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Middle East and North Africa Programme: Workshop Report

Egypt in Transition

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Introduction

This paper is a summary of discussions that took place at a workshop held in Cairo in March 2011, six weeks after the former president, Hosni Mubarak, was forced to resign in the face of mass protests against his rule. Entitled 'Egypt in Transition', the workshop brought together a group of Egyptian activists, opposition party members, journalists and representatives of civil society organizations from across the political spectrum with a small number of UK policy-makers to discuss Egypt's changing political landscape and its relations with the UK and the West.

The workshop's agenda was broad to allow the discussions to be directed by the participants. Key findings that emerged included:

- Egyptians feel that in the post-Mubarak era they have an unprecedented opportunity to reshape the political landscape.
- Challenges that will be faced include increasing political awareness at the grassroots; connecting activists and the political elite to the needs of marginalized populations, especially in rural areas; and encouraging/enabling a fragmented opposition to coalesce into coherent groups.
- The military's role in politics is seen as problematic and it should be replaced by a civilian government as soon as possible.
- The Mubarak era has left a bitter legacy in Egypt's relations with the West, as most Egyptians perceive Western governments to have been supporters of his rule; Western policy-makers will have to make serious efforts to build relationships of trust with the new political actors in Egypt.

Moving forward: where will Egypt be in five years' time?

During the first session of the workshop all participants had the opportunity to express their assessment of the current political situation in Egypt and their expectations of how Egypt would progress in the next five years. Despite the wide variety of political perspectives represented by the participants, there were a great many shared concerns, including around the role of the military in the transitional phase, the necessity of addressing bread-and-butter issues faced by ordinary Egyptians, and the work needed to foster political awareness across Egyptian society and build a genuinely participatory democracy in Egypt.

Where is Egypt now? Taking stock of recent events

In assessing recent events, the discussion focused on evaluating the achievements of the Egyptian revolution to date and on the significance of the result of the constitutional referendum that took place less than a week before the workshop.

Overall, workshop participants were almost all optimistic about possibilities for change in post-Mubarak Egypt, even if many had reservations about the current direction of travel. They clearly felt that the fall of Mubarak's government marked a turning point in Egyptian politics, ending a long period of political stagnation: several described the current period as one where Egypt was at a 'crossroads'. A number of participants questioned whether the revolution was complete, noting that the majority of the military and security structures have been left in place. It was also suggested that there was a risk of counter-revolution by the remnants of the regime.

Others were more confident about the achievements of the revolution to date, seeing Egypt already set on a path to representative democracy: it was pointed out that now people had gained the confidence to raise their voices, it would be difficult to remove it again. Many participants also expressed enthusiasm for listening to a range of opinions, feeling that in post-Mubarak Egypt there was a renewed interest in engaging in dialogue and crossing the traditional political divides that had formed under decades of authoritarian rule.

Regarding the referendum's huge yes vote, participants' initial assessments varied. Several saw the result as a 'win' for salafists or the Muslim Brotherhood, and expressed concern about the use of religion in campaigning in the run-up to the vote. Others considered the result to be a 'wake-up call' for the groups that had supported the no vote. In particular, it served as a

reminder to young activists to take greater account of the views of the great number of Egyptians who had taken no active part in the revolution and whose concerns are, above all, a return to stability and improved livelihoods. Additionally some participants noted that they voted yes in the referendum in order to ensure the restoration of a civilian government as soon as possible. Some also questioned the point of holding a referendum on a constitution that the military had suspended, reflecting concerns about the continued political role of the armed forces.

Important political actors in post-Mubarak Egypt

The military

There is a great deal of uncertainty and concern over the military's role in the current transition period. There is little clarity over its decision-making process, and in particular which groups' views it takes into account. Some participants perceived a rapprochement with the Muslim Brotherhood and an exclusion of the youth protest groups, but in general the process is very opaque.

A number of participants saw the military as being partially or wholly identified with the old regime, and while they expected it would want to 'retreat to the barracks' as soon as possible, they noted that it also has its own interests to protect. The military is concerned above all with a return to stability, which may have driven its decision to announce a new law restricting protests and strikes – a law that was a cause of concern to all the participants. Several people highlighted the problematic history of military involvement in politics in Egypt, and saw structural problems with the armed forces as an institution: for example, a participant asked whether anyone could envisage the military allowing its budget to be scrutinized in parliament.

