

InsightEgypt

ISSN 2282-5959

N. 1 | May 2013

Stop-and-go: Egyptian Civic Opposition Moves Slowly Forward

Azzurra Meringolo

Since the fall of President Hosni Mubarak, the attention of most international observers has been absorbed by the Islamist movements, particularly by the Muslim Brotherhood. The lack of coordination between the different non-Islamist parties and movements means that the current opposition is a nebulous galaxy of actors whose influence on the transitional process has often been neglected. These non-Islamist political forces refuse to be labeled as "secular": they prefer to be known as *madani* or civic. While they respect the principles of Islam, they reject religion as the main touchstone in politics.

After several birth waves of new organizations¹, the majority of these movements and parties have converged into the National Salvation Front (NSF), under the coordinating direction of Mohamed El Baradei.



A mural on the exterior wall of the presidential palace depicting President Mohammed Morsi, left, former military council ruler Hussein Tantawi, center, and ousted president Hosni Mubarak with Arabic that reads "no, the brotherhood's constitution is not valid," in Cairo, Egypt, Dec. 8, 2012. (photo credit: Nasser Nasser/AP)

The face-off with the Islamists

The first face-off between the civic organizations and the religious forces took place during the March 2011 constitutional referendum. Tensions between the two fronts raised when the Islamists succeeded in

¹ For a detailed chronology of the birth of new civic organizations please consult appendix 1.

With the support of Eni

 **IAI**
Istituto Affari Internazionali

persuading the majority of the electorate that the vote was about Islam. A wide majority, 77.3% of the voters, approved the new constitution².

During the parliamentary elections that took place in November 2011, the Islamists garnered 65% of voter preferences³. Between all of them, the splintered civic organizations⁴ collected only 20.5% of the vote. A drop in consensus for the Islamists was registered at the presidential elections of May 2012⁵, but the civic forces were unable to unite their voices to promote a single candidate: they were scattered among four different candidates. Although they have very different life histories, Amr Moussa and Ahmed Shafiq have been described by the Islamist and by revolutionary forces as *foloul*, remnants. Meanwhile the socialist Hamdeen Sabbahi, who turned out to be the real surprise of the vote, was not perceived as a truly influential candidate⁶.

The most recent face-off took place during the referendum on the draft Constitution⁷ approved in December 2012⁸. In this vote, 63.8% were in favor of the text, but in three provinces the draft failed to get a majority of the vote⁹. The critics of the new constitution¹⁰ did not so much oppose Article 2, with its reference to *Sharia* as the foundation of the law, as much as they took a stand against the articles that lay out the separation of powers, women status and the role of the army¹¹.

The NSF was born in the midst of this debate, particularly after the decree of November the 22nd with which Mohamed Morsi broadened his powers by striking against the judiciary¹². The influence of the NSF remains doubtful. In fact, its internal struggles became clear when the more liberal currents clashed

2 Nathan J. Brown, "Why Nobody Noticed What Egypt's Opposition Has Won?", in *The Middle East Channel*, 28 March 2011, <http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/node/732121>

3 The brotherhood party, *Hurrya wa Al-Adala* obtained 37.4% of the vote, the Salafi party *Al Nour*, 27.8%. This data refers to the votes came by the lists of party candidates. In the electoral system that was used, one third of the seats were elected directly while the rest were assigned on the basis of the lists provided by the parties.

4 *Al-Masriyin al-Harar* and *Al-Tagammu* ran together under a single list called the Egyptian Block, while *Al-tahaluf al-Sha'abi al-Ishtiraki*, *Masr al-Hurrya* and other minority revolutionary groups formed a list called The Revolution Continues. *Al-Wafd* ran alone.

5 In the first round of voting Sabbahi got 20.7% of voter preferences, Moussa 11%, Abu El-Fothou 17.4% and Ahmed Shafik 23.6%. Mohamed Morsi, the Islamist candidate who at the second ballot would prevail with 51% of the vote received only 24.7% at the first-round.

6 The fourth candidate of the civic parties was Khaled Ali, a lawyer.

7 November 2012, Ahmed Maher, founder of the "April 6 Movement", decided to abandon the constitutional assembly, accusing the Islamists of ignoring the demands put forward by the other participants.

8 See the interview with Marina Ottaway by the Council on Foreign Relations, *Egypt Struggle for Power*, 5 December 2012, <http://www.cfr.org/egypt/egypts-struggle-power/p29599>

9 Cairo 43.2%, Munufyya 48.9%, and Garbiyaa 47.8%. See the actual commission data published by the EISA website: *Egypt: December 2012 Constitutional referendum results*, <http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/egy2012referendum.htm>

10 At the beginning of 2013 the Egyptian president called on a committee to work on amendments to the Constitution, but it is still not clear what articles can be modified.

