime figures.²² But there are disagreements among protestors over this issue and the large majority of Egyptians are tired of constant mobilization.²³

Challenges and Prospects for Democratic Transition

Throughout the conference participants discussed the challenges facing a democratic transition in Egypt and their forecasts. There has been real change, but Egypt is still far from enacting true democracy, and the obstacles to such a transition are large. There are many actors interested in stopping the process of reform long before real political pluralism is reached.²⁴ Egyptian civil society is weak, with little meaningful contact between networks,²⁵ and the military is expected to remain entrenched in politics. SCAF has made moves to suggest they are not interested in the day-to-day running of the country,²⁶ but the establishment of true democratic civilian control over the military seems distant, as the Egyptian military has been so embedded in rule one way or another for so long.²⁷ Furthermore, the United States is not expected to pressure for democratization or the dismantling of security services.²⁸

Much discussion centered around the electoral laws and political institutions that would best foster democracy. Some saw the rapidly approaching elections in September as disadvantaging secular and new parties,²⁹ although others asserted that even with more time these parties would not likely do well.³⁰ An electoral system with some aspect of proportionality would aid new parties or those trying to advance national political or economic reform agendas and better guarantee the inclusion of different groups. Small single-member districts would advantage traditional political forces.³¹ It is likely that Egypt will have a presidential system, which could be a challenge as it is claimed to be less stable, and combined with a multiparty parliament, creates incentives for corruption and gridlock.³²

The plan to have parliament control the process of drafting a new constitution after the election was seen by several participants as troubling. In Egypt, debates over the

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²⁹ Samer Soliman and Hesham Sallam

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³¹ Hesham Sallam

³² Tarek Masoud

constitution have historically concerned the role of Islam in the state, animating religious cleavages.³³ Furthermore, this control could lock in a certain political dynamic, raising the stakes of this crucial post-revolution election. Instead, participants emphasized the importance of an electoral system and parliamentary composition that allows for fluidity over time to move politics away from divisive debates over identity or religion to accountability, delivering of services, and the economy.

Conclusion

There are formidable obstacles to enacting real democratic change in Egypt. Yet there are also reasons for optimism; the protests have already achieved what had been inconceivable a short time ago. It is far too early to make definitive statements about a constantly evolving situation, but academics play an important role in observing, describing, and analyzing ongoing events to help hold actors accountable. CDDRL's program on Arab Reform and Democracy will continue working with academics, experts, and activists to fulfill this serious responsibility both in Egypt and across the region.

³³ Tarek Masoud