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A functioning state and pride in this functioning state is as much part of the Egyptian identity as the rest. It is precisely this compact of pragmatism, pride and aspiration that need to be understood to make sense of recent events.

The last time I was in Egypt a few weeks ago everyone was waiting for the June-30. Activists were a little quieter, keeping their powder dry; the police freely admitted that they wouldn't be bothering to arrest anyone until then; the country was holding its breath for what was clearly marked out as the day on which the population's patience would run out on Morsi and his government . As I climbed out of one taxi, the driver yelled out in sing song 'And remember, InshAllah, June 30—Bye bye Mr Morsi!' and burst out laughing while sounding his horn in cucaracha time.

I had the impression that the mix of exhausted frustration and defiant hope and all the protests over the past year were being re-packaged as dress rehearsals for Act II. Whether what has just happened is genuinely Act II or the final curtain is difficult to tell. Over the past year I've spent quite a bit of time in Egypt leading to the launch last month of a report on the attitudes of young people toward the revolution and its promise – and over the course of heated conversations, leisurely evenings, research meetings, debates, interviews, parties, taxi rides and more rides a couple of things have become clear to me – leaving me with hope for the years ahead.

Democracy vs social justice

The first is the relatively insignificant status of 'democracy' as a concept - in comparison to social justice and dignity. There is much discussion in the media about whether or not this is a step forward for Egyptian democracy. All sorts of valid questions – can democracy be imposed by the army? Can it emerge against the backdrop of a suspended constitution? Morsi was put in place by democratic elections how can his removal be interpreted as anything other than an affront to the people? And while all of these quite rightly create severe doubts as to the democratic nature of the army's comportment, most Egyptians I've talked to have been at pains to point out that democracy was not the primary aim.

One young activist of the kind we might label secular and liberal went as far to say:

> "What good is democracy if there is no social justice? That is, a regime that respects human dignity and fulfills basic needs; right now in Egypt we have a democratically elected government that stands by as the police brutalises citizens, beats them up, strips them, tortures them and sometimes kills them. At the same time poverty spreads."

The words 'social justice' (Al-'adalah ijtima'iah) and 'dignity' (karama) recur again and again - almost incantatory in their omnipresence. And wilfully divorced from their older cousin 'democracy'.

As framed by Sherine El Taraboulsi of AUC:

> "As a concept, the question of social justice has a particular resonance within the region perceptible most especially at the level of how social justice is articulated. (…) In recent protests in Tahrir Square for example, while "social justice" or more accurately, since there are differences as will be later explained, al-'adalah ijtima'iah, remains central, "democracy" is hardly mentionedand the public discourse on social justice does not necessarily see it as an extension of democratization but sees it as connected to a number of other rights that a democracy would guarantee such as dignity, freedom of expression, transparency and equality before the law. The important point here then is that social justice in the Arab Awakening public realm is not always articulated as a by-product of a democracy, and that calls for analysts and commentators on the Arab region to take social justice as its point of departure and undergo a reassessment of what social justice is in today's Arab world, based on needs, perceptions and manifestations on the ground".[1]

Democracy itself, as several people told me, 'doesn't really matter'. A party can be democratically elected but if it doesn't deliver on social justice - equality before the law, freedom from state and policy brutality, the protection of the weakest in society and access to the basics - housing, employment, literacy - then, according to my varied and numerous interlocutors, democracy does not count for much.

Professor Ahmed Abd Rabu of Cairo University evoked the informal poll he took in his graduate class in February 2013 during which he posed a question to his students: "I asked them, he said, how many of them would be willing to trade Egypt's democratic consolidation for economic development. Two thirds of them were in favour". "For them," Abd Rabu continued, "there is no democracy without social justice and there is no social justice without redistribution and economic development. So, that last one - social justice - has to come first". By early June, when Abd Rabu asked them again, the numbers in favour of privileging economic development over the rest had gone up to almost 100%.

For many of us, these components of social justice are inherent to a functioning democracy – because we see them as a product of democracy. That is, we take them to be part of the richer, less strictly procedural, definition of democracy. But in a part of the world where democratic procedure (elections, constitutions, etc.) is, at best, seen as having changed nothing for people's everyday life and, at worst, seen as a smoke-screen to justify the active brutality of the state apparatus against significant sections of the population, 'democracy' is a hollow term, and often invoked as a possible product of the rest – though not even necessarily so.

Another serious mistake, however, would be to dissociate the demands for 'bread' from those of social justice and dignity. This is not about an economic process trumping a political one, but rather a deep commitment to those politics of social justice and dignity - in which bread and freedom go hand in hand. In this respect an article by Wael Nawara in *AlMonitor* struck me as both exactly on the right track – but also incomplete. Nawara rightly

argues that it is important to take on board the dynamics provided by Egyptian identity – its pride in its nation state which the Muslim Brotherhood does not sufficiently acknowledge; its historic role in leading the Arab world, and the deeply entrenched ways of life that cannot be reshaped de facto by the ideology of Muslim Brotherhood. In this respect, Nawara is right. I'm not so sure however that this identity is so divorced of the pragmatic considerations around fuel shortages, electricity black outs and the demands for bread. A functioning state and pride in (and hope for) this functioning state is as much part of the Egyptian identity as the rest. It is precisely this compact of pragmatism, pride and aspiration that need to be understood to make sense of recent events.

