Editorial:

“Egypt five years since Tahrir: Back to square one”

The revolution will not be televised

It has been five years since the self-immolation of Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi sparked a series of uprisings against authoritarian rule in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. In contrast to the crowds celebrating the transition to democracy in Tunisia, there were no mass ceremonies on the fifth anniversary of the Egyptian revolution. After having arrested activists and shut down cultural spaces, security personnel were out in force. Only a handful of regime supporters were allowed to organise a low-key gathering, not to celebrate the instigators of the revolution, but to praise the police who tried to stop them. All other demonstrations were banned. The social media networks were silent. Egypt has been thrown back to the darkest days under former President Hosni Mubarak.

And yet, 2011 had been so full of hope for a change for the better. On 25 January 2011, after the Tunisian government had been overthrown, tens of thousands of Egyptians flooded into Cairo’s Tahrir Square to call for “bread, freedom, and (human) dignity” and for Mubarak to go. Mohamed Morsi, president of the Freedom and Justice Party, was arrested along with 24 other Muslim Brotherhood leaders but benefitted from the chaos of the revolution to escape from prison two days later. In the days that followed, more than 800 people died in battles with police and Mubarak supporters. Tahrir Square became a symbol of the opposition, not only for Egypt but across the Arab world. Thirty years in power were ended 18 days later when Mubarak stepped down and transferred his powers to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. January 25th later became a public holiday, “Revolution Day”.

But the revolution did not end there. In November, Tahrir Square again became the battleground for democracy, with thousands of demonstrators rallying against the military junta. Dozens of people were killed in clashes between protesters and soldiers. The protests did produce their intended effect though, with the army agreeing to organise Egypt’s first-ever democratic elections. Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi won the presidential elections in the second round in June 2012, with 51.7% of the vote. That same month, Hosni Mubarak was sentenced to life in prison by an Egyptian court.

Democratic transition under President Morsi was messy and ultimately unsuccessful. His government did not hold the military accountable for violence against protesters, pushed a religiously conservative agenda and thus polarised society even further. Fresh protests broke out in November after the President granted himself a range of unlimited powers to legislate without judicial review—
supposedly in order to “protect” the nation. Morsi was forced to annul his decree but did manage to pass a new constitution in a controversial referendum in December. The vote was plagued by widespread allegations of rigging and other irregularities. On the second anniversary of the 2011 revolution, demonstrators thronged in Tahrir Square. More than 50 people were killed during days of violent street protests. It led army chief Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to warn that political strife was pushing the state to the brink of collapse.

Full circle
The President was eventually deposed in July 2013, in a coup d’état led by Sisi in the wake of new protests against Morsi’s decision to appoint Islamist allies in 13 of Egypt’s 27 governorships. One of those appointed was a member of a former Islamist armed group linked to a massacre of tourists in Luxor in 1997. The summer of 2013 saw the start of a merciless and bloody crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood, followed by purges among secular movements and the Egyptian Left. Up to 1,000 supporters of the ousted president were killed when, after 1.5 months of occupation, security forces stormed their camps on Cairo’s Rab’a al-Adawiya Square. In a comprehensive report, Human Rights Watch has described the event as “one of the world’s largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history”. *

In the post-revolutionary politics of Egypt, a new constitution was adopted in January 2014, banning parties based on religion. The government resigned, allowing Sisi to stand for president in elections held in May, which he won with a Stalinist 96% of the vote in a well-orchestrated home-run. One year later, Morsi was first sentenced to 20 years in prison over the arrest and torture of protesters during his rule, and then sentenced to death over the breakout of Muslim Brotherhood prisoners in 2011. The release from jail of Mubarak, even if he still faced charges of corruption and murder, brought the wheel full circle.

President Sisi has reinstated the kind of authoritarianism protesters risked their lives to escape five years ago. In fact, Amnesty International and other human-rights groups have called Sisi’s state repression, intimidation and attacks on press freedom unprecedented. While estimates of the number of political prisoners detained under Mubarak’s emergency law rule run as high as 30,000, a protest law passed in November 2013 has become “a fast track” to prison, with more than 40,000 people—journalists, liberals, activists and Islamists alike—arrested or indicted with a criminal offence in the first year of Sisi’s rule alone.** As the security forces face a burgeoning insurgency and increasingly sophisticated militant attacks, the government has justified the crackdown by saying it is fighting terrorism. The Ministry of the Interior has reported that nearly 12,000 people were arrested on terrorism charges in the first nine months of 2015, but it has released no updated numbers since. President Sisi has accused the Muslim Brotherhood of coordinating with far more radical Islamist groups (including one that has pledged allegiance to ISIS) that have killed hundreds of security forces and downed a Russian charter flight in the Sinai Peninsula.

Sisi’s regime has effectively divided the country into supporters and terrorists. Strangling any form of dissent, the military junta has turned prison into the burial chamber for the aspirations of the revolution. Political apathy appears almost total in today’s army-run Egypt. Yet, the embers of social discontent are smouldering, fanned by the frustration about the country’s poor education system, corruption and sinking economy. The average age in Egypt is 25. Youth unemployment rates rose to 26.3% in 2015, while more than a quarter of Egypt’s nearly 90 Million people live below the poverty line. Until Egypt starts upon the journey of national reconciliation, with every part of society included in a process of rebuilding politics and the economy, it will be difficult for any government to find the path to stability.

Which role for the EU?
The EU’s stance towards Egypt has evolved with the revolving door politics of the country. The EU’s current approach to the Egyptian regime is premised on its role as an important contributor to peace in the Middle East and—ironically—as a supporter of a national unity government in neighbouring Libya. Sadly, this approach is emblematic for the ‘pragmatic’ realism espoused by the new European Neighbourhood Policy: stemming the flow of refugees and fighting terrorism trump the insistence for respect of human rights.

Notwithstanding the token expressions of support for the rule of law, checks and balances, and media freedom in Egypt, it is the absence of any genuine effort on the part of the EU to expose the Sisi regime for what it really is, i.e. a military dictatorship that came to power in a coup d’état, or to tackle the ‘softer’ sources of insecurity (poverty, corruption and bad governance) that prolongs the suffering of the Egyptian people. This failure has also estranged the country’s youth, with whom High Representative Federica Mogherini desperately, but finally unsuccessfully tried to connect in her speech*** at Cairo University last November. The EU must do better if it has any hope of being taken seriously as a champion of democracy and the rule of law in this fragile and volatile part of the world.


Steven Blockmans
Senior Research Fellow and Head of the EU Foreign Policy unit at CEPS
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