

Failed Democratization of Egypt

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The Arab Spring was the term used to describe a number of anti-government rebellions and protests that engulfed the Arab world roughly a decade ago as a result of oppressive

governments, inequality, and injustice. Beginning in Tunisia in 2010, the uprisings pushed governments in Northern Africa and the Middle East towards democracy, however, in many countries, the democratic movement faced large obstacles. A perfect example of how the Arab Spring uprising failed to transition a country from non-democratic to democratic is Egypt, a country with a long history of non-democratic policies and a military backed Presidential Republic. Democracy is a political system in which there are regularly scheduled elections where the most powerful decision makers are elected in free and fair elections where the majority of people have the right to vote.¹ The role of the government in a democracy is to govern and act in the best interest of the citizens that voted them into power. That government must follow a constitution that provides law and structure to the country and lists the freedoms given to the country's citizens. The system and Constitution should also make sure that all citizens are treated equally and justly. Democracy should allow for free and fair elections that allow for equal voting rights and a peaceful transition of power when dictated by the people's vote. While the Arab Spring uprisings helped to temporarily push Egypt from being a presidential republic into being a democracy, a number of obstacles has prevented the full transition. These obstacles include a history of unfair elections, socio-cultural issues among citizens, and a long historical tradition of non-democratic principles.

One of the primary forces keeping Egypt in a standstill in their transition to democracy is a pattern of unfair or limited elections that has plagued the government for nearly a century. One of the pillars of a democracy is the ability to conduct free and fair elections where all citizens have the equal opportunity to vote. This just is not the case in Egypt. After gaining independence from the United Kingdom in 1922, a new constitution established a parliamentary

¹ Huntington, S., 1993. *The Third Wave*. Norman, Ok: University of Oklahoma Press.

system, and Egypt held its first of ten general elections, until the Revolution of 1952. However, during this time of Egypt's free democracy, women were not granted the right to vote until 1957 thereby disqualifying Egypt as a true democracy until that point. The Revolution of 1952 was established as a coup, when the Free Officers Movement overthrew the Monarchy and Parliament, and placed coup leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, as prime minister and president. Nasser was succeeded by his Vice President, Anwar al-Sadat, who ruled until being assassinated in 1981 by Islamic extremists. Sadat was succeeded by his Vice President Hosni Mubarak, who ruled until the Arab Spring uprising. During this period, from 1952 until 2010, elections were held and did indeed allow women to vote, thereby progressing in that criteria. However, the lack of any opposing parties other than the military backed regime prevented Egypt from achieving democracy historically.²

One reason that there are not any free or fair elections in Egypt is the large role that the Egyptian military plays in the elections. The Egyptian military has tremendous power over the elections not because of subordinating the public in Egypt, but by making and posting themselves as the supreme, indispensable arbitrators. This power completely takes away the citizens real sense that they actually have a "choice" of whom they want the President to be.³ Without having a choice of whom they want to be elected the next President, the elections in Egypt that are supposed to be democratic really are not democratic at all. Another reason why there are no free and fair elections in Egypt is the power hungry President that is in charge. Throughout his time as President of Egypt, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has constantly tried and attempted to expand his power beyond the government and military. If he had control over what type of government would run Egypt, he would like to go back to an authoritarian regime, which

² BBC News. 2020. *Egypt Profile - Timeline*.

³ Maghraoui, Abdeslam, "and About The Author(s)"

is a government that has no checks and is ruled by one strong central power. An authoritarian government would give most of if not all power to President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and would get rid of the elections that are a check on his power. There are a number of sources that prove the President has attempted to and successfully has rigged the elections in Egypt. He has eliminated all real challengers that announced their intention to run for President against him. He did this by having the military arrest 2 candidates and put another on house arrest until they dropped out of the election.⁴ This would completely go against the idea of free and fair elections, as the citizens are being forced to vote for the power hungry President instead of having a real choice. Lastly, several opposition groups have threatened to boycott the election because it was not being conducted fairly. The President of Egypt responded to this by threatening to use the forces of the Egyptian military against anyone that threatens the elections.⁵ For the last century, Egyptian elections have been marred by limitations of opposition through the restrictive laws against women in its early years to the modern era, where leaders are using military threats to limit any opposition. Without all people's votes counting and being heard, the state of Egyptian progression towards democracy remains stagnant.