11 Juan Cole, "Egypt's New Left Versus the Military Junta", in *Social Research*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (Summer 2012), p. 487-510.

12 Issandr El Amrani, *Navigating Egyptian political crisis*, in *ECFR Commentaries*, 11 December 2012, http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_navigating_egypts_political_crisis

with the socialist wing over austerity measures (associated with International Monetary Fund loan)¹³ that would have hurt the weaker social classes¹⁴.

It's not impossible that civic forces and the *foloul* will set aside their ideological differences and bury their enduring conflict to establish an anti-Islamist alliance, but until now this did not happen, although at sometimes the two fronts have joined in public street demonstrations and the NSF has recently welcomed Amr Moussa among its ranks, cleansing him, so to speak, of his *foloul* label¹⁵. Still, given their origins, the *foloul* are difficult to absorb into that group of non-homogeneous movements described as revolutionary forces, at a time when the Islamists are trying to paint that same opposition as a counter-revolutionary force. Under the circumstances, it would be highly discrediting for the opposition to enter into negotiations with cells of the old regime. Inside the civic organizations, the young revolutionaries are the first to put pressure on their leaders to avoid any alliance with the *foloul*.

From the streets to the ballot box: the hard climb of the youth movements

From the first days of the transition, the motley universe of the youth movement faced a lack of central leadership. Decentralization, flexibility and ideological diversity were elements of strength in the fight against the old regime, but they became an handicap on election time.

*Shabab al-Thawra*¹⁶ was one of the main youth movements into which at least 25 other groups¹⁷ chose to merge. About 50 young people ran as candidates during the 2011 parliamentary elections, but they ran on different, unrelated lists¹⁸.

At the presidential elections, the Egyptian youth could not bring its votes to bear on a single candidate. In the first round of voting, the former members of the Muslim Brotherhood who had joined *Al-Tayar al-Masry*, as well as other youths, supported Abdel Moneim Abu El Fothou. Without formally stating so, the "April 6 Movement" supported Sabbahi. At the second ballot between the former prime minister of the Mubarak's era, Ahmed Shafiq, and the Islamist Mohamed Morsi, a portion of the youth boycotted

13 Ahmad Mustafa, "Questions Surround Unity of Egypt's National Salvation Front", in *Al-Monitor* (transl. from *Al-Hayat*), 16 April 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/contents/articles/politics/2013/04/unity-egypt-opposition-national-salvation-front.html>

14 Andrea Teti and Gennaro Gervasio, "After Mubarak, Before Transition: The Challenges for Egypt's Democratic Opposition", in *Interface*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (May 2012), p. 102-112.

15 Hamdeen Sabbahi did not fully agree with the credit given to Amr Moussa.

16 The group Youth of the Revolution was formed by movements that were politically oriented such as April 6, the Democratic front, *Al-Tagammu*, the campaign to support El-Baradei, the Socialist revolutionaries and a few members of the Muslim brotherhood who left the brotherhood to join *Al-Tayar al-Masry*.

17 Concerning the young revolutionaries who refused not to participate in the political arena or in the ballot, see Moataz Sayed, *Perception of young people towards political participation in liberal political parties in Egypt post the 25th January Revolution: a qualitative study*, Master Thesis, American University in Cairo, February 2013.

18 In light of the disappointing election results, *Shabab al-Thawra* announced it was disbanding on July 8, 2012.

the vote, while another part such as the “April 6 Movement”, supported the Islamic candidate, as it considered itself to be already part of the new opposition¹⁹.

The Egyptian youth have not succeeded in shifting their revolution into the ballot box²⁰, but they have had a pivotal role as custodians of the revolutionary values²¹. The new political system has disregarded them, but through several initiatives they have attempted to defend those revolutionary values of justice, liberty, and democracy for which they fought. To those who accuse them of being too idealistic and not flexible enough to make necessary political trade-offs, the youth reply by creating newspapers, non-governmental organizations and forums for discussion that not only deprecate the current state of affairs, but search for solutions that are consistent with their revolutionary values²².

Future challenges

Despite the setbacks in the latest union and student elections, the civic forces have frequently been able to speak out and be heard, even ousting the Muslim Brotherhood from some of its historic strongholds²³. At least for now, and in the short run, this limited success will most likely not determine a massive change in electoral behaviour to their advantage.

These youth forces should attempt to overcome the strained polarity between Islam and secularism, broaden their base, and attempt to reach different segments of society. In addition they will have to decide how to finance themselves. To prevent internal stresses, the civic parties have refused generous donations from single individuals²⁴, yet they have not been able to establish any fundraising strategies for their activities.

Another challenge concerns youth participation. Although they have been the main actor during the revolution, young people continue to be excluded from the decision making process where an older elite is still in a dominating position. Sabbahi's party has instituted an executive council that includes 17 young members, while the older generations have been grouped into an advisory committee.

