

# The ‘New Liberals’: can Egypt’s civil opposition save the revolution?

Moataz el Fegiery

»» For decades, common wisdom dictated that only political Islam would be able to take power once Arab dictators fell. The Arab spring came as a golden moment for the popular, well-prepared Islamists to establish their political influence in the post-revolutionary political orders of Egypt and Tunisia. Two years after the revolutions, however, the impact of non-Islamist currents on the political scene of both countries is growing.

Egypt’s transition to democracy is embattled. Instead of celebrating the second anniversary of the 2011 revolution, mounting protests against the policies of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) spread across Egypt in January and February 2013. So far, the MB’s experience in power supports the idea that democracy can work against itself, to the degree that the democratically-elected Islamists and their allies seem to be seeking to undermine democratic institutions. Political developments over the past eight months suggest that the Islamists no longer enjoy overwhelming support in Egypt. A poll conducted by the Egyptian Centre for Public Opinion Research in March 2013 showed that only 47 per cent of Egyptians thought President Morsi was ‘doing well’, compared to 78 per cent just after his first 100 days in power. Despite its sinking popularity, the MB still has significant organisational capabilities and has managed to strengthen its control over public institutions. The Brotherhood’s crumbling hegemony opens a window of opportunity for liberals and leftists (known in Egypt as the ‘civil’ political forces) to build on the Islamists’ failures and shift power relations to their favour.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The Muslim Brotherhood’s legitimacy crisis sets the floor for non-Islamist political forces to fill the emerging vacuum.
- Political pressure and a united opposition are key to create the conditions for free and fair elections.
- To emerge as a powerful electoral coalition, members of the new liberal front will inevitably need to make painful compromises on political and economic issues.

»»»»» Unlike their pre-revolutionary liberal peers, infamous for their lack of grassroots connections, organisational weakness and elitist discourses, new liberal and leftist parties that have flourished in the post-revolution era have been able to attract sympathisers from a wider range of Egyptian society. A March 2013 report by the RAND Corporation on 'Voting patterns in post-Mubarak Egypt' concludes that 'Islamists achieved their high-water mark in the initial ballots after the January 25 Revolution, but the gap between them and their non-Islamist rivals has since narrowed'. Although many new liberal parties show great commitment toward the consolidation of democracy and human rights in Egypt, they also have to face many of the same structural limitations with which the political opposition under Mubarak had to deal. In order to succeed at this critical juncture of Egypt's transition, the non-Islamist opposition must maintain their internal cohesion and develop new tactics to transform mounting street protests into organised, strategic political action.

### **THE RISE OF CIVIL FORCES**

Young liberal and leftist activists were the driving force of Egypt's revolution. Liberal and Islamist forces collaborated during the 18 days of the revolution to oust Mubarak. Since then, however, deep rifts between Islamist and non-Islamist forces along ideological and political lines have opened up.

The two years following the fall of Mubarak had provided the Muslim Brotherhood with an unprecedented opportunity to establish itself as a model for a 'moderate', legitimate and democratic brand of Islamist governance – but this opportunity has now largely faded. The second anniversary of the revolution in January 2013 was marked by massive demonstrations across Egypt, protesting against the political and economic failures of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood-led government. Egyptian human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) affirm that human rights conditions have

immensely deteriorated under President Morsi. The constitution drafting process was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamist allies, and the final text turned out to reflect narrow MB interests that undermine many fundamental human rights and serve to consolidate the Islamic nature of the state.

An elitist discourse and detachment from the grassroots have been among the long-standing criticisms towards liberal and leftist opposition parties. Before the revolution, registered liberal and leftist parties were seen by many as a tool to legitimate the Mubarak regime. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Islamists drew on their organisational and social mobilisation capacities established over the past 40 years to consolidate their political position, while the civil opposition was very fragmented and unable to exert major influence at key political junctures. In the beginning of the transitional period, the civil forces opposed the roadmap developed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), but they were unable to unite behind any alternative political programme. In the first parliamentary elections after the revolution held in November and December 2011, liberals and leftists were scattered among many electoral coalitions, despite being aware that at stake in this election was no less than the power to oversee the drafting of the new constitution. The same mistake was repeated in the presidential elections held in May/June 2012 when civil forces failed to unite behind a single presidential candidate with a democratic transitional agenda. It was only after this and a number of other failed attempts to build a united liberal front that political leaders learned that they would not be able to save Egypt's transition unless they worked together and drew on each other's strengths.

