TRT world forum 2018

Closed Session

The Political Atmosphere in Egypt:

Reconciliation or Regression?

TRT WORLD research centre

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The TRT World Forum 2018, recognized as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 3rd- 4th at the Swissotel in Istanbul gathering together over 600 esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of 8 public sessions, 11 closed sessions and keynote speeches delivered by some of our most esteemed guests, this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the future of the Middle East and the European Union to the growing trend of Islamophobia, refugees, Turkish foreign policy in an age of crisis, the crisis of new media and female leadership in a world of conflict. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

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Summary

On October 4, 2018 TRT World Research Centre held a roundtable meeting on 'The Political Atmosphere in Egypt: Reconciliation or Regression?' This was part of a series of roundtable meetings forming part of the two-day TRT World Forum 2018.

Once perceived as one of the icons of the Arab Spring, Egypt has come to symbolise the counter-revolutionary wave that has swept across the region.. The recent decision to remove several prominent figures from its official list of "terrorists", which included prominent members of the Muslim Brotherhood, has sparked discussion about the possibility of reconciliation between the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood organisation and the Egyptian government. This session aimed to unpack the ambiguous signs of possible reconciliation in Egypt between the state and its long-time scapegoat, the Muslim Brotherhood. Is reconciliation a real possibility? Or is this primarily a publicity stunt engineered by President Abdel Fattah el Sisi to appease international actors and human rights organisations?

Discussion themes of the session:

- Recent Egyptian social and economic crises, with special reference to the societal views and support for the government post-coup.
- The state of post-coup human rights violations and civil society repression by the Egyptian government.
- The possibility of reconciliation between the 'deep state' and civil society and the future of political Islam in Egypt.
- Discussion on the state of the 'Arab Spring', and whether it is still relevant for democratization in the Middle East.

Introduction

On July 2nd 2013, the Egyptian Army led by General Abdel Fatah el Sisi overthrew the country's first democratically elected President, Mohammed Morsi, in a military coup. The following day, on state television, General Sisi announced the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government from the power and the suspension of the Egyptian Constitution of 2012. In August 14th, security forces and army units under the command of General Sisi raided two protest camps in Cairo, leading to the infamous Rabaa Massacre. Human rights groups claim security forces killed more than 1,000 protesters, most of them supporters of the Morsi government. A crackdown on all opposition subsequently ensued that jailed up to 36,000 people of a variety of political affiliations. Since 2013, the social, political and economic situation in Egypt has worsened, and what was once perceived as an icon of the so-called Arab Spring has come to symbolise the counter-revolutionary wave sweeping across the region.

During the session, the speakers highlighted the social and economic crises resulting from the military regime and possible scenarios for an effective political solution, including reconciliation with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood organisation. The first speaker emphasized the importance of history in better understanding current issues in Egypt, particularly the nature of the military state that has persisted in different forms since 1952. The speaker shed light on the rampant corruption by the Egyptian military regime, the nature of human rights violations in the country and the reasons behind the international community's silence. The second speaker touched on Egypt's geostrategic significance and historical relevance for the Arab world. He argued the 2013 military coup should be interpreted as part of a wider counter-revolutionary wave aimed at reversing democratic advances in Egypt and the wider Arab world. He referenced the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and the exclusive control and dominance of their affairs by the Gulf States and Israel. The speaker expressed that the current problems in the country are part of major political and economic shifts in the world, with particular reference to the slow retreat of the US from multilateralism and rejection of globalism.

Much of the discussion focused on the possibility of reconciliation between the Muslim Brotherhood and the state. One of the participants raised the question of whether the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood along with rampant human rights violations could lead to radicalization among supporters of the group. He argued that the rise of violent groups such as the Islamic Jihad was primarily a result of Gamel Abdel Nasser's military repression from 1967 onwards. However, one of the speakers rebuffed this notion and argued that the Muslim Brotherhood has been able to contain its followers by sticking to peaceful resistance and by rejecting extremists who have resorted to violence.

It was noted that Egypt currently faces three main challenges. First: rebuilding the economy without hurting the vulnerable middle class in such a way as to raise questions regarding the relationship between President Sisi and the business community. Second: overcoming a political structure with a president who is suppressing all forms of opposition and dissent with brutal military force. Third: addressing regional issues including the Sinai Peninsula problem and neighbouring Libya conflict as well as the instability elsewhere in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. Participants and speakers agreed that reconciliation between the Egyptian government and various elements in opposition is the only way forward for the country. It has been suggested that opposition groups should unite to galvanise support to restore democracy and fulfil the aspirations of the Egyptian people.

The Nature of the Military Regime

Egypt gained independence from Britain in 1922 and witnessed the first coup d'état in 1952 by the Free Officers' Movement that removed King Farouk. Following the coup, the British-allied Egyptian monarchy was abolished and a republic was established. In 1954, fellow coup leader Gamal Abdel Nasser became prime minister and, in 1956, president of the republic, a position he held until his death in 1970. Following Nasser's death, vice-president Anwar al-Sadat became president, ruling unchallenged until his assassination in 1981. Hosni Mubarak, Sadat's deputy, succeeded him and held power until 2011.

