



Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 2, Episode 4

What is the legacy of Egypt's Arab Spring, 10 years on?

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SR: Welcome to "Democracy in Question," the podcast series that explores the challenges democracies all around the world are facing today. I'm Shalini Randeria, director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Graduate Institute in Geneva and the rector of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

[00:00:30] My guest today is Michael Wahid Hanna. Michael is an adjunct senior fellow at New York University School of Law. He also directs the U.S. program at the International Crisis Group, a think tank working to prevent wars and shape policies that will build a more peaceful world. Michael is widely published on issues of international security, international law, American foreign policy in the Middle East.

Let me just mention two of his recent books, *Hybrid Actors: Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East* and *Citizenship and its Discontents: The Struggle for Rights, Pluralism and Inclusion in the Middle East*. Thank you very much for being with me here today, Michael.

MWH: Thanks so much for having me.

[00:01:15]

SR: So, this year 2021 marks the 10th anniversary of the Arab Spring. In 2011 anti-government protests first started in Tunisia, quickly spread around the Middle East and North Africa from Morocco to Bahrain. Though these rather spontaneous uprisings were met with violent

responses from authoritarian governments, some long standing autocrats like Ben Ali in Tunisia, Gaddafi in Libya and Mubarak in Egypt, were ultimately deposed. I focus on the legacy of the Arab Spring in Egypt today. How can we understand what happened in Cairo 10 years ago? And what changes for good or worse did it lead to in the country? 10 years ago, these eyes of the world were on Cairo, especially on Tahrir Square, as a series of popular uprisings in Egypt culminated in the fall of the once powerful Mubarak regime on the 11th of February 2011. It was thought to be a new dawn of democracy. Michael, you were in Cairo then, and in Tahrir Square as the protests mounted 10 years ago. So, let's begin with your personal experiences during those weeks and months.

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MWH: Yes, so I live in New York, and I follow these issues closely. When we went to bed on January 24th, we had no real sense of what was getting ready to happen. And I think the participants themselves were probably shocked when they went out onto the street and realized what had been amassed in the streets of Cairo. And of course, Ben Ali, has already fallen in Tunisia. And it's the beginning of this cascade moment. But in any event, once seeing these things unfold, I decided that the place I should be to understand what was going on was Cairo. So I left New York, I flew into Cairo, it was past curfew, when I landed, I was stopped by multiple military roadblocks, detained for a good 30 minutes, my flash drive was seen as very suspicious, people were paranoid and on edge. And I obviously then went on to witness something quite

incredible. You know, I should say that in the lead up to February 11th, what was quite interesting were the number of people who joined the protest, not necessarily as sort of activists, but as curious bystanders. It was like a civics class in many ways, asking questions of those in the square and elsewhere, "What are you doing? Why are you doing this?" And so all of that created this very positive atmosphere. And of course, this is truly mass mobilization.

[00:04:00] And so when in the streets during those days, you were surrounded by thousands and thousands, tens of thousands of people. And each day, the square was following news of some sort. One day, people were listening to Obama's comments about Egypt. It's a period rife with rumors, and of course, it had been preceded by pretty severe violence, you know, hundreds of people dead and injured. It was a quite tense period. And when the news came on February 11th, that Mubarak had stepped down, effectively been forced to step down, I think at first, there was quite a bit of disbelief. People simply couldn't believe that this had actually happened. Others were overcome in tears, some expressing complete elation. It was a moment that I think almost nobody could have conceived of happening and people, I think, felt the weight of that announcement, and felt like they had been part of making that historical outcome happen.

[00:05:00] And to be there, I think is something that has left a lasting impression in my mind. And of course, the kind of naïve optimism of the moment has also left a lasting impression. And so, where we find

ourselves today, and where more importantly, where Egypt and Egyptians find themselves today, is a product of a series of very catastrophic decisions in many cases. But at that moment, on February 11th, when people in Tahrir Square heard the news, it was something quite unique and quite a touching experience from a personal point of view.

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SR: So today, many may see the Tahrir moment as a wasted opportunity, an opening towards a transformation that was just closed off too soon. In Egypt, the 2012 presidential elections brought to power the radical Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, led by President Morsi. This ended then in 2013, in the coup that reestablished military control. So, except for Tunisia, most of the Arab countries swept up in the Arab Spring seem to be in some ways worse off today. Now, thinking back on your exhilaration, the excitement ten years ago, do you think there's a way to think of the legacy of the Arab Spring as a transformational event even today?

MWH: I think it is fair enough to say that based on the political aspirations, the kind of animating rationale of the moment, and the hopes of those, you know, not just individuals on the ground, but kind of movements and organizations that participated, I'm not afraid to say that this has been a failure. Thinking back on what those people wanted, what were those demands, it's hard to judge the present moment as anything like a success obviously. That being said, this has had a

massive impact on Egypt, on the region. And there are ways in which its impacts will be felt for generations to come.