Some participants were more positive about the military's involvement in the transition period, arguing that it should be judged by its support for the protesters against Mubarak and noting that protesters had asked it to step in. It was also pointed out that the military is not a monolithic institution; the 'top brass' and the rank and file probably have different interests.

The Muslim Brotherhood

It is clear that the Muslim Brotherhood is expected to be a major political player in post-Mubarak Egypt, and Brotherhood-affiliated representatives could potentially hold a majority in the new parliament (though many analysts

expect a smaller showing). While some were concerned that the Muslim Brotherhood is forming an alliance with the military or elements of the old regime to exclude new voices from the political process, most participants did not see its involvement in politics as problematic. It was suggested that the Brotherhood might emulate the 'Turkish model' or forge a new 'Egyptian model' of Islamist political participation. Despite some worries about the use of religion in campaigning in the run-up to the referendum, the Brotherhood's enthusiastic participation in the political process was seen as something to be embraced as part of a new, more open political field in Egypt.

Fragmentation and reworking political structures

While most participants felt there was too much uncertainty to make detailed predictions about the trajectory Egypt might take in the post-Mubarak period and where it might find itself in five years' time, they were nevertheless eager to discuss which issues most needed to be addressed for a successful democratic transition. Suggestions focused on how to remake the political landscape, including the need for greater political awareness at the grassroots level, better connection between political activists and ordinary Egyptians (especially those in rural areas), and addressing corruption and economic needs. Many participants felt that the process of transition would entail a radical reworking of political and security structures, including the dismantling of the security apparatus and the disengagement of the military from the old regime. A number of structures that had previously been thought to be solid crumbled during the revolution, and there are yet more new structures that need to be built – to guarantee human rights, for example.

In order to do this there needs to be a specific plan for the process and its ultimate aim, and who will be responsible. A clear monitoring system will be necessary. It was suggested that this may be best implemented by a transitional government formed of technocrats. A truth and reconciliation movement may also be an important way for Egypt to assess and come to terms with the nature of repression in the Mubarak era and particularly the role played by the security services.

A number of participants described a problem of extreme fragmentation among political actors, feeling that there were a great number of competing voices and strong opinions and as yet not enough cohesion and networking. It was also suggested that there is still a big rift between the Muslim Brotherhood and liberals, which was highlighted by the row over the referendum result and needs to be bridged to ensure groups can work together to push through the democratization process. Nevertheless

enthusiasm was expressed from most participants for reaching out, engaging in dialogue and building cooperation across political divides.

Democratization

All the participants were keen to ensure that post-Mubarak Egypt moves towards a genuinely democratic system, and avoids the potential pitfalls of transition experienced by countries such as Ukraine. One of the greatest obstacles was perceived to be a disconnect between Egypt's political elite, the young activists and the general population, especially those living in rural areas or in slums. The political elite has too long been able to govern without accountability, while the young activists are still focusing their efforts on issues such as campaigning for the dismantling of the state security apparatus. However, many participants cited the issue of connecting with the grassroots as being a new priority, especially after the results of the referendum. 'Let every political activist leave his office, his newspaper column and his favourable TV channel, and go down to the streets and talk with people!', said one participant. It was felt that the Muslim Brotherhood and the salafists were more successful in connecting with the wider population, and set an example with their vigorous face-to-face campaigning.

Nevertheless it was also perceived that the referendum demonstrated a lack of political awareness at the grassroots level. Many voters – even among the well-educated – probably did not understand the details or the implications of what they were voting for. One participant related how he asked someone waiting to cast his ballot how he was voting. 'For Mubarak' came the reply. Beyond the problems of basic political literacy many participants also felt that even political activists had a great deal to learn in order to participate effectively in a democratic system. While it was easy for the opposition to unite around 'the fall of the regime' as a slogan during the revolution, it now needed to go beyond demands, develop policies and learn how to convey its ideas.

The economy

Tackling the economic situation was identified as a priority issue, in terms both of livelihoods and of the macroeconomic picture. Some 40% of Egyptians live on \$2 a day, and the post-Mubarak period is an important opportunity to look at social justice. Some participants were concerned about the possibility of economic collapse, pointing out that as political uncertainty continued Egypt was running up huge debts, printing money and using up

limited foreign currency reserves. The issue of corruption was also raised, highlighting the need to put in place new rules for prosecuting corruption in order to prevent a return to the pervasive corruption of the old regime.

