



Egypt's Tryst with Democracy in 2013: A Year of Disappointment

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All hopes for a new democratic Egypt have suffered an unprecedented jolt after the coercive dismantling of an elected government in July, 2013. The democratic urge of the masses emanating from the January 2011 revolution has been overshadowed by an increasing dominance of the Army over their newly created political space. The Army has managed to solidify its dominance on the back of a faltering revolution in the final months of 2013. In essence, a convergence of interest between the vested elites and remnants of the previous regime of Mr. Mubarak helped the Army emerge as a prime force, which seems to be determined to silence all voices of resistance.

An already independent and powerful Army fortified itself further when a new Constitution approved by a 50-member committee extended it all immunities and allowed military trials of civilians. The new Constitution accords the Army a final say in the appointment of the Defence Minister and insulates its spending from public scrutiny by listing its budget as a single entry in the national account. After the Constitution is ratified later this month, the Army's dominance will be more institutionalised. Apart from allowing the Army to protect its web of interests, the Constitution has tipped the scale in military's favour to preserve its ubiquitous status of the past.

In July 2013, the Army cashed in on the public resentment against Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood (MBH), and installed a transitional government. Since the takeover of the military-backed regime, the Army has capitalised on the public fear of the MBH to push ahead its own exclusive agenda and guard decade-old political and economic interests. Instead of promoting democracy and political freedom, the Army seems to be more desirous of exclusion of the political opposition in the name of combating Islamic radicalism.

It seems that both the liberal forces and the Army are complementing each other when it comes to keep the Islamic forces at bay. Members of the previous regime are enjoying support from the Army in its drive against the radical Islamists. On the other hand, the Army is creating fears among the masses about the MBH with the help of the media, which is controlled by the liberals.

All liberal and secular forces have launched a high pitched campaign and are unanimously raising the issue of defiant political attitude to Islamist forces. The traditional rift between the liberals and the Islamists has made the latter turn to the Army to sustain its comfortable position in a messy domestic political milieu of the country.

At a time when the country is desperately waiting for the referendum on the new Constitution, to be followed by parliamentary and presidential elections, the Army backed regime has introduced a series of non-democratic laws in the name of combating political violence. To begin with, the government confiscated all moveable and immovable property of the MBH. This was followed by another undemocratic move in November last year when the government enacted a temporary protest law which declares public protests and demonstrations almost an illegal act bringing back the bitter memories of the emergency era. The move was aimed at containing the democratic movement of groups like the 'April 6' and the 'Tamarrood' (meaning Rebel) and suppressing the growing animosity of the masses against the Army.

On December 25, 2013, the government took the most drastic and non-democratic step when Egypt's Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, declared the

MBH a “terrorist organisation” both inside and outside of the country which could be a major blow to the democratic process in the country. The decision came two days after a bomb blast ripped through the premises of the Security Directorate in the Nile Delta city of Mansoura that killed over 20 people. A Salafist group active in Sinai, *Ansar-BaitulMuqaddas* (Supporter of Jerusalem Mosque), claimed the responsibility for the blast but the MBH had to bear the brunt because of its relentless battle against the Army.

As of now, there is no evidence to prove the MBH’s involvement in the above incident but the political fragility and uncertainty in the country make it conducive for the Army to target the Islamst group in the name of national security and the political stability. The new law against the MBH allows the Army to arrest anyone on suspicion of having ideological or sympathetic association with the organisation or involved in promotion of its ideas in any form. It is a deterrent to keep people away from protests or even showing resentment.

This new set of laws is aimed at depriving the masses of political activism at a time when the country is in the midst of political process such as constitutional referendum, the parliamentary and presidential elections in next few months. In this act, the Army seems to derive its strength from domestic and regional forces which are opposed to the democratic upsurge in the country for their political and strategic gains, respectively. These decrees by the Army are a jolt for democracy and not a good sign for the progress of the roadmap promised by the Egyptian Defence Minister. There are fears that the political space will further shrink for negotiations between the secularists and the Islamists and hopes for a political settlement or stability have diminished in the country in the near future.

The isolation and exclusion of the MBH may spur a further wave of violence in the county which is already marred by the lurching security and volatile political environment. The politics of consensus among non-Islamic groups might thrust a deviant alliance to harm the Army. Moreover, the temporary disapproval of the Islamists may morph into deep resentment against the Army itself. The curtailment and the curbing of democratic voices would further serve the interests of political elites sabotaging the democratic ambition heralded by the January Revolution. The existing political uncertainty has the potential to decrease the likelihood of a

stable Egypt and can potentially ruin the democratic threads woven into the fabric of the Egyptian society.

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