[00:07:00] And so I think at some level, perhaps this has ushered in a period of instability that can eventually lead to some kind of regeneration. I don't see that as any kind of near term prospect. We are really at a point of democratic depression, that it's a moment of resurgence in authoritarianism in the region, and instability and violence and conflict have bred reactionary impulses in many places and have shrunk the political imagination understandably. If you live in war torn countries, if you are in Yemen, or in Libya, or in Syria, for many, personal survival is their first concern, and the grand projects of political change for many have been set aside. You know, I think the thing that perhaps was lost on many of the protesters at the time, is that salutary political change or moments of opening, but more importantly, political ruptures are dangerous, even if entered into with good intentions. Even if autocrats who have misruled their countries and repressed their people are overthrown, there are vacuums that open. And I think there wasn't a full appreciation in many cases of just how dangerous that moment was, despite the fact that it was a genuine political opening, there was great potential for political change and transformation.

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SR: So, one image which in especially Western political discourses recurs over and over again is political Islam. The influence of Islamism has been seen as one of the key obstacles to democratization in the Arab

world. What is often overlooked is the fact that there exists in Egypt, as also elsewhere, as you have pointed out in many of your writings, key distinctions between the practices and traditions of religion and piety that pervade social mores, everyday social life, and the hyper religious vocabulary and discourse of organized radical Islamist forces. You have made it very succinctly here when you write, "*The vast majority of Egyptians are neither liberal nor secular, and continue to believe in the important role of religion in the public square, and the predominant role of the state. Egypt is lacking in genuine calls for pluralism, liberty, and equality. But these are not tantamount to an endorsement of Islamism, as represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and other variants of political Islam.*" So could you explain the significance of this distinction that you are making?

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MWH: There is at times a confusion of religiosity and Islamism. They're just not the same thing. As you mentioned, Egypt is a pious contrary. Religious belief among Muslims and the 10% of the country that is Christian is high. But religious belief does not necessarily mean an endorsement of political Islam, and Islamism that seeks to be the guiding force for all facets of governance, and social and political life. What I think is a mistake is to look at the elections that took place, the parliamentary elections first and then the presidential elections, in which the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists did quite well, and take that as a kind of baseline for politics in Egypt. These are the last elections of

the Mubarak era. They're not the first elections of our transition here in Egypt. This is what is left after these decades of first military rule and then more autocratic rule under Nasser, Sadat, and then Mubarak, these are the parties that remain as opposed to a kind of new beginning. You know, the thing to remember about a group like the Muslim Brotherhood is that its official cadres are very small. It is, in effect, something like a secret society.

[00:11:00] And so official members of the Muslim Brotherhood are not a huge number in Egypt. Of course, that doesn't count soft support of which obviously, there is quite a bit in Egypt. Islamism has been on the rise in many respects from 1967. We saw a kind of moment of religious revivalism in the region. Following the defeat in June 1967, the Arab armies to Israel led by Egypt, we see a kind of retreat in many ways based on the experience of Islamist parties in power or contesting power during the uprisings. And so it's not static. Like any other society or region, you know, the fates of political parties and movements is not fixed. And in Egypt, in the immediate post-Mubarak period, they had some very clear organizational advantages that allowed them to compete in a way that other parties were not able to. They did take part in this broader moment of religious revivalism in the region. And they were seen based on their role in parliament, they had participated in controlled fashion, in parliamentary elections under Mubarak, but they had been seen as pushing anti-corruption. And for many, they were something new and potentially better. And so, you know, that is in the realm of soft support. Much of that soft support collapsed during their brief period in

power, but these are people who represent a real constituency, and a kind of organic part of Egyptian society.

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SR: So let me take you to the opposite point of view because there is the obverse to viewing Arab societies through a lens of monolithic Islam or Islamism, is the perception that liberal values and politics have never had, nor will they ever have any significant sway in these societies and in this part of the world. A more historically rooted analysis, however, would reveal a much more complex picture. They would show ups and downs, they would show a gradual ascendancy of Islamic revivalism and the periodic intensification of authoritarian tendencies. So how does Egypt compare in these respects with, say, Turkey or Pakistan, other countries in the region? And what factors could lead to the future emergence of a pluralistic liberal politics in Egypt and elsewhere?