British and Western policy towards Egypt: a help or a hindrance?

The second session of the workshop focused on Egypt's relationship with the UK and the West, including the EU and the US. A number of participants had already raised the issue of Western political interference during the first stock-taking session, and it was clearly regarded as an important issue for Egyptians to deal with in the post-Mubarak era. Heavy criticism was directed at Western policy-makers for their relationships with the Mubarak regime, and it is clear that Egyptians want to set a new agenda for how they relate to the West.

Despite a high degree of scepticism about Western governments' intentions towards Egypt, the participants rejected isolationism and many felt that Western countries could offer support for the political transition, if they were genuinely willing to develop new relationships with civil society. Nevertheless, it was also apparent that there is a degree of mistrust, given the West's support for the Mubarak government until very recently, as well as questions around Western willingness to engage with Islamist movements and a shortage of productive or open communications with new political actors in Egypt. Western policy-makers will need to make serious efforts to build relationships of trust with these actors and take their concerns into account.

The Mubarak era: a bitter legacy in UK–Egypt relations

While the participants did not all see UK–Egypt relations as entirely negative, they did all perceive the UK as having played a part in supporting the Mubarak regime. Although the US was identified as having been the greatest supplier of military aid to Egypt, little differentiation was made between the foreign policies of the US, the UK and the EU, all of which were perceived to have been supporters of Mubarak's regime. Despite wanting to set a new agenda for their relationships with the West, Egyptians do not want to simply 'move on' from the Mubarak era: they feel that it is important to review the events of this period and receive acknowledgment from Western governments about the role that they played in supporting the Mubarak government through military aid and other means.

The participants saw Western policy in the Middle East as being driven by self-interest and skewed perceptions. One participant cited the hypocrisy of Western researchers and journalists who focus their concerns on the Brotherhood's ideas about Islam and Islamic law, when the staunchest Arab ally of the West in the region is Saudi Arabia, which implements an extremely strict interpretation of Islamic law. The issue of the West's relationship with

Israel was also raised, as participants felt that support for Israel was a key driver of policy towards Egypt in that Western governments were more concerned with maintaining Arab governments friendly to Israel than with supporting democratic movements. Maintaining access to oil supplies was also seen as a key driver of policy. In general the participants emphasized Western policy as being driven by realpolitik and national interest, including all forms of aid.

It was also pointed out that distorted perceptions were mutual, as the Mubarak government had exploited colonial history and nationalist sentiments and sought to portray itself as a bulwark against supposed Western attempts to rule the Middle East all over again.

Western policy-makers and the new political actors in Egypt: opening communication channels

Despite the negative perceptions of what drives Western policy towards Egypt, almost all the participants wanted to engage with the UK and the West on some level. Taking into account that the meeting featured a somewhat self-selecting group – of those Egyptians who were willing to come to a meeting organized by a British think tank, held mostly in English – it is clear that during this transitional period previously marginalized political actors are open to engaging with the West.

However, Western policy-makers will have to take steps towards rebuilding trust and improving communication. Some Egyptian activists had previously engaged in discussions with UK and US policy-makers and yet had come away feeling that their concerns were not listened to and that engaging in such discussions was fruitless. One participant cited a meeting arranged with American policy-makers: when he had asked why the US was unwilling to leverage military aid to put pressure on Mubarak, one policy-maker had responded that Egyptians should be grateful the regime didn't kill them all.

This feeling of frustration extends to the post-Mubarak period, as participants felt that during visits to Egypt senior Western officials showed little understanding of the current situation. In particular it was noted that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had appeared to be unaware of serious human rights abuses (documented by both local and international human rights organizations) committed by the Egyptian military after the fall of Mubarak's government.

UK Prime Minister David Cameron's visit to Cairo was also badly received, as it immediately preceded a trip to the Gulf to promote British business

alongside eight senior representatives of British defence manufacturers. This was, unsurprisingly, perceived negatively. The episode suggests that British policy-makers need a greater awareness of Egyptians' legitimate concerns, as well as better coordination of communications.

