

Briefing Memorandum

Political change in Arab nations: The case of Egypt

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Introduction

Having begun with demonstrations in Tunisia at the end of last year, three Arab nations, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya saw dictatorships overthrown one after another. This was the arrival of the "Arab Spring." Today, anti-government demonstrations continue in Syria and Yemen. Similar circumstances may occur in those countries as well. What are the characteristics of the current political change in Arab nations, and what developments will follow in the future? Using the region's largest country, Egypt, as a case study, those questions are considered below.

Regimes overthrown by unorganized masses

This political change is distinctive in that regimes were overthrown through demonstrations by unorganized masses. In the past, overthrow of regimes in Arab nations had generally been carried out through coups d'état by organized political groups. This is because there was no electoral democracy in most Arab nations, so regimes could not be changed through elections. Thus, the only option for regime change had been to overthrow the regime by force. Overthrow of regimes through demonstrations by unorganized masses such as occurred this year was unprecedented, so the current political change has generated different post-overthrow disorder than in the past regime change. Generally in the past, when a regime was overthrown, the political group that overthrew it would establish the new regime. For example, in Egypt in 1952, when the Free Officers Movement overthrew the monarchy, it took over the regime. In contrast, with mass demonstrations bringing down regimes in Egypt and Tunisia this time, it is unclear who will take the reins of new regime. Thus, in Tunisia, the Prime Minister under the old regime, Mohamed Ghannouchi, attempted to retain power for a time, and in Egypt, the military, which had supported the old regime, succeeded in forming an interim administration. In short, this new pattern in which the forces that overthrew the old regime do not set up the new regime prevails in both countries, at least at present. (In Libya, on the other hand, the traditional pattern of the regime change may prevail, where the forces that overthrew the old regime establish the new regime.)

The demands of the demonstrators and the results so far

In these demonstrations, the main focus of the chants and placards of the demonstrators was the

overthrow of the regime, which was achieved. But the real desire of the young people who were the mainstays of the demonstrations was economic improvement, i.e., jobs and higher incomes. They thought that the dictatorship had hindered their economic advancement, so they actively participated in the demonstrations. In reality, however, it was not the case that they were poor because of failures of the regime's economic policy. Indeed, it would be closer to the truth to say that they became relatively well off because of its economic policy. For example, by the mid-1990s in Egypt, there were few electric appliances in ordinary households. Only the wealthy had washing machines with spin functions. There was a shortage of telephone lines, and it was not unusual for several families to share one line. This year, less than 20 years later, young people with mobile phones and computers, far more prosperous than the generation before them, held demonstrations against a backdrop of economic dissatisfaction. In short, they were not demanding wealth because they had been left in poverty. They had reached a certain level of prosperity and, because they had received information about the greater level of wealth in richer countries, they demanded more wealth. It is necessary to note that democratization is not their main concern.

Since the overthrow of the dictatorship, achievements to date include freedom of political activity and freedom of speech and press. The Islamist group Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's de facto largest opposition party, albeit long considered an illegal organization, was legalized and formed a political party, the Freedom and Justice Party. Numerous other political organizations have also formed new political parties. Moreover, the previous restrictions on political speech were lifted, and now free and open speech is permitted. Government-affiliated media that had been mouthpiece for propaganda of the president have changed their attitudes as well. On the other hand, things that have not yet been achieved include the economic improvement discussed above. There is little prospect of achieving it in the future. In particular, the optimistic expectations that young unemployed university graduates tend to hold will never be met. Since the 1970s in Egypt, university entrance examinations have become a mere facade in order to absorb the young people whose numbers increased because of the population explosion. The quality of university education has long been declining. A status of university graduation is thus no longer a guarantee of a certain level of knowledge and ability, but many graduates tend to believe that as people of high educational achievement they are entitled to outstanding employment opportunities. These young unemployed university graduates formed the mainstay of the demonstrations. It is quite possible that in the future, failure to meet their expectations will lead to further action on their part.

