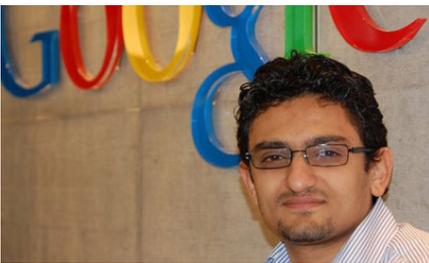




The Puzzle of Post Revolution Egypt

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The Egyptian population's ability to bring about change was on vivid display when thousands gathered in *Tahrir* Square demanding – and obtaining – freedom from an oppressive ruler. With the fall of the government of *Ahmad Shafik* and the appointment of a technocrat, *Essam Sharaf*, as the new prime minister, the curtain is slowly descending on the remains of the Mubarak regime. Most analysts, however, consider the future direction of Egypt to be uncertain and murky. With the media in the Arab World and the West putting every action or event under a microscope, we tend to lose focus on the bigger picture emerging in post-January 25th Egypt. Daily events are taking place in a larger context in which those behind the scenes have different ideologies and seek to lead Egypt in different directions. The new Egypt will emerge from these competing forces. Will democracy take hold and will the new government be more secular or theocratic and will a revival of nationalism play a role? This article attempts to shed light on these questions by examining the attitudes of key groups within Egypt in each of these areas and what that may mean for the future of Egypt.

The democratic, secular, nationalistic ideology of the relatively educated youth of the Facebook/Twitter age who led the 25th of January revolution is not necessarily representative of the entire Egyptian population or even of the entire youth segment of the population. However, this group, which was the most instrumental in launching the revolution, was and is the group most trusted and appreciated by a majority of the population. As a friend of mine remarked, “I feel somehow ashamed that in eighteen days, my children's generation was able to get rid of such a tyrant, who was supported by the entire Western and Arab communities of nations, while our generation spent more than thirty years in total paralysis and simply complaining about the regime.” More recently, other groups – some religious and some not – are threatening to suffocate the secular camp. Some of these groups were predictable, like the Muslim Brotherhood. What lies behind actions of others, like the Coptic Christian Church, the Egyptian Military Command, Saudi Arabia and even the United States, is more complex and difficult to interpret. The following table summarizes the positions of key groups in Egypt vis-à-vis democracy, secularism and nationalism, with the numerical

value (from 1 to 5) representing the relative intensity of their position. Some of these positions are obvious while others, at first blush, may appear counterintuitive.

Ideological tendencies of the major actors shaping the post-January 25 th Egypt						
	Democracy		Secularism		Nationalism	
Internal actors						
The Egyptian Military (Powerful and rigid)	Ambivalent	3	Ambivalent	3	In Favor	5
The Egyptian Youth (Gaining recognition but limited power)	In Favor	5	Divided	3	Leaning in Favor	4
The Muslim Brotherhood (Gaining power)	In Favor, for now	4	Against	1	Ambivalent - leaning against	2
The Coptic Church (Losing Power)	Neutral	3	Leaning Against	2	In Favor	4
Secular Political Parties (weak)	In Favor, but cautious	4	In favor	4	Leaning In Favor	4
Old Regime members (Losing power)	Leaning against	1	In Favor	4	Neutral	3
External actors						
The United States (Questionable Power)	Ambivalent	3	Ambivalent	3	Leaning Against	2
Saudi Arabia (Losing Power)	Against	1	Against	1	Against	2

* 1 being weakest and 5 strongest – an indicator to the reader of the relative intensity of the trend.

Most agree that implementing meaningful democracy in Egypt will be an extremely difficult undertaking with an illiteracy rate over 30 percent and a population used to millennia of subjugation by, and dependency on one brand of “Pharaoh” after another. “Nationalism” (whether Egyptian nationalism or Arab nationalism) has been given little attention while the population is focused on putting its internal house in order. Nationalism, however, is also closely intertwined ideologically with attitudes towards democracy and secularism and, sooner or later, it will likely shape Egyptian foreign policy to a large extent. Ironically, on this issue the Muslim Brotherhood and the United States may become strange bedfellows, united against a rise in Egyptian nationalism, but for very different reasons.