Participants were positive about relationships with civil society organizations in the West and solidarity messages received from ordinary citizens during the protests. Some participants also commented positively on UK initiatives such as the Chevening Scholar programme. Focusing on such positive aspects of UK–Egypt relations may provide a solid foundation for building more trusting relationships between UK policy-makers and new political actors in Egypt. To ensure these are strong and sustainable, however, policy-makers will have to address the trust and communication issues that seem to have been problematic to date.

Setting a new agenda for Egypt's relationships with the West

Egyptians would like to remake their relationships with the UK and other Western countries, renewing those relationships on a basis of mutuality, cooperation and equality within the framework of international human rights. While a minority of participants rejected absolutely any foreign interference, most did see a role for Western governments in supporting Egyptians during the transition period, focusing particularly on support for civil society organizations.

Participants had a number of concrete suggestions for how Western governments could play a supportive role in the post-Mubarak era. These included increased conditionality on aid given to the Egyptian government, tied to human rights and tackling corruption; transferring expertise, especially on how to implement transparency in the justice and security sectors; forgiving some debts; investigating assets belonging to members of the Mubarak regime and ensuring these funds are returned to the Egyptian people; and creating an international 'Friends of Egypt' group including not only governments but also private-sector groups and businesses that are willing to invest in Egypt.

Participants also wanted to see continued and increased donor aid to civil society organizations in Egypt, focusing on building capacity – not just implementing single projects – and monitoring to ensure funds are well spent. While some participants were more critical of the problems around Western aid – feeling that local NGOs end up catering to the requirements of the donors rather than implementing the projects that they need – others felt that

such aid had in the past also been able to act as a counterweight to regressive policies implemented by their own government.

Participants suggested that enhanced direct links between civil society organizations in Egypt and the West could be positive, for example in increasing understanding of shared values between people (such as linking anti-arms trade campaigners in the UK with Egyptians affected by military repression) and in providing examples for Egyptians to consider in the development of new civil society organizations and structures.

Several participants were also keen to emphasize that remaking relations between Egypt and the West also needed to be a part of a larger remodelling of the international community – ‘building a new world order’. The lack of equal representation on the UN Security Council was cited as an example of inequality on the international stage. ‘Dignity’ has been a key word during the Egyptian revolution and in wider regional events and was also cited as an important part of remaking international relations.

Creating space for dialogue and inclusion: what needs to happen next?

The final session of the workshop involved a role-playing exercise to identify key policy priorities for Egypt’s political transition over the next six to nine months. Participants were placed in small groups and each group was assigned the identity of a particular interest group in Egyptian society, such as trade unions, the military, or young business people. They were then asked to identify the single overriding policy priority for that interest group, and to list the stakeholders with whom the group would need to engage in order to implement that policy. A full description of the methodology and breakdown of the results can be found in the appendix.

The prioritization exercise and the ensuing discussion showed both the scope of the participants’ ambitions for Egypt in the post-Mubarak period and the many obstacles to achieving those ambitions that still need to be overcome. Overall the sense was not that the participants differed vastly in their ideas of the final destination for Egypt – there is a common desire to bring about a transparent, democratic government, end human rights abuses, and achieve economic prosperity. However their ideas on how to reach this destination differed and the participants recognized that one of the challenges they face is to build consensus over the roadmap for transition.

Challenges in the transition period

Fragmentation and lack of consensus

The prioritization exercise highlighted a problem already identified by participants in the first session: the lack of consensus and the many competing voices among Egyptian political actors. While most participants were very keen to try to agree within their small groups on policy priorities they were not necessarily successful, and some groups ended up listing a number of disparate priorities as a compromise. Consensus was most easily reached over the least detailed policy suggestions, such as 'democracy in institutions and in practice'.

Bridging divides

The exercise also underscored the concerns expressed earlier in the workshop about the urban political class being out of touch with the grassroots. The policy priorities identified for rural townspeople were the most disputed, suggesting that there was a lack of direct connection with that group. There was some discussion about the desirability of devolving powers to local administrations. One participant argued that 'there is a small Mubarak in every village' and that it would take time to develop democracy at the local level.

A steep learning curve

Participants appeared to feel there was a great deal of work to be done at the grassroots level to raise political awareness and achieve meaningful participation. One participant noted that achieving meaningful political participation – which she felt was lacking during the referendum – was her top priority but she knew it could not be achieved in six months. Participants were all keen to resolve the problems they highlighted, and made many suggestions, emphasizing the need to listen more, to build consensus, to engage in more face-to-face discussions (perhaps holding 'town hall'-type meetings). However, they were also aware of the urgent nature of the challenges facing Egypt in this transition period, and time may be a limited resource.