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MWH: Yeah, it's a big question. I'm allergic and I always have been to notions of immutability that this is a kind of fixed fate, that Egypt will forever be deciding between military dictatorship, or military-led politics, or religious authoritarianism. There's nothing fixed about that. You know, I do believe in political culture. You know, you cannot create a political culture overnight. And I think it is fair to say that there was not great support for liberal politics in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Mubarak. There's not a great constituency at the moment for that kind of

pluralistic outlook. And there are historical reasons for that. But again, it is not fixed. And, of course, we have seen in earlier periods of Egyptian history, contestation around these ideas, around notions of liberalism, secularity to a degree. And when we look comparatively, we see a place like Tunisia where there's a much bigger constituency for an idea like secularism in a way that has served as a counterbalance and has, I think, been beneficial to their political transition. I mean, I would note as well that Tunisia's Islamists look very...do not look very much like Egypt's Islamists. They've been much more wise, much more consensus-focused, and have really thought in a much broader way about keeping a political transition going as the kind of paramount goal, to not let this revert to authoritarian relapse.

[00:15:15] There are elections in Tunisia, there are political parties in Tunisia, there are changes in power. I think there's great frustration, of course, with what it has produced, particularly on an economic level. But it hasn't cast that aside, those frustrations haven't mounted to such an extent that the entire experiment has been jettisoned. But that counterbalance was important. That counterbalance didn't exist in the same way, in Egypt, there were huge constituencies in support of the military. You know, when the military came down to the streets in February, in particular, February 2011, they were seen as protecting the protesters, they were seen as somehow a neutral party. And of course, they turned out not to be a neutral party at all in the broad sweep of events. But there's a real constituency for that kind of statist outlook.

And that's a key and important current in Egyptian politics is support for the military. Again, that's changed over time. It has...as they have been front and center in Egyptian politics for a decade, perceptions of the role of the military have changed. But that in some ways, has been the unfortunate counterbalancing pressure to Islamist ascendance in the early days. And obviously, that has not produced good results.

[00:16:30] But Egypt has changed a lot since the period of if we go back to Gamal Abdel Nasser, say, social mores have changed, the country looks quite different. There was a much greater sense of the ways in which governance and religion were separate, say, during the period of Arab nationalism, but it was never a question of pure separation. These were never hard and fast rules. You had family inheritance laws, other ways in which religion has always been a part of Egyptian politics. But it has changed over time. And there's no reason now to think that these things are fixed. And so politics change, political culture can change. It is changing. These are not the kinds of changes that can happen quickly. It's been ten years since the uprisings. You know, it's the work of maybe generations as opposed to kind of short-term outlook of political change.

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SR: So, one actor in this kind of a change, change of political culture, change of political institutions, and systems, even slow and incremental change would be civil society actors. So let's look at the specific shape and workings of civil society in Egypt. Do you see some pressure for

change coming from below, even religious ones, moderate religious ones?

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MWH: They do play a huge role. They did play a very important part in Egypt. And it's part of the reason that the current disposition is very focused on crushing that kind of independent civic life. The Sisi regime in Egypt now is very focused on limiting civilian and civic, political life and activity. It conceives of these things much more broadly and I think that is rooted in their sense of what happened in 2011. In the decades prior, the kind of late Mubarak era, a time when lots of discussion was focused on who would succeed Mubarak, there was a clear effort to install his son, Gamal Mubarak, his successor. But in the meantime, during that period, there was the rise of a semi-free press. And there was a kind of controlled political competition in which various political parties competed, including the Muslim Brotherhood. These were not free and fair elections. There was no way that, say, the Brotherhood and other oppositions parties could capture a majority of an Egyptian parliament. But even that diminished version of political life in which there was some ability to dissent to the extent that you stayed within the boundaries of accepted discourse that you didn't cross a few very important red lines, that moment in which authoritarianism was seeking, I think, to be somewhat more nuanced, and to try to control politics with a slightly softer touch. This isn't to say that this wasn't a very repressive government. They were. Lots of Islamists were in jail, there were periods of intensifying repression, but nothing like we see in Egypt now.

[00:20:00] And the lesson that the authorities took from that, after they were able to fully return to power is that they were never going to let that happen again. The chief lesson was that we can't allow these kind of green shoots that might eventually grow into something important, we can't allow them to exist at all.

In this period from 2013, really till the present, we've seen the authorities in Egypt crush any kind of civil society actor. We've seen even tiny protests repressed. And people have seen this at times as a kind of sign of weakness, that they are afraid for their sustainability, that they're scared of what this represents, as a challenge to their power. And unfortunately, I don't think that's the case. I think there is simply a zero sum attitude. The pervading concept here is that any kinds of nonconformity, any kinds of dissent, anything, no matter how small that could eventually threaten their regime must be crushed in the early stage. They're not ever going to let events evolve in such a way that the building blocks of an uprising are being constructed right under their noses. Which effectively did happen in the late Mubarak period. When we look back, in hindsight, we see all the ways in which the period created the building blocks upon which people were able to create this moment of mass mobilization and uprising.

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SR: So Michael, let me draw your attention for a moment away from Egypt to Tunisia, not only because that's where the first voices of resistance were heard during the Arab Spring, which signaled a lot of

hope for change, but also because Tunisia seems to have emerged as the only country in the region with a democratic polity, even though marred by poverty and by corruption. So, what makes Tunisia exceptional, especially when it comes to secular values and norms and practices?