The disorder accompanying the overthrow of the dictatorship

Another problem that appeared after the overthrow of the dictatorship is that some people mistake freedom for anarchy. This is because concepts like freedom and democracy have not taken hold. The idea that freedom is acceptable to the extent that it does not infringe on other's rights is not

yet deeply rooted. As a result, many incidents happened in Cairo. In May some Muslims attacked minority Christians (Copts), causing many injuries and deaths. In September, fans rioted after a soccer match, fought with police, and burned several patrol cars and passenger vehicles. Also in September, demonstrators invaded the Israeli embassy. Disorder that could be called the freedom to attack religious minorities, the freedom to riot, and the freedom to invade foreign embassies has been generated. In addition, the worsening of public safety since the overthrow is unmistakable. Since the final days of the Mubarak regime, workers at Egyptian prisons have deserted their jobs, and lax supervision has allowed many prisoners to escape. Moreover, the attendance rate for police officers has declined, eroding the police's ability to keep order. Because the police have stopped making arbitrary arrests that they did in the past, public fear of the police has declined. This has weakened their crime deterrent effect and the number of crimes is increasing. If the police had functioned as they did in the past, these incidents would not have happened. The antipathy of many Egyptians towards Israel and the antipathy of some Muslims towards Christians already existed. However, the dictatorship and the police generally had deterred violent attacks based on this antipathy.

Will the transition from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to civilian rule go smoothly?

Since the collapse of the old regime, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has been in charge of the interim administration. The Council has promised a transition to civilian rule following elections for the People's Assembly and for the President, but the question is whether this will take place as scheduled. Concern about this point has recently been surfacing in Egyptian public opinion. First, the military has a hold on significant economic interests, and it does not want to let them go. Since the 1952 revolution, all four of Egypt's Presidents have come from the military. Will the military allow the birth of a civilian President with real power? Recently there have been whispers that the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, may run for President as an ingenious way of solving this difficult problem for the military. In September, the front page of a leading government-affiliated newspaper just happened to print a photograph showing the Field Marshal, taking a walk in Cairo in civilian clothing and being welcomed by citizens. This drew speculation that it was part of image-boosting strategy aiming to make the field marshal president. Since it has generally been the custom in Egypt for its Presidents of military origin to wear civilian clothing after taking office, one cannot call this speculation groundless. In fact, the only options that the military could permit are either a civilian president who would approve the continuation of the military's special interests, or a president with a military background, as with past presidents.

Meanwhile, the preconditions for the transition to civilian rule such as the People's Assembly

and presidential elections have been delayed. Therefore the young people who led the anti-government demonstrations, who once welcomed the military as being on the side of the people, have now grown critical of it. This mood is reflected in graffiti. "The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, withdraw!" appears on the walls of buildings. Currently, however, an increasing number of people dislike the prolonged disorder and worsening public safety that has followed the overthrow of the regime and criticize the young people who call for continued demonstrations. This is indeed the conventional Arab political structure where those who suffer from disorder call for the revival of a strong regime (approximately equal to a dictatorship). It is possible that those people will support a representative of the military such as the Field Marshal in the election. If the military aims to win the election, restoring order and stability would be an effective campaign promise.

The conspiracy theory that Mubarak is leading a counterrevolution and the theory's validity

With the former President Hosni Mubarak appearing in court as a defendant, the idea has less currency today, but the rumor that the former President is leading a counterrevolution that hinders the progress of the revolution has spread all over Egypt. This story amounts to a type of conspiracy theory, but in this story there are aspects that hit the target as well as aspects that miss.

Aspects that are off-target include the idea that the reason why circumstance of life has not improved economically after the regime change is that Mubarak is leading a counterrevolution. The root of the error lies in the belief that the reason why the people are poor is that the President and his cronies monopolized the nation's wealth, so with their ouster, the monopolization would end, and the wealth would flow to the people. In fact, although the former President and his cronies did use their power to obtain wealth, the share of national wealth that they seized was much smaller than people imagine. In addition to it, the former President's economic policies since the late 1990s achieved high economic growth, which made the people wealthier than they were before. However, the disorder has kept economic policy from functioning since the overthrow of the regime. The tourism industry, Egypt's largest, has collapsed from a drastic decline in visitors. In short, the political change has slowed economic growth. Therefore, it is natural in the short term that overthrowing the previous regime has not made the people richer than before, it is not because of counterrevolution.

