

Thinking about Egyptian politics from the bottom up

by Paul Sedra, madamasr.com

May 27 05:10 PM

Most analysis of Egypt's presidential elections — save for that in Egypt itself — is unremittingly bleak, suggesting that the election of military man Abdel Fattah al-Sisi will constitute not only an about-face from the 2011 revolution, but practically a return to the status quo ante of the Mubarak dictatorship.

According to Dalia Fahmy, in a recent contribution to The Immanent Frame blog, the predicament Egypt faces is, in fact, still worse: “Egypt is redefining authoritarianism by both institutionalizing the ‘deep state’ and crystallizing military rule. The result is an entirely new phenomenon that demands serious attention and demands a new way of thinking.” Fahmy argues that three factors — the closing of political space, the elimination of public dissent, and the removal of the trappings of democracy — have converged to generate a brand of authoritarianism unprecedented in Egyptian history.

There can exist but little question that the hopes for Egypt's purported democratic transition — particularly those held by the millions of Egyptians who flooded Tahrir Square on 11 February 2011 to celebrate the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak — have faded into oblivion. The various polls held since then, regarding parliaments, presidents, and constitutions, have increasingly taken on the guise they held under the dictatorship — of a meaningless shadow play for the benefit of foreigners, or indeed, a cruel joke on the people of Egypt. Bread, freedom, and social justice seem just about as distant from Egyptians' grasp as they were on 25 January 2011.

I am certainly not immune to the profound sense of defeat and disillusionment that has accompanied this transition. But I think it is profoundly wrong to suggest that Egypt is in a worse state politically than it was before the 2011 revolution. If nothing else, the revolutionaries who have so courageously taken to the streets time after time after time since 25 January 2011 have demonstrated that people make politics; that Egyptian politics is not the exclusive preserve of a condescending Cairene elite. Even if the revolutionaries have not achieved their aims, their sacrifices on the streets have served as a vitally

important lesson to all Egyptians — that the sense of rot, immobility, and corruption that pervaded Egyptian politics for decades is not an inescapable burden that Egyptians will forever bear.

I would venture still further than this, though, and argue that the very election of Sisi will open up new opportunities for protest politics in the near term. Although he will likely don a business suit in his role as president, Sisi cannot detach himself from Egypt's military. Insofar as he remains emblematic of the Armed Forces, he will remain vulnerable to attack for the manifold failures and corruption of the Armed Forces. In the past, the leaders of the military were able to retain the eminent grip of Egyptian authoritarianism, building up tremendous economic power behind the scenes, almost entirely without exposure to public view. Sisi's decision to take on the presidency will necessarily cast greater light on the machinations of the military elite, and widen the scope for public scrutiny of military management.

At the end of the day, though, there is a critically important part of Egyptian politics that bleak analyses like Dalia Fahmy's misses. The practice of politics in Egypt is not simply a function of voting, of debating in parliament or writing a constitution. Beneath the thin veneer of formal politics — of parties, parliaments, and presidents — there is the vast realm of informal politics in Egypt, involving activities as seemingly mundane as networking to find a job or organizing to collect neighborhood garbage. Arguably, it is in the realm of the informal that most politics actually happens in Egypt, because the realm of the informal is the realm of ordinary people and their ordinary concerns. It is in the realm of the informal that people negotiate their day-to-day survival.

In the realm of informal politics, Egyptians have always demonstrated just how adept and resilient they are in coping with the predations of formal politics. Take, for example, the case of the neighborhood protection committees that emerged almost overnight in Cairo during the 2011 revolution, when the police were withdrawn from the streets: Checkpoints appeared at nearly every corner as neighbors sought to ensure the security of their persons and property. Although there is much research yet to undertake into the effect of the 2011 revolution on such informal politics, the anecdotes I have heard — of local communities demonstrating unprecedented boldness in confronting the state — suggest that, at the level of ordinary people, much has changed in the past three years. One need only glance at the website of Cairo's Tadamun initiative to get a sense of this movement for the better.

In the midst of all the doom and gloom voiced by Egypt analysts and observers, I am

heartened by the space for social action that the 2011 revolution has opened up, if not from the top down, then certainly from the bottom up.