In this respect the concepts of dignity and social justice are a much better way into the situation than is democracy.

An Egyptian protestor crying after the news that President Morsi will be removed. Demotix / Amr Abdel-Hadi. All rights reserved

Dignity? 'We are all Khaled Said'

Time and again people reminded me of Khaled Said and the circumstances of his brutal death in June 2010. The fact that a few days before one of my visits in February another incident of this sort had occurred (the beating and stripping by police of Hamada Saber in front of the Presidential Palace, this time captured on video) made it all the more poignant and served as a powerful prompt for many to argue that nothing had changed in the 'new' Egypt. (Recent articles actually record an increase in police brutality.)

Such abuse by the police and the forces of order – and the role that the narratives around such incidents (and there are many) play – needs to be taken on board beyond the story of human rights violations or abuse that they tell. The human rights abuses are to be condemned, but the incidents are also a key to understanding the manner in which democracy is being interpreted and portrayed in Egypt: a form of institutionalised helplessness before the force of the state which many thought had ended with the revolution; and a failure by the democratically elected MB to change any of it.

The concept of dignity, omnipresent in political discussions, is worth examining for what it

reveals at the heart of political demands (and is reminiscent of the language used in the civil rights movements of the 1960s). It is also important to take note of the word because dignity is relational - it is about recognition. Rather than emanating as a matter of course from the individual as human rights do, it is in fact step two - it is the required response from another in view of that claim to humanity. We cannot treat the other with dignity without having more than an intellectual or mental grasp of it; we must root our actions in experience. In this respect, treating someone with dignity is an educated emotional guess about the complexity of his or her needs -physical, political and emotional.

At the heart of dignity there is a demand for the fulfilment of basic needs. Certainly a shorter distance between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Interestingly, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy links social justice philanthropy to distribution of power; it defines it as involving, "giving to create *a more equitable distribution of power* … to truly reform institutions so that the need for chronic charity is eliminated". This is an expression closer to social justice than to political representation - and it feeds directly into the nurturing of a dignified approach ('"chronic charity", after all, can easily be understood as the diametrical opposite of dignity).

What now?

At the launch in Cairo a couple of weeks ago of the *Revolutionary Promise* report, young people from Egypt (but also Tunisia and Libya) expressed their frustration at being marginalized entirely from policy-making as well as their anger that 'after all that' as they put it, nothing seemed to have changed in their lives. One person in the room stood up and asked, 'but surely you didn't things would change in a matter of months?' to which the chorused reply was 'well, actually we did – we'd toppled a dictator, we thought we'd done the hard part'!

This reminded me that not only were the people involved in many of these uprisings quite young; more to the point, this was still the early part of a maturation process for the region and for Egypt. That's not to imply that any of these countries will follow a pre-tracked path to liberal democracy as conceived of on distant shores, but it did mean that we were at a stage of political development that was both necessary and insufficient.

Without wishing to be patronising in the face of huge courage and commitment, you don't need to be a psychoanalyst to detect some pretty familiar models at work in the recent events in Egypt – and it is easy to cast the Egyptian army as the strict parent stepping in to rescue its wayward teenagers from the scrape they've gotten themselves into.

Many commentators are seeing in this move both an assertion of military might (and the re-establishment of a pre-electoral order) as well as an inherent weakness in the Egyptian people's capacity to build a democracy; '*Fine democrats you make* they seem to be saying'.

Except that Egyptians never claimed to be on the road to democracy - they wanted social justice and dignity and a responsive government that would deliver these. And they weren't getting it. So they decided to keep pushing, taking whatever means necessary in order to try again.

And what of the losers?

The situation does shed remarkable light on the actions of Morsi and his government over the past year. What many to whom I spoke referred to as their 'hysterical push for control'. While I'm sure that the imposition of a more conservative religious outlook and set of rules was a part of Morsi's plan, one thing I am even more sure of was that the 'push for control' stemmed equally, if not more so, from the conviction and the lived experience of having no control whatsoever over the state apparatus. Whatever his huge failings, whatever the dubious commitment to democracy and whatever happens now, it is clear that Morsi was many things, but paranoid was not one of them: his perception that his grasp on the levers of power was at best tenuous was correct.

And he was indeed caught between a system whose long, corrupt roots reached deep into a Mubarakian state over which he and his band had no control and a (wealthy) army ever ready to depose him. The only way this will ever change is if the roots of change are embedded at the local level and in forms of accountability – procedural, process-oriented, cross-generational – that take root in the neighbourhoods of Egypt.

Those who argue that the army stepping in yesterday means that nothing has ever changed or will ever change in Egypt, are missing the main point made to me again and again – no matter how difficult things are, we are no longer afraid. Let's call that dignity.

[1] Sherine El Taraboulsi, *Al-'adalah ijtima'iah in Transition: Social Justice Philanthropy and the Arab Awakening*, Cairo: TrustAfrica, American University in Cairo. February, 2013.

About the author

Catherine Fieschi is the director of **Counterpoint** a research and advisory group that works to provide governments, businesses and NGOs with analysis on how cultural and social dynamics affect politics and markets. Catherine holds a PhD in Politics from McGill University in Canada. She is the author of *In the Shadow of Democracy* (MUP) and of numerous pamphlets and articles on extremism, populism, citizenship and identity politics.

Subjects