Most Egyptians, Muslim or Christian, are religious by nature and many religious rituals govern their weekly activities to one degree or another. However, whether and to what extent this religiosity should be transferred to the political arena is highly contentious. The battle lines are being clearly drawn between those advocating a secular government and those, like the Muslim Brotherhood, who want (ultimately at least) a theocratic government. The concept of secularism is generally misunderstood in Egypt, often associated with atheism and liberalism, making it more susceptible to challenge by those in favor of theocracy.

There is also increasing speculation behind the scenes about whom the major players in the military are and in what direction they lean. Many analysts believe that the military is sending signals that it is backing an Islamic regime, a stand that seems to have the blessing of the Saudis as well as the tacit acceptance of the United States. It is unclear whether the military leadership has always harbored such leanings or if others are influencing it. The Military Council's appointment of Judge *Al Bishri*, a staunch Islamist, as the head of the committee responsible for amending the constitution was a bad omen for the secularists.



The Military Council's decision on March 5th to appoint only one woman (a holdover from the old regime) to the newly formed government also sends a message on the military's views on the participation of women (or lack thereof). The Council also seems to be ignoring the recommendation of many respected judicial and political figures to have the presidential election take place prior to the election of members of parliament. The argument for delaying the parliamentary elections is that the Brotherhood is the only party, besides the old Mubarak regime, with any significant political organization at present. The Brotherhood would therefore be the sole beneficiary of early parliamentary elections. After more than thirty years of an oppressive Mubarak regime, there is little secular opposition in place that could mount a challenge to the Brotherhood or to candidates handpicked by the military. The military's actions therefore seem to guarantee – whether by effect or by design – that secular voices will not be heard. Although the Brotherhood may have only a fifteen to twenty percent following, they may be able to acquire a much higher, disproportionate number of parliamentary seats in early elections. More importantly, the military is probably aware that the Brotherhood will not challenge the benefits only the military elite enjoy through the commercial/military industrial complex, something they are less able to count on with a secular government.



The Muslim Brotherhood loves democracy, until they attain control. There is a saying in Egypt that the Brotherhood believes in “one man, one vote – but only one time”. The Brotherhood appears to be so certain of their success in the next parliamentary elections that they promised not put forth a candidate in all precincts to allow for other groups to be represented in parliament as well. It is unclear, however, whether the Brotherhood wields that much power. They may simply be placating a portion of the Egyptian population and the West who are wary of their intentions, or may actually be unsure of their real power at the polls and just managing expectations. There is no doubt however that regardless of how much the Brotherhood proclaims to favor a democratic process, their ideology favors a theocratic government in which the democratic voice of the people would be ignored if, in the opinion of religious leaders, it contradicts the *Shari'a*. There are, of course, many interpretations of various laws in the *Shari'a* such that it is impossible to predict how a theocratic government would rule the country. A theocracy in Egypt could follow the stricter interpretations like those observed in Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, where most civil liberties for women and non-Muslims are denied, or follow more liberal interpretation that allow more, but

still limited, freedom. There is no doubt however that the effects on Christians and other minorities, tourism and the economy in general will be devastating. Even if only a small percentage of the population supports the Brotherhood, it is a fallacy to equate minority support for the Brotherhood to rejection of a theocratic regime by the majority. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Muslim majority in the Egyptian population is very susceptible to politically motivated charges that support for a secular government is tantamount to denying the supremacy of *Shari'a* law and therefore of Islam, rather than support for the separation of religion and politics. If political choices are framed in such terms, the vote of the generally religious Egyptian population is too close to call.



Some analysts differentiate between those who identify with the Brotherhood and those who identify with the Salafi movement. The Brotherhood acknowledges on their website, however, that they follow the Salafi doctrine. Therefore, when it comes to policy, the ideological differences between the two groups are almost non-existent. Those who identify more with the Salafi movement in Egypt tend to look at the Brotherhood as adhering less rigidly to the teachings of orthodox Islam, as practiced in Saudi Arabia, and accuse them of some innovative interpretations of Islamic law, but that is where the differences stop. In the grand scheme of things, despite cries from Brotherhood supporters, like the writer *Fahmy Huwaidi*, that the Salafi are extremists^[1], when it comes to shaping Egyptian politics they both favor the Islamic *Ummah*; Egyptian nationalism is a distant second. Note that this month Islamists were already advocating the internationalization of the post of Sheikh of *Al-Azhar*, the highest religious authority in Egypt, proclaiming that he does not have to be Egyptian.^[2] The Egyptian writer, *Ahmad Hegazi*, in his article on March 9th in *Al Ahrām*, reflected the secular view of the Muslim Brotherhood when he wrote: “Riding the revolution (to attain) power...and riding the democracy to (impose) tyranny.”