Socio-cultural conflicts between the citizens and the rulers are a second major factor slowing the progress of Egypt toward democracy. One main issue in Egypt's movement towards democracy is secularism. The Egyptian government has both historically and recently, struggled to maintain an independence from religious influence. The Revolution of 1952 banned not only opposing political parties, but also the Muslim Brotherhood, to limit the influence of religion on state policy. However, with the Arab Spring uprising, the Muslim Brotherhood movement was

⁴ "Egypt: Planned Presidential Vote Neither Free Nor Fair." Human Rights Watch 2020

⁵ "Egypt: Planned Presidential Vote Neither Free Nor Fair." Human Rights Watch 2020

legalized in Egypt and given limited political power. The Egyptian government is tightening its grip on mosques and sermons, concluding that the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and the new military regime “are fighting out an important battle between religion-controlled state and state-controlled religion.”⁶ The argument here is that the conflict is between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military regime, but both the Brotherhood and military regime do not support the separation of religion and state which is a key part of what goes into a democracy.

In addition to the secular battles currently plaguing the government, other socio-cultural influences have held back Egypt’s transition to democracy. Egypt is currently plagued by various inequalities, including education access and gender inequalities. There is a growing concern in and around Egypt that education in the country is not equal, and that it is only guaranteed for those who have highly educated parents, those who come from better socioeconomic backgrounds, and those who are born in certain areas of Egypt.⁷ The right to education is a key part of whether or not a country is democratic or not. Along with education inequality in Egypt, there is also gender inequality. Historically, women were given the right to vote in limited fashion in 1957 but after the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt, there has been a major push for social conservatism in the country. For women this meant sexual and gender based violence, calls for segregation between men and women in all public places, and an increase in the gender gap by increasing the wages of men while at the same time decreasing the wages of women.⁸ The definition of democracy calls for a system and Constitution that makes sure that all citizens are treated equally. With the education system causing inequality and the calls for gender discrimination after the Arab Spring protests, this is not a country that treats all

⁶ Dacey, Austin "Does Secularism Have a Role in Egyptian Struggle?" 20146

⁷ "Egypt: Inequality of Opportunity in Education." 2020

⁸ "Egypt: Inequality of Opportunity in Education." 2020

of its citizens equally. For Egypt to continue on its long path towards becoming a democracy, they must get rid of the inequalities all across the country.

The final reason why Egypt is in a standstill in their transition to becoming a democracy and still have obstacles to overcome is its historical tradition of non-democratic principles. The first argument for this is Egypt's past style of government which was a monarchy. Egypt has had many constitutions, most of which continued to give power to the King. For example, the 1923 Constitution provided for a bicameral parliament, an independent judiciary, and a strong executive in the form of the king. In 1930 this constitution was replaced by another one, which gave even more powers to the king and his ministers.⁹ It was not until 1952 that Egypt was officially declared a Republic. However, during this same time period, in 1958, an Emergency law was enacted that has been extended nearly continuously until today and has been used to control citizens and power within the country. The constant state of emergency has been used by multiple parties of Egypt to limit free speech, prohibit peaceful protests, increase censorship, extend a police state, and suspend basic constitutional rights.¹⁰ In other words, the elected government has used a state of emergency to limit the rights of its citizens, thereby eliminating the possibility of achieving true democracy.

Although Egypt has not fully turned its government into a democracy, it has taken some significant steps towards becoming one. A perfect example of this comes in the year 2005. This year is significant because for the first time, Egypt held its first presidential election in which multiple candidates vied for the office and which was conducted by popular vote. Prior to that time, a single candidate had been chosen by the legislature and then confirmed by a national

⁹ Baker, Raymond William, and Donald P. Little. "Government and Society." 2020

¹⁰ Wolfe, L., 2020. *COLD WAR LEGACY: EGYPT'S EMERGENCY LAW 162 OF 1958*

plebiscite.¹¹ This was a great stride towards democracy in Egypt, as it was a way for citizens to have their voices heard in government for the first time.

Another stride that Egypt took happened during the Arab Spring protests in the early 2010's. The Arab Spring uprisings were protests in Egypt and other surrounding countries that were aimed at increasing the low standard of living along with getting rid of tyrannical regimes in the region. The ability for citizens to have the opportunity to have their voice heard is a key part of democracy and is a great step by Egypt in their journey to becoming a complete democracy.

To conclude, while one needs to acknowledge Egypt's push toward democracy in the last decade, the transition has been greatly limited due to numerous factors. Although the protests of Arab Spring and the first democratic election in Egypt's history in 2005 helped push Egypt in the right direction, unfair elections, issues among citizens, and a history filled with non-democratic principles has put their transition into becoming a democracy in a standstill. Elections, or a reasonable facsimile of an election, are not enough to define a democratic society. Elections must have equal access participation among voters. The citizens must have unlimited access to free speech, and opposition to the ruling party must be able to state their policy differences without the fear of reprisal. The ruling party must respect the rights of all citizens to participate fully, and until that occurs in Egypt, the country cannot be fully considered a democracy. In the future, Egypt will continue to have socio-economic issues. As long as Egypt continues to hold onto its long tradition of inequality and the military's role in selecting a government they will not become a democracy.

¹¹ Baker, Raymond William, and Donald P. Little. "Government and Society." 2020

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