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MWH: Yeah, I mean, we have a kind of, at times, idealistic notion about repression, that it is always ineffective. And of course, it's not true. Repression, it turns out, could unfortunately be quite effective. We see this now, in Egypt quite clearly, it is not effective at good governance, but it can be effective at regime sustainability. And similarly, it *can* produce social change. And so Bourguiba, Atatürk before him, they did, in fact, through repressive means usher in social changes, some of which have had kind of lasting impact in Tunisia, in a way that has no correspondence in Egypt. That was not part of the kind of Arab nationalist program of Nasser and clearly was not in his much more right-leaning successor, Anwar as-Sadat.

And so it did create a different kind of politics. In Egypt I mentioned Sadat and his much more right-leaning politics. When he came to power, tried to crush leftists who he saw as supporters of his predecessor, and he nurtured Islamist parties as a kind of counterweight. And it's part of a kind of larger arc in the region, in which non-Islamist parties are ruthlessly repressed. And regimes because of this moment of religious revivalism are unable to sort of eradicate religious politics. And in some ways, religious politics in the region becomes this kind of vernacular of

dissent and opposition. And so, it highlights this duality, this contest between dueling kinds of authoritarianism, autocratic leadership versus religious authoritarianism.

[00:23:30] And Tunisia did look different. Its politics, after the fall of Ben Ali, looked more plural, sometimes in problematic ways. I mean, Tunisia's seculars have been at times unreasonable and have been very rigid, and ideological, and hardline. So it's not to sort of commend them as the kind of ideal political force that one would want to see rule Tunisia, but only to say that the existence of multiple political parties with viability, with real constituencies, do create counterweights within society and can play an important part in balancing out political competition in a way that doesn't necessarily create a kind of zero sum atmosphere, in which survival and the ascendance of one strain of political thought is seen as the kind of near term goal.

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SR: Let me turn to another aspect of the Arab Spring and ask you if the international community and international organizations could have possibly played a different role, one that may have affected more positively the course of democratic transformation in the Arab world. Or do you see this as mainly a failure of internal forces, domestic politics, which could not have been in any way supported in a different direction from the outside?

MWH: I primarily see the events being driven by local agency, by local decisions. You know, I think the determinations of groups like the Egyptian military, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, were the key centers of decision making at an early stage right after the fall of Mubarak. And there are clearly things to criticize about the role of the United States and its European partners in how they handled the uprisings. When we look at Syria, there is a lot to criticize. But one lesson that is very clear to me looking back on this experience is that these political ruptures are dangerous and at times uncontrollable. It's not simply a question of solutionism, it is not simply that if you have the right policy prescription, then the country is going to turn out okay.

[00:26:00] Once Bashar al-Assad decides to deal with political opposition, mobilization, and dissent, by murdering his way through the protests as a means to kill as many people as possible to sustain his rule, those are local decisions, and they create situations that are obviously not easily dealt with. It is not simply a question of prescription. At times, particularly in Washington, there is a sense that we just have to get the right policy, and once we have the right policy, then things will be better. But the right policy on Egypt isn't going to democratize the country, right? I mean, democratization is only going to happen when there is sufficient support on the ground and among those with decision making authority to democratize the country. The United States can be helpful, others can be helpful. We see that in Sudan now.

In some ways, the reverberations of the uprisings continue in places like Algeria, and more pointedly in Sudan, which is in the midst of its own very fraught transition to an unknown endpoint. But they're both worrying signs and positive signs. And I think there are ways in which outside actors can help those transitions along. They can't create those transitions, they can't create those political openings. Those things have to be organic and rooted in society, for them to have a chance for success. And so there is much to criticize about how the United States and others handled the uprisings. You know, we saw the migration crisis, I mean, lots of things flow from that moment. Less than ideal, there's a lot of tactical things that I think decision makers got wrong, but hard to lay the blame for failure at the foot of others in this case.

SR: Thank you, Michael. Thank you for this really insightful discussion on the prospects and also the obstacles for democratic transformation in Egypt and in the Middle East. It's been a great pleasure.

MWH: Thanks again for having me.

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SR: The protests in Tahrir Square in Egypt 10 years ago was sudden, unexpected, and also exhilarating. Meanwhile, deep disappointment has set in about the prospects of a democratic transformation in Egypt and more broadly in the Middle Eastern Region. And even if the Arab Spring did not produce liberal secular societies, I think it's important to remember that everyday religiosity and piety should not be confused with

support for political Islam. Repressive regimes have gained the upper hand. For now, we seem to be left with the alternative between autocratic leadership and religious authoritarianism. And yet, what Michael Hanna reminded us is a democratic transformation needs strong support within each society.

Thank you for listening to this episode of "Democracy in Question."