The ideology of the Christian Coptic hierarchy in Egypt is equally complex. The Coptic Pope wants to cling to power over his Christian flock as much as the Brotherhood wants to attain power in Egypt. The two found themselves united in fighting the emergence of any secular movement. Their collusion was evident last week in Pope *Shenoudah's* surprise announcement that he wants to retain clause two of the constitution^[3], which has become the Islamists litmus test for political hopefuls. Clause two states: “Islam is the State religion and Arabic its official language; and the principles of Islamic *Shari'a*, the main source of legislation.”^[4] The Pope requested, however, that the article be amended to state that, “People of the book (a reference to Christians and Jews in Islam) are to govern themselves in accordance with their beliefs.” That would be tantamount to official State recognition of the Pope as the ultimate authority over his constituents in civil legal matters. The Egyptian Coptic Church often uses (or abuses) its power through its authority to issue certain documents to Copts, particularly in matters involving marriage and divorce. While secularists try to establish a government based upon civil rather than



religious laws, the Coptic hierarchy and the Muslim Brotherhood are united in doing all they can to foil those efforts.

Absent from the internal discourse taking place is any mention of almost half the Egyptian population – women. It is quite striking that, except for a few, women's voices have been silenced and they are relatively absent in the post-*Tahrir* square demonstrations. Not one woman was selected by the military to serve on the committee amending the constitution and, as mentioned above, there is only one woman among the faces of government newly appointed by the military. A woman writer, *Sekina Fouad*, who had been named the next minister of culture in the new government, was replaced at the last second by a man. It is unclear however if the reasons for her removal were gender motivated or because of her political stand on some political issues^[5]. The issue of gender discrimination did arise when an Egyptian Constitutional Court judge, *Tahani Al-Gibali*, objected to article 75 of the proposed amendments to the constitution, which stipulates that the president must have an Egyptian wife^[6]. The use of the feminine gender to identify the spouse, she noted, implies that only a male could be president.



On March 8th, a planned demonstration by women in celebration of International Women's Day, failed to attract the large crowd as expected, and most of those secular women, who did show up, were subjected to sexual harassment and intimidation by Islamist gangs to the point that they had to flee the march^[7].

Aside from these internal groups presently trying to influence the make-up of post-revolution Egypt, two principal external actors, the United States and Saudi Arabia, stand to gain or lose the most, depending upon outcome. The stance of these external actors is, as in the case of internal groups, reflective of their philosophical views on secularism, democracy and nationalism, and what they perceive to be in their own national interest.

In the case of the United States, however, when it comes to the Middle East there is an oil gulf between philosophy and national interest. The choice between stability and democracy has resulted in a constant tension in U.S. foreign policy, and in few places has it been more pronounced than in the Middle East. A case in point is our relationship with Saudi Arabia, considered to be the ideological centre of radical Islam and one of the main incubators of terrorists. The United States has supported the decidedly undemocratic *Wahabi* government there without batting an eye. The United States is wary that the emergence of an independent national and secular democracy in Egypt may threaten the Saudi regime, as we see in other countries in the region. Despite rhetoric on the virtues of democracy, U.S. foreign policy reflects recognition that democracy is a messy and moody form of government, which when practiced in the Middle East could threaten the flow of oil, on which the United States depends, from the Arabian Peninsula through the Suez Canal, and endanger the security of Israel.

