



Egypt in transition

Can Egypt’s secularists accept an Islamic state? One human rights activist and former Mubarak minister says one year on, many questions remain and the revolution is far from over.

A year after protestors united to topple the 30-year regime of President Hosni Mubarak, Egypt has yet to unify behind the new government, and many questions remain about the future. . . With Islamist parties now controlling nearly three-quarters of the post-revolution government, the political landscape has changed dramatically and liberals, women (whose representation in parliament has dropped from 12 percent to 2 percent) and Coptic Christians wait anxiously to see how regressive the new rule will be.

Meanwhile secular protestors, keen for military forces to hand over power ahead of the June deadline agreed by the Islamists, are back on the streets in bloody demonstrations as dreams of democratic reforms and increased civil liberties seem farther away than ever. Human rights activist and former Egyptian Minister of State, **Moushira Mahmoud Khattab**, says the nation’s youth is testing its strength and the democratic forces which put the Islamists in power are still there. Speaking outside the Women’s Forum in Deauville, shortly before the Egyptian elections, Khattab says the country is going through a natural transition after revolution, and the current popularity of Islamic conservatives is not “irreversible”.

Test of strength

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“The current unrest is very alarming,” she told INSEAD Knowledge. “This revolution is still in the making. It’s not finished yet, we are living the transition. We must support the revolution to continue its course. The different forces in society who have been dormant for so long are discovering themselves, they are testing their strength and there is a power struggle, which is natural.”

Many young revolutionaries, who turned to the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party as a united voice in a background of unrest, are realigning as a variety of voices speak out and liberal parties organise themselves. “The most important segment of the Egyptian population, and probably the biggest, the nation’s youth, are now very active,” Khattab says. “Before they were criticised for being passive and indifferent, now they are very, very involved.”

Human rights at risk

While the idea of unrest in the streets is always alarming, Khattab says of greater concern is what will happen if conservative elements in the government continue unchallenged. Conservative Islamic groups may have been cautious on women’s rights issues in the lead up to the election - publicly taking a moderate stance - but evidence suggests once in power this could change. For example,

during the Mubarak regime the Muslim Brotherhood opposed laws forbidding female genital mutilation. And its current Programme for Human Development emphasises the group's "support for women's role as wives, mothers and makers of men; and aims to better prepare them for this role".

"Most probably they (the Muslim Brotherhood) will influence the formulation of a constitution that may not adequately cater for the rights of certain groups, such as women and Christians," Khattab warns. "They have been changing the minds of the people on Islam and how Islam looks at other believers."

She fears an Islamic state could overturn many of the human rights laws she and other activists fought hard to achieve under Mubarak. "The right of the woman to divorce herself; the right to visitation and custody of children; the (raising of the) minimum age of marriage; and (the banning of) female genital mutilation," she lists. "When you label these as laws of the previous corrupt regime you are setting the stage for a reactionary state of human rights.

"But I am not worried at all about the future of Egypt because Egypt is a big country. It's not irreversible. Now that people are free to express their views... I'm very optimistic that this blurry situation will clear up and I'm very happy to see the liberals organising themselves."

Violence fuelled by frustration

This reorganising of the liberals has given secular protestors a new platform on which to battle the military in the streets. Demonstrations outside the Israeli embassy last September; anniversary celebrations around Tahir Square last month; and most recently soccer riots, during which soccer fans accused the military of letting rivals attack them in retaliation for their participation in protests over the last year, have all ended in bloodshed.

Khattab said the embassy attack while "sad", was part of the process as Egyptian youth find their voice. "You have to respect how they (the protesters) feel," she says. "They see a dead peace process, they see violence and they see the legitimate rights of people go unnoticed."

The saddest part of the revolution, she notes has been watching Egyptians turn against each other as Muslim mobs attack Christian groups and churches. "We have to know that Christians are Egyptians in the first place. Religion is being politicised, it is being used as a tool to justify discrimination against certain groups."

But Khattab believes this attitude will change as the better educated people move into the driver's seat. "I think the heart of the revolution is peaceful and

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will continue to be peaceful."

Ready for business

Meanwhile she believes the business climate should also pick up as courts address the corruption which was rampant under Mubarak, and foreign investors benefit from the improvements introduced under his rule. "Don't forget that the previous regime invested a lot in the infrastructure, we have first-rate IT systems and many roads constructed. The problem Egypt faces now is human development, raising the quality of education, capacity number building for the labour force and catering to the aspiration of the youth."

One thing the country is united on, she claims, is the need for the transition period to be over quickly to make way for proper presidential elections and a new solid constitution. "And the military? Definitely the military needs to go back to its very important duty to protect the country."

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