Low levels of trust and high levels of corruption have led to a stagnant economy and put enormous stress on both the economic and political fabric of Egyptian society. One speaker claimed the initial purpose of the 2013 coup was not to fix the economy – as has been claimed by some of Sisi's supporters - nor simply removing the Muslim Brotherhood as the regime claims, but rather was aimed at stopping the Egyptian people's democratic aspirations. In the speaker's perspective, any interpretation that does not include this does not provide an honest assessment of the situation in Egypt today.

Human Rights Violations

Several participants pointed out that existing economic and social tensions in Egyptian society are contained through a military-political order connected with the so-called 'deep state'[1],and aligned with business interests and regional allies, most notably Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The containment strategy comes with a very high price for the public: human rights abuses—torture, extrajudicial executions and forced disappearances, arbitrary arrest and intimidation. Documentation of the violations by human rights organisations has been instrumental in putting pressure on the regime. According to Human Rights Watch 2018 World Report, Egyptian authorities sent at least 15,500 civilians to military courts including over 150 children between 2014 and 2017. 800 people have been sentenced to death since 2013, and as of mid-August 2017, 378 persons had disappeared over the previous 12 months. According to the US State Department 2017 Egypt Human Rights Report, Egyptian security agents have caused the disappearance of at least 1,700 persons since 2015.

According to the Human Rights Watch Report:

> The Interior Ministry's National Security Agency (NSA), operating with near-absolute impunity, was responsible for the most flagrant abuses, including widespread and systematic use of torture to coerce confessions. Torture techniques included beatings, prolonged painful stress positions, and electrocutions. Prosecutors rarely investigated torture claims and almost never dropped torture-tainted confessions.

According to Amnesty International 2017/2018 Egypt report:

> The authorities used torture and other ill-treatment and enforced disappearance against hundreds of people, and dozens were extrajudicially executed with impunity. The crackdown on civil society escalated with NGO staff being subjected to additional interrogations, travel bans and asset freezes.

In spite of the condemnation of human rights organisations, the Egyptian regime under Sisi has maintained support from important players in the international community, particularly in the West. Even with its dismal human rights record, the regime has managed to secure trade deals with the EU and the US.

During Sisi's visit to Washington in April 2018, President Trump said regarding the Egyptian ruler: "He has done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation." International support for the regime is based on regional security and stability considerations with no reference to democracy and human rights. One speaker pointed out that the Egyptian people took to the streets 100 years ago waving American flags, demanding freedom and democracy. They were inspired by former US President Woodrow Wilson's rhetoric on justice, democratisation and human rights. Today's US leadership by contrast, according to the speaker, stands against the traditional American foreign policy values of democracy and human rights promotion, and multilateralism. Because of America's contradictory stance and the inaction of the international community, authoritarian governments are able to take root in the MENA, as in the case of the Egyptian military regime. In regards to the position of the international community towards Egypt, a participant contended that Egypt is 'too big to fail' for the West and that all efforts would be expended to preserve the current status quo, so long as it is viewed through the dual lens of stability and security. He argued that a stable Egypt is very important for the West because an unstable Egypt, like Libya, could be an enormous liability given Egypt's role in the region. For this reason, the West faces the dilemma of whether to support the democratic aspirations of Egyptians or to maintain the status quo.

A critical problem in Egypt now is the concentration of power. Power has accumulated in the hands of the military regime at the expense of civil society, more so than under the regime of Hosni Mubarak. Under Sisi, civilian life and civilian institutions have been deteriorating, and are arguably weaker than ever. Egyptian society currently has very little space to manoeuvre due to repression and exclusive control of the military regime in every aspect of life. There is a narrow elite controlling domestic, regional as well foreign affairs. Participants agreed that the elite currently in control of state institutions have always worked for the ruling regime (s) in Egypt. Therefore, there is little change from the previous authoritarian administrations. The independence of the vital institutions of the state, for instance, judiciary and media are almost zero. The intelligence and security apparatus are exclusively under the command of President Sisi. In the last election, almost all the candidates were forced to withdraw their candidacy and some were imprisoned because they were regarded as a challenge to the current regime. Thus, participants converged on the assertion that Egyptian governance is seeing a worsening trend.

[1] The term "deep state" is often associated with the turbulent politics of Egypt, a country whose short-lived democratic experiment was interrupted by cabals in the military, security services, and civil bureaucracy.

Opposition to the Regime

It is important to note that many people who initially supported the military coup now openly oppose it. According to one of the speakers, dissent against the Sisi regime is gaining momentum. Opposition to the regime appears to have increased proportionally to the level of crackdowns and repression. The regime continues to target dissidents, most of them from the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, but also those from other political parties and movements, regardless of whether they are violent or peaceful. In the 2018 presidential elections, opposition groups called for an election boycott after all the candidates were sidelined by the regime. In a joint statement, eight Egyptian opposition parties and 150 pro-democracy public figures urged Egyptians to stay away from the March polls in protest.