Furthermore, most Arab nations, including Egypt, are "-nepotism societies-" that emphasize affinities such as ties of blood or region. In such a society, where if a powerful person does not favor his relatives and people from his hometown, he would be condemned for not meeting their expectations rather than praised for his rectitude, monopolization of wealth by the powerful always occurs. Even if President Mubarak (Leader A) is overthrown, when Leader B takes over as President, the wealth that was monopolized by Leader A and his group will simply flow to Leader B and his group instead. In any event, it will not be spread among the people. To a majority of Egyptians, using connections is only natural. The young people who participated in the demonstrations are no

exception. The only way to change this situation is to overturn those values, but even this drastic political change has left them unshaken. In light of this, the structure where a person of power and his cronies seize their share from Egypt's national wealth and leave the rest to be divided among the people will not change in the future. Moreover, it is possible that stagnation in economic growth will shrink overall national wealth, reducing the people's share as well and leaving them poorer in the short term. However, the people do not understand this structure, which is one reason the story of counterrevolution has spread.

On the other hand, the counterrevolution theory is on target in some ways. Around the time the rumor was spreading, the former President, because of his health, was not imprisoned, unlike many of his relatives and other former high government officials. Instead, he was spending his days in comfort at a hospital in a resort area. In fact, the military accorded the former President, who came from their ranks, special treatment. The actual power relationship was "The military protected the former President," but the people saw it as "The former President is manipulating the military." Just as it is difficult to tell from observation whether the queen bee serves the worker bees or vice versa, it is difficult for outsiders to accurately discern the structure. Therefore, deriving the counterrevolution theory from the former President's special treatment does not accord with the facts, but it is not far off-target.

Outlook for the future

It has been more than six months since the overthrow of the dictatorship in Egypt. What is the country's future direction? Preparation for the People's Assembly election is moving forward, so Egypt's first fair national elections will take place. A rise of the Muslim Brotherhood is a concern for the international community. However, when it performed well in the 2005 election, the Brotherhood was said to discuss whether to recognize Israel. Such actions indicate that the Brotherhood can act realistically, so if it wins the election it is possible that it would take a pragmatic stance. Meanwhile, young people's groups are working to organize, but since they have no political experience, it is difficult to predict their actions. In the future, if public opinion demands the restoration of public order increasingly, it could intensify the collision with the young people's groups. As for the presidential election that will follow the People's Assembly election, both the military and the Brotherhood say that they will not field their own candidate. All announced candidates so far are civilians. If a civilian President is born, a smooth transition to civilian rule will require special consideration for the military. However, the presidential election still has many uncertain elements.

Many commentators have been referring to this political change - as democratization, but if one defines democracy as "fair elections held on an ongoing basis, with changes in government achieved thereby," it remains to be seen whether democracy will be realized and take root. One can consider

freedom of speech and freedom of political activity to be progress towards democratization, but in Egypt now, democratization is advancing hand in hand with social destabilization and worsening public safety. This seems to be the repetition of bad precedents of some Arab nations. If Egypt can break free of this pattern, it will be a brilliant first for the Arab nations, but the current situation allows little optimism.

This political change has brought about many unimagined situations. The notorious Tura Prison, which once housed Islamists for political offenses, now holds the sons of the former President. The public broadcast of them and of the former President being caged as defendants in a courtroom is reminiscent of the trials that followed the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981. In that trial at the beginning of the Mubarak regime, current al-Qaeda supreme leader Ayman al-Zawahiri stood caged as a defendant. Today, Mubarak is in the same place. The Arab people call this political change a revolution; they are quite correct.

The purpose of this paper is to respond to reader interest in security issues while promoting better understanding of NIDS. A "briefing," of course, is a background explanation. Our hope is that this paper will help readers to better understand the complex security issues. Note that the views expressed in this paper do not represent the official opinion of NIDS.

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