

Egypt: three years of mirages

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The upheavals in Egypt have not come to an end and neither have the foundations been laid for settling a convulsive and erratic transition. Three years have passed since the events that Egyptians still refer to as the ‘25th of January revolution’ toppled Hosni Mubarak and aroused enormous interest worldwide. During that time, the country has been subject to constant disturbances that have fuelled uncertainty and social polarisation, while the serious social and economic problems that caused the riots have become even more entrenched.



Few in Egypt consider that the situation today is better than it was three years ago, neither economically, as revenues in key sectors like tourism have plummeted and foreign investment has fled, nor in security, as violence and criminality have surged. Time and again observers from outside the country have voiced concern about the alarming signs of decomposition in Egypt, a process with a high potential of spilling over to the rest of the Middle East and North Africa in the form of socio-political instability and militant radicalism.

Over the past three years, the transition in Egypt has been marked by constant changes in the ground rules, the inability to forge basic consensuses and stable alliances, the repetition of recent mistakes, the zero-sum attitude of the main players and the generation of expectations that soon fail to be met. These characteristics are not foreign to other transition processes, but in Egypt they have occurred in a heightened form over a short period of time.

One conclusion to be drawn from what has occurred since Mubarak’s overthrow is that each new step taken has conjured up mirages and illusions, giving rise to serious miscalculations by all the political and social players involved. The same can be said of the present, when the military appear to control the situation after having displaced, at least for the time being, their main political adversary: the Muslim Brotherhood.

The deposed President, Mohamed Morsi, and his Muslim Brotherhood committed the fatal mistake of believing that a victory at the polls –even with 51.7% of the vote– gave them the right to legislate as they pleased, to place themselves above the law and to impose a Constitution tailored to their own wishes. Their sectarian and incompetent administration soon made them many enemies. The current problem in Egypt is that those who rule also claim to possess the ‘legitimacy of the masses’ to draft laws restricting rights, to approve a Constitution through an undemocratic process and impose a narrative of the ‘fight against terrorism’, for which it blames the Muslim Brotherhood, many of whose members are now facing tough prison sentences.

If the 2012 Islamist Constitution was not the result of a broadly-based social and political consensus, the same can be said of the new Constitution, approved under military patronage. Despite the apparently wide social support for the new charter, as suggested by the ubiquitous media campaign in its favour (it was forbidden to canvass against it), only a third of the electorate voted in its favour. According to official sources, 98.1% of the vote was in favour, a figure which brings to mind the electoral results of times gone by.

The constitutional referendum held last week could prove to be yet another mirage of the many conjured up in Egypt's transition process. Many of those who voted in favour, especially women and the elderly, did so in the hope of seeing stability restored and law and order enforced, whose deterioration has upset the lives and economies of much of the population. The referendum was also presented as an attempt to legitimise the current political order and as a protest or revenge vote against the Muslim Brotherhood. Some even saw it as a plebiscite that might enable the strong man of the moment, the chief of the Armed Forces, Abdelfatah al-Sisi, to be acclaimed the new President of the Arab Republic of Egypt.

The months following last July's coup, headed by al-Sisi himself, have both revealing and, at the same time, disturbing. Since then the country has experienced an ascending spiral of repression and violence that has aimed to exclude political adversaries by any means, thus causing a deep social split and repeated attempts to return to the police State practices of the Mubarak era.

To avoid the appearance of weakness or misrule, the State has opted for employing a heavy hand to deal with the most pressing concern for most Egyptians: insecurity (whether real or fuelled by the media). Hence, repression by the military, the Ministry of the Interior and the judiciary has become steadily harsher since July. First it was directed at the Muslim Brotherhood, but it is now also being aimed at young revolutionaries, intellectuals and any voice critical of the drift towards a greater authoritarianism. The growing tide of repression, however, has failed to check the rioting in the streets or to prevent attacks against the police and the army, whose frequency and severity are on the increase.

In their eagerness to monopolise power, the military and their allies in the so-called 'deep State' (the security services, bureaucracy, media, big business, etc.) seem to be unconcerned about the domestic economy of the average Egyptian. The country's society is large and very young, it grows rapidly and has a very unequal distribution of wealth. Furthermore, the economy is still standing almost entirely due to the generous aid provided by certain Gulf States interested in preventing its collapse. Aid, however, will prove insufficient if unaccompanied by deep and multilateral economic reforms, targeted at socially sensitive issues such as subsidies for basic goods and energy.

Three interconnected factors will shape the future of the precarious Egyptian transition: the economy, security and the capacity for political and social integration. In the absence of national stability and reconciliation, it is difficult to see how the objectives of the revolt that toppled Mubarak –summarised in the slogan 'bread, freedom, social justice'– can be met. On top of that, the serious deficiencies in public services as a result of insufficient resources, institutional inefficiency and rampant corruption, will make social peace difficult to achieve.

On the other hand, Egyptian society is changing and is no longer afraid to demand the removal of its presidents (the fourth president in three years will be chosen within the next few months). Egyptians have also discovered the power of mobilisation to bring about political and constitutional change (they are on their third constitution in three years, a feat not many countries can boast of). The apathy of the past has given way to impatience in the face of a lack of results, and if there is one thing Egyptians are proving it is that they can quickly remove their support from those in charge.

Attempting to govern a fragmented society plagued by grave socioeconomic problems through resorting to the methods of the past seems a complicated task of doubtful success. It is likely that al-Sisi may wish to see himself as the saviour of the nation or as the charismatic successor of Gamal Abdel Naser, but in a context this problematic if he were to become president, nothing guarantees that he will not follow the fate of either of his two military predecessors, far from the glory he seeks.

Does Egypt run the risk of becoming a failed State? Although it might seem unlikely today, there are increasingly more reasons to not entirely dismiss the possibility. Were such an outcome to materialise, the consequences world-wide would be unimaginable. It is evident that the Egyptian State today is much weaker than it appears, given its inefficiency and that it is paradoxically resorting to repression in order to appear stronger. One conclusion that can be drawn from what has occurred in the last three years in Egypt is that if Mubarak fell, it was especially because his regime ceased to be strong and became fierce instead. The question now is whether or not the current rulers wish to put this conclusion to the test.