One of the speakers pointed out that the military has occupied a central role in Egyptian politics throughout much of Egyptian history and people still look to the military for solutions to the nation's ills. However, the military's position in society is in danger now as the level of resentment rises. The military regime is attempting to centralise power, effectively creating an alliance between disgruntled security and civilian elites as well as the opposition.

In addition to widespread abuses and economic stagnation, the speakers highlighted the regime's systematic alienation of both the civilian leaders and the business community as another major reason for the rise of opposition. It was noted that the civilian leaders, the business community, judiciary and security establishment have been pillars of the previous military regimes, with special reference to Mubarak rule. The current military order has chosen to rely on a very narrow affiliation of groups and independents for support in the parliament in an unofficial coalition known as Tahya Masr, which has no official political party framework. Sisi's near-total dependence on trusted support from the military and alienation of other important sectors have systematically increased the military's involvement in political, civilian and economic affairs. This has, in turn, widened the gap between the regime and the public, effectively accelerating the level of opposition.

Many Egyptians, both inside and outside of the country, are demanding a genuine, non-cosmetic change. It was noted in the discussion that once Egyptian people manage to break the barrier of fear, they may more openly confront the military rule. The most important issue, as one participant noted, is preventing a total collapse of state institutions.

Political Islam

Since the abolishing of political parties following Gamel Abdel Nasser's 1952 military takeover, there has been no single influential opposition in the form of a political party in Egypt. The existing political parties and movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, are weak and more divided than ever.

Arab rulers, particularly those in the Gulf, sought to stop the spread of the revolutions by supporting and financing counter-revolutions. According to one of the speakers, the Gulf States in particular are afraid that genuine democracy may succeed in the region. This is why many attendees expressed their belief that even if there had been another democratic leader with no Islamist background at the helm of the Egyptian state, the coup would still have taken place.

A participant raised the question of possible radicalisation of the parties with Islamist backgrounds, referencing the fact that extremist groups, such as Islamic Jihad, emerged in Egypt in response to political repression in Nasser's era in the 1960s. One of the speakers replied by stating that while there are some extremist groups in Egypt, such as those in the Sinai peninsula, the Muslim Brotherhood has been able to control its supporters and keep its youth from engaging in violence. The speaker argued that the Brotherhood believes in peaceful resistance and stands as a barrier to that radicalization. There may be a minority who oppose the idea of peaceful resistance, but the Muslim Brotherhood leadership has deemed them as falling outside the group's ideology of peaceful resistance. However, one cannot rule out the possibility of radicalisation completely given the level of oppression.

Prospects for Reconciliation

The panel suggested that a genuine reconciliation is the only viable solution for the current crisis in Egypt. However, this may prove increasingly difficult to achieve if the Sisi regime continues to foster an "us" versus "them" approach to governing. The regime has created divisions throughout Egyptian society to extend its influence and control, including within families. Additionally, there is a sectarian element in the country resulting from exploitation and politicisation of Coptic Christians by the regime, which has increased tensions between the Muslim and Christian communities.

The regime has made overtures to the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the past few years, but these have been somewhat feeble and appear to have been more about neutralizing the movement rather than offering an opportunity for genuine political engagement. Subsequently, in April 2018, the Brotherhood listed three conditions in order for talks to take place. The first was that talks should be at a more senior level than ambassadorial; the second that the dialogue must include all groups that oppose the current regime, not just the Brotherhood; and third, that all political prisoners, including former President Morsi, should be released before the commencement of any dialogue.

Conclusion

The speakers and participants concluded that there are currently three pressing issues in Egypt:
1) The regime relies on an overly narrow political and social base;
2) The business elites and economic centres which had initially supported the regime have now come to oppose;
3) The international community needs to adopt a holistic perspective, considering not only the stability of the current regime but also the harm it is causing internally and abroad.

The rampant human rights abuses committed by the Egyptian authorities since the 2013 military takeover were discussed during the session. The violations include extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, unfair trials, torture, mass arbitrary arrests, intimidation and a lack of respect for freedom of expression and assembly.

Discussants and participants alike acknowledged that there are currently far too many opponents to the Egyptian military regime, which makes the situation unstable. Many people who have initially supported the military coup have begun to openly oppose it. Dissent is gaining momentum in terms of security-related, economic and political opposition, and has increased proportionally in response to increased clampdowns and repression.

The historical aggressions against the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups with political Islam affiliations have been debated. Since the abolishment of big political parties in Egypt following Gamel Abdel Nasser's 1952 military takeover, there has been no effective political parties. The current political parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood, are weaker and more divided than ever. Although the Muslim Brotherhood has been successful in sticking to its ideology of peaceful resistance, the level of state oppression could lead to further violence.

The only recommended way forward for Egyptian society is reconciliation. In doing so, Egyptians opposed to the military regime (inside the country and in the diaspora) also need to rally behind a call for reconciliation. The international community needs to play a leading role in bringing democracy to Egypt, and in helping heal the fractures in Egyptian society.

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