Today, the relationship between the old liberal opposition parties and the newly-emerged 'civil' parties still suffers from a lack of trust and unity. However, their shared interest in confronting the democratic setbacks brought about by successive military and Islamist rulers over the last two years has brought them together in a number of political

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## Egyptians are keen to know how the political opposition would seek to improve the deteriorating Egyptian economy without further hurting their living standards

coalitions across the non-Islamist political spectrum. In this sense, the creation of the National Salvation Front (NSF) in November 2012 represented a turning point for Egypt's civil opposition. The NSF is currently the main umbrella for Egyptian liberal and leftist opposition parties. It was established as a reaction to the controversial Constitutional Declaration

adopted by President Morsi on 22 November 2012, which provided him with immunity from any judicial oversight. NSF members range from old parties such as the liberal Al-Wafd and the leftist Al-Tajamu to newly-founded liberal and leftist parties such as the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, Free Egyptians Party, the Popular Socialist Alliance and the Constitution Party.

The NSF has opposed the restrictive policies of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood against the judiciary and the media, and advocates for an inclusive and representative constitution making process. However, the NSF's electoral potential is yet to be tested.

### ARTICULATING POLITICAL PROGRAMMES

If the MB's political and economic failures create opportunities for non-Islamist forces to fill the legitimacy vacuum, the latter need to offer viable alternative proposals. Liberal and leftist parties advocate for a 'civil state' based on citizenship, democracy and social justice, but they differ amongst themselves in their interpretations of these values. Regarding the relationship between state and religion, civil political forces reject Islamists' instrumental use

of religion in politics and law. Although not all civil forces call for a separation between state and religion or the omission of the *Shari'a* as the main source of legislation in the constitution, their understanding of the role of the *Shari'a* in the state is clearly different from that of Islamists. Most civil forces are content to see the application of the *Shari'a* only at a minimum level, as it was under Mubarak. Others define the principles of *Shari'a* as ethical values that are fully in line with social justice and international human rights. Only few politicians call for a secular state, which is a rather unpopular idea in Egypt. Political Islam has left its imprint on Egyptian society since the 1970s and liberals and leftists are politically-constrained to openly challenge the constitutional provision on the *Shari'a*. However, over the past decade a growing number of human rights defenders and secular intellectuals have begun to argue that such provision should be amended to ensure the state's neutrality towards all religions and the respect for international human rights.

The positions of liberal and leftist forces on human rights tend to be more mature than those of Islamists. Civil parties founded after the revolution such as the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, the Free Egyptians Party, the Egypt Freedom Party, the Socialist Popular Alliance Party or the Al-Dustur Party are now close allies of human rights NGOs. However, some parties, including Egypt's oldest liberal party, Al-Wafd, adopt a restrictive approach towards some human rights such as religious freedom, gender equality and freedom of expression. Pan-Arab parties, such as the Nasserist Party or Al-Karama Party, are also suspicious of human rights NGOs and foreign funding.

Liberal and leftist parties have different ideas on how to achieve social justice in Egypt. Their economic views range from the neo-liberal perspective represented by the Al-Wafd Party to the extreme leftist opinions represented by the Socialist Popular Alliance. There is no unified vision among these parties on the minimum



»»»»» requirements of social justice. They have different views regarding state social subsidies, state-sponsored education, labour rights, minimum and maximum wages, and dependence on foreign loans. A minimum consensus on these pressing issues will be required, as Egyptians are keen to know how the political opposition would seek to improve the deteriorating Egyptian economy without further hurting their living standards. President Morsi and his government have failed to distance themselves from Mubarak's crony capitalism. The policies adopted so far have been very painful for the poor and the lower middle class. A package of harsh austerity measures, including new taxes and cuts in subsidies, is expected before Egypt receives a \$4.8-billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). While the loan will help reinvigorate the Egyptian economy, the country is in dire need of a more comprehensive plan for economic recovery. Crucially, while the leftists and some liberal parties are against cooperating with the IMF due to the deal's negative impact on social rights, they have so far failed jointly to propose an alternative path.