Thus, the Obama administration would like to placate the Saudis by signaling to them that, although they abandoned their friend Mubarak, they have no problem dealing with a religiously dominated government in Egypt -- at least as long as they have the army as the ultimate protector of the regime. That policy is reminiscent of the equally ill-guided policy in Afghanistan based on the belief that there were “good” elements of the Taliban. For the United States to formulate its foreign policy based upon some attempt to arbitrarily distinguish between Islamic radical groups is not only ill-advised, it’s dangerous. There are certainly differences between the conduct of the Muslim Brotherhood and the conduct of *Al Qaeda* as much as there are differences between the Taliban that renounce violence and those that do not. But to frame the policy debate in these terms is to totally disregard the secular option, which is what is in the long-term interest of the United States and should guide our policy. There are also those in the Intelligence community that mistakenly believe that it is easier to influence a religious group than a secular nationalistic one, that religious groups can be more readily bought with favors and money. We can see the results of such a misguided policy in the failed attempts to use favors to control religious fanatics in countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, and even in democratic countries like Israel.

The Saudis were incensed when they realized that the Obama administration was abandoning Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia. It was reported that in the Saudi King’s last telephone conversation with president Obama, on the eve of Mubarak’s resignation, the King was raging over Obama’s change of heart in support of the revolution. The Saudis believe that a secular national democracy in Egypt will be harmful to the royal family. They also have not forgotten the proxy war they fought in the sixties against Egyptian forces sent to Yemen by a then nationalistic secular president Gamal Abdel Nasser, and the constant abuse the Saudi rulers suffered in the Egyptian media. The Saudis are against democratic rule in Egypt, against a secular government and against a nationalistic government. Confronted with a *fait accompli* on the issue of democracy, the Saudis would at least like to prevent the emergence of a secular nationalistic government. When their foreign minister, *Saud Al Faysal*, visited the heads of the Egyptian Army^[8] on March 2nd he most likely promised monetary support for Egypt – as long as they fight national secularism. It is already being reported by the head of the Saudi Chamber of Commerce and Industry, *Saleh Kamel*, that Saudi Arabia has decided to form an investment bank in Egypt with a \$100 billion capital, to help the Egyptian economy.^[9]

In Cairo, there is an eerie feeling that the voices of the secular youth that started the revolution are being smothered, while radical Islamists are slowly stepping in and taking over the space in the street. With a high percentage of illiteracy and no system of checks and balances, the revolution may be hijacked to somewhere the original pilots never intended to go. Let us hope that the United States will support a secular democracy rather than act as if a government dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood is inevitable. That would be bad for Egypt, the region and the United States. U.S. Policy should be driven less by the form of foreign governments and more by the principles they stand for – such as civil liberties, protection of minorities, women’s rights. And let us hope that Egyptians will

surprise us once more when they go to the polls, by remembering their own slogan: “Religion belongs to God and the country belongs to all.”

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^[1] Al Shorouk March 13th, 2011 <http://www.shorouknews.com/Columns/column.aspx?id=407356>

^[2] Source: Al Dostor February 27th, 2011 <http://www.dostor.org/society-and-people/variety/11/february/27/37136>

^[3] Source: Al Dostour February 24th, 2011 <http://www.dostor.org/politics/egypt/11/february/24/36908>

^[4] President Sadat was instrumental in playing the religious card in order to divert attention from his expanded power. When he decided to amend the constitution in 1977 to basically remain president for life while totally restricting the participation of any rival, he then amended this clause by making the principles of Islamic Shari’a “the” main source of legislation instead of “a” main source. It was his way of pocking at the Coptic Pope who was then a source of annoyance while appeasing the Islamists.

^[5] A staunch socialist known for her Pan-Arabism stand, *Sekina Fouad* was also criticized in the past for her anti-Semite remarks.

Wall Street Journal: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704335904574497143564035718.html#articleTabs=article>

^[6] Source: Al Shorouk March 8, 2011 <http://www.shorouknews.com/ContentData.aspx?ID=404240>

^[7] Source: Al Shorouk March 8th, 2011 <http://www.shorouknews.com/contentdata.aspx?id=404634>

^[8] Source: Al Ahram March 3rd 2011 <http://www.ahram.org.eg/460/2011/03/03/25/65449.aspx>

^[9] Source: Al Ahram – March 8th, 2011 <http://www.ahram.org.eg/465/2011/03/08/25/66400.aspx>

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