Final thought

At the end of the workshop the participants were asked to pick their number one personal top priority for Egypt in the next six months. This was by no means a scientific survey, but the most popular choice was nothing less than 'The empowerment of the people and the complete dismantling of the regime'. This tallies with the overall sense conveyed during the discussions that despite the great challenges ahead, Egyptians feel that the events of the revolution have given them a great deal more agency in determining their country's future.

APPENDIX: Policy priorities

During the third session of the workshop the participants were divided into small groups of 2–4 people. They were assigned a ‘fake identity’ and asked to identify what that group’s policy priorities would be in the transition period. They were also asked to consider which other groups would need to be involved in order to achieve those policy priorities. The participants were then asked to repeat the exercise with their own real priorities, attempting to agree within each group on their priorities.

After a final discussion of the results of the exercise, a straw poll was conducted. The participants were asked to identify their personal number one top priority for Egypt in the next six months, and which priority they thought would be hardest to achieve.

Table 1: Priorities for key interest groups

Group	Policy priority	Who needs to be involved	Top priority	Most difficult
The military	Retaining power, but behind a civilian government	A civilian collaborator who can command popular support while not challenging the system; close cooperation with the US & Arab Gulf states; placate the middle & lower ranks of the army	0	0
Trade unions	Job security & wages	Employers; Ministry of Labour; wider government – key ministries (different sectors); media; lawyers/legal advisers	0	1
Western governments	Stability; a government they can talk to	Civil society; liberals & seculars; the army & the government	0	0
Egyptian government	Calm social & labour demands; improve security; stabilize the economy	Military support; cooperation of the business community; help from donor countries; cooperative media; collaborating trade unions.	0	0
Arab governments	No change in status quo; reduction of people’s anger (through economic means)	Support of the military	0	0
Arab people	End of existing regimes		0	0
Muslim Brotherhood	Parliamentary elections; internal reform	Youth within the MB; other political parties; salafists; grassroots	0	0
Political prisoners	Putting the killers of protesters on trial; bringing in laws to stop torture.	State security; activists; journalists	1	0
Young business people	Stability	Military; government; trade unions	0	0
Rural towns people	Education and decentralization	Government; governorates; local community; local councils; civil society organizations; research institutions; local & foreign donors	2	0
Women	Public awareness campaign on rights of women	Media; religious institutions; education sector; corporations (as employers); outreach groups; a celebrity endorser e.g. Mohamed Aboutrika [well-known Egyptian footballer & role model]; female role models women can identify with/feel empowered by	1	0
Western people	Human rights; safety (as tourists); Islamophobia		0	0

Table 2: Participants' personal priorities

Policy priority	Who needs to be involved?	Top Priority	Most Difficult
Army back to camps	Political parties, civil society, trade unions	3	3
Army to return to barracks Conduct parliamentary elections that are free and fair, followed by presidential elections Improve the economy Mobilize the masses; achieve a common denominator among political actors focusing on democracy		1	1
Giving women in rural areas their rights – to learn, choose, marry and decide		0	0
Agreed transition roadmap	Military, political forces, trade unions, civil society, international community including international organizations	2	3
Stable political environment without sacrificing human rights or democratic principles	Military, political parties & movements, media, free independent trade unions & syndicates	2	4
Democracy in institutions and in practice		2	
Freedom of expression and ability to participate in decision-making		0	4
The creation of ideas, projects and political parties in a way that prevents a reversal – i.e. creation of an active political life	Civil society, politicians, funds & sponsors, media	1	0
Empowerment of the people and the complete dismantling of the regime	Workers, human rights activists, online movements, youth groups, opposition parties – a close-knit coalition of opposition forces	5	3
Ability of people to make informed decisions and mobilize for a cause	Education, impartial agents, activists	2	1
Demand to put on trial/hold accountable all responsible for killing civilians during the revolution; criminalize torture; make police civilian; psychiatric rehabilitation of police to realize motto of 'police in service of the people' – not oppressing the people; dismantling the security services, not just renaming; a future of true democratic practice so as to provide an active role for each Egyptian to build civil society.		0	0