In order to distinguish themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood, liberal and leftist parties need to base their political programmes not on general ideological premises but on concrete and realistic objectives. Although these programmes do address many of Egypt's pressing issues, most parties fail to elaborate on how these issues can be handled within the current political and socio-economic conditions. For instance, the need for a comprehensive strategy for transitional justice and security reform is a pressing concern in Egypt today, but nothing indicates that non-Islamist parties have a clearer vision than that of the incumbent Islamist government on how to handle this problem. The NSF has announced that it is developing a detailed programme to 'save Egypt'. In order to appeal to a broad range of constituencies, such a comprehensive joint programme must not only contain a roadmap for democratic transition, but it should also explain to ordinary people how the opposition would

aim to improve Egypt's deteriorating economic and social conditions.

### **BUILDING CONSTITUENCIES**

Having been criticised for its lack of grassroots outreach for years, the non-Islamist opposition still lacks the capacity and connections with different social bases to transform popular demands into organised political action and votes. The NSF has managed on occasions to build on street protests to embarrass the regime, but mostly its management of protestors' demands has been neither systematic nor effective. Once street protests calm down, the NSF loses momentum. One reason for this is that the NSF has so far failed efficiently to bring wide social sectors into its political vision and systematically use street protests as part of a larger political strategy. Young activists and emerging leaders, who have been fuelling the ongoing street protests, are not adequately represented in most liberal and leftist political parties, including in the newly-founded ones. Young revolutionary forces have limited financial resources to develop their own political parties. Many of them have innovative political visions, but are unable to win seats in parliament without proper support. A systematic inclusion of young forces into the existing liberal and leftist parties, including in leadership positions, would prove a valuable asset. The older generation of politicians should be ready to change parties' internal structures to meet the aspirations of the youth. The civil opposition's electoral strongholds are currently above all the educated middle class in urban areas. It has often been stressed that in order to extend their appeal beyond this circle in future elections, liberal and leftist parties must build ties with voters in poor rural areas too. A systematic strategy to enlarge their social constituencies would also increase liberal and leftist parties' fundraising prospects. Widespread accusations that Islamists receive funds from abroad notwithstanding, the success of the MB's fundraising from a wide network of supporters is undeniable, and civil parties should seek to learn from them.

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## RE-LAUNCHING A FLAWED TRANSITION PROCESS

Aside from the need to strengthen their programmatic and organisational appeal, civil parties must develop a strategy on how to re-design the current transitional process, which they regard as flawed. The NSF announced that it will boycott the upcoming parliamentary election, on the grounds that it believes that it may worsen polarisation and instability. Behind this argument stands the conviction that the current debate in Egypt should go beyond political disputes that can be settled in the ballot box, as there is no consensus in society regarding the basic rules on the nature and political organisation of the state. Some commentators regret this decision by the opposition, as it is a lost opportunity to mobilise its constituency and to achieve parliamentary representation. The Muslim Brotherhood responded to the NSF's boycott decision by stating that the only way to change the rules of the game is through the ballot box.

Although the MB does have a point, the NSF's motivations are understandable within the constraints of Egypt's political process. Even if votes are not directly manipulated, the electoral environment favours the MB and its allies to obtain a parliamentary majority. The Brotherhood has managed to maintain its firm grip on state institutions, including local administrations. The distribution of districts in the new electoral law drafted by the Islamist-led Shura Council maximises the benefits of the Brotherhood. President Morsi has not established sufficient legal safeguards to ensure free and fair elections. The opposition, even if it managed to win enough votes to achieve a meaningful number of seats in an Islamist-majority parliament, would not be able to block or pass legislation, or amend the constitution. Its representation in parliament would only serve to decorate a flawed democratic process. Elections can become a means peacefully to settle conflicting political interests, but only in a political system that guarantees minimum

standards regarding the separation of powers and the rights of minorities. Under Mubarak, opposition parties participated in elections despite the limited political opportunities, but the pointlessness of this experience today leads main opposition leaders to reject a similar strategy after the 2011 revolution. The MB, by contrast, is aware that a victory in the upcoming parliamentary elections would renew its damaged legitimacy. The NSF's decision to boycott the elections should be supplemented by other tactics, including using President Morsi's declining reputation, as well as the current divide between the MB and some of its Islamist allies, in domestic and international campaigns to improve the conditions of political contestation in Egypt.

## DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

In order to create the conditions for free and fair elections, political pressure and grassroots mobilisation by non-Islamist forces will be crucial. In Egypt's current political stand-off the roles of the army and US support are decisive factors. Although President Morsi succeeded in August 2012 to remove pro-Mubarak generals from the SCAF, some signs suggest that the new military leaders do not necessarily support Morsi unconditionally. The army has repeatedly expressed concerns about the country's political scene and some military leaders have even hinted that the army at a certain critical moment might be obliged to step in to maintain order. The MB lobbies for the generals' support, aware that if political turmoil becomes acute military intervention could undermine its political ambitions. While some non-Islamist actors consider an army intervention as the last resort to end MB hegemony, many liberals are aware of the potentially dangerous repercussions of that option, remembering the bloody experience of Algeria in 1992 when the army removed Islamists from power. In the case of a massive outbreak of violence, the army should certainly intervene to maintain order, but it must not get involved in political disputes. The non-Islamist opposition





»»»»» has repeatedly affirmed that it does not aim to remove Morsi, since he is the elected president of Egypt, and that it only seeks to reformulate the basic transition rules set by the SCAF and Islamists during the transitional period. However, if the current government continues to respond violently to protests and peaceful opposition, demands to remove Morsi from power are likely to gain popular traction.

The US has encouraged Egypt's non-Islamist opposition to participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections, in order to have a diverse parliament. At the same time, however, the US has failed to tackle the root causes of Egypt's current political crisis. The US's unlimited support to the Muslim Brotherhood during the transitional period was broadly criticised by Egyptian civil forces. The US government invested all its means to empower the Muslim Brotherhood in its power struggle with the SCAF in 2012, but did little to urge Islamists to initiate an inclusive political process. In March 2013, the main opposition figures boycotted a meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry on his first visit to Egypt. If the US wants to regain credibility in Egypt, opposition leaders argue, it must refrain from empowering some political forces at the expense of others, and must work with the EU to leverage the Egyptian government to engage constructively with the demands of the opposition and civil society. The latest calls from the European Parliament to suspend aid to the Egyptian government after genuine pressure from Egyptian human rights defenders and some liberal politicians should be supported by EU institutions in an attempt to convince President Morsi to address the legitimate demands of his opponents.

## CONCLUSION

The Muslim Brotherhood's legitimacy crisis sets the floor for non-Islamist political forces to fill the emerging vacuum. After the revolution, liberal and leftist parties have managed to expand their social constituency, but they still suffer from many of the

same problems that affected opposition parties before the revolution. The establishment of the NSF is seen as an attempt by the civil opposition to overcome fragmentation. However, the opposition has to work more to strengthen its organisational capacities and be able to offer concrete, convincing and viable political and social policy alternatives to those of the current government. Moreover, they need to develop clear stances on central popular concerns which have so far mainly been addressed by Islamist parties, such as community security, local services, and larger moral issues. Remnants of the Mubarak regime continue to enjoy a remarkable social base, and many are politically-organised, especially since the presidential elections. Most former Mubarak loyalists have joined the Egyptian National Movement Party established in December 2012 by Ahmed Shafik, who was narrowly defeated by Morsi in the presidential elections. Although Shafik and his supporters also oppose the hegemony of the Muslim Brotherhood, current prospects for a political alliance between the remnants of the Mubarak regime and other revolutionary forces (similar to the process currently observed in Tunisia) are low. The lack of trust between both camps continues to divide the non-Islamist opposition. The postponement of parliamentary elections still allows some room for the NSF to pressure the regime to change the rules of political contestation. If political conditions change and the opposition finally decides to run for parliament, unity among its candidates will be crucial. Cohesion within the NSF is currently the only way to strengthen the position of non-Islamists in the political process. Political understanding and electoral coalitions with other like-minded Islamist parties or members of the former Mubarak regime could also be an option. In either case, to emerge as a powerful electoral coalition, members of the NSF will inevitably need to make painful compromises on political and economic issues.

*Moataz el Fegiery is associate fellow at FRIDE.*

**e-mail: [fride@fride.org](mailto:fride@fride.org)  
www.fride.org**

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