19 In popular parlance, the young revolutionaries who in the end decided to look for Morsi are known as *Botoo' al Lamoona*, meaning the people of the lemon. Before going to vote against the worst of two evils they are said to have covered themselves in lemon (the Egyptians say that if you have to eat something that is barely edible you have to cover it in lemon, so you don't taste it).

20 Nadine Sika, “Youth Political Engagement in Egypt: From Abstention to Uprising”, in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2, p.181-199, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2012.709700>

21 Andrea Teti, “Egypt from uprising to revolution”, in *OpenDemocracy*, 12 March 2013, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/andrea-teti/egypt-from-uprising-to-revolution>; Andrea Teti, “Egypt from uprising to revolution”, in *OpenDemocracy*, 12 March 2013, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/andrea-teti/egypt-from-uprising-to-revolution>

22 Thomas Carothers and Nathan J. Brown, “The Real Danger for Egyptian Democracy”, in *Carnegie Articles*, 12 November 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/11/12/real-danger-for-egyptian-democracy/eg5z>.

23 Azzurra Meringolo, “I corpi intermedi e la partecipazione giovanile nella società egiziana”, in *Aspenia online*, 17 aprile 2013, <https://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspensia-online/article/i-corpi-intermedi-e-la-partecipazione-giovanile-nella-societ%C3%A0-egiziana>

24 *Masr al Hurrya*, for example, has set a ceiling of 200,000 Egyptian pounds for any single donation (about Eur 22,000/USD 28,000).

El-Baradei's party on the other hand continues to be shaken by deep internal turmoil²⁵, and so far has failed to find a suitable way to involve young people in the decision making process²⁶.

This issue is linked to the problem of balancing internal democracy and discipline. Egyptian youth are motivated by revolutionary aspirations rather than by party's logic which requires a minimum level of compliance²⁷. At the same time, older movements' leaders are not able to hold the reins of the protests and end up being dragged into the streets by the most active youth component of their own organization²⁸.

Until now the street rage has not been constructively channeled. Unable to translate the cries from Tahrir Square into solid political initiatives²⁹, the NSF has been unable to capitalize the wide discontent over issues of social justice and governance. Criticism of Mohamed Morsi has not been turned into valid alternative proposals³⁰, as became apparent during the Constitutional debates, when the NSF has been unable to propose any thoughtful amendment to the new text.

The civilian parties have also been unable to exploit the sudden drop in popularity of the Islamist movement³¹ and the NSF appears to be adopting a short term approach with little or no proposals³². This sterile attitude appears to be corroborated by the recent decision, agreed upon by all the parties and the movements of the Front, to boycott the next parliamentary elections³³.

Inside the civic groups, the debate is still raging between those who think that Parliament is the ideal place in which to pursue the fight and those who, on the contrary, believe that street actions are more effective.

The NSF should decide how far it can take this script, given that a (less and less credible) threat to boycott the vote is based on the self-contradicting charge that the Islamists are refusing concessions to the civic forces. By snubbing the electoral process and its results, the NSF could be accused of inexperience and a lack of understanding and sophistication in the political arena. Even of being a danger for stability.

25 In January 2013, about 200 members of *Al-Doustour* organized a sit-in to protest against the leadership of the party, expressly criticizing some decisions by El-Baradei, such as a change in the membership of the executive committee.

26 On April 4, 2013 the activist journalist Gamela Ismail was named head of the organizing secretariat of *Al-Doustour*. To attempt to resolve the internal conflict between the old guard and the new, El-Baradei brought forward to June the internal elections that had been planned for September 2013.

27 Georges Fahmi, "L'opposizione laica avanza in ordine sparso", in *Limes*, No. 1/2013, p. 37-42.

28 Issandr El Amrani, "On the Egyptian opposition", in *The Arabist*, 27 February 2013, <http://www.arabist.net/blog/2013/2/27/on-the-egyptian-opposition.html>

29 Bassem Sabry, "Rethinking Egypt's opposition", in *Al-Monitor*, 22 December 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/rethinking-egypts-opposition.html>

30 *Ibidem*.

31 According to a report published at the end of March 2013 by *Baseera*, an Egyptian center for research on public opinion, president Morsi's popularity has reached a low point of 47% (http://baseera.com.eg/baseera/recentpollmore_en.aspx?ID=18)

32 Maha Abdelrahman, "The Egyptian opposition: from protestors to revolutionaries?", in *OpenDemocracy*, 22 April 2013, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/maha-abdelrahman/egyptian-opposition-from-protestors-to-revolutionaries>

33 Following a judgment by the Cairo administrative court, dated March 6, 2013, the election law has been sent back to the Constitutional Court. As a result the legislative elections that were scheduled to take place in April have been put off to a later date, still to be defined, and probably will not take place until next fall.

If they maintain their boycott threat, the civic forces would leave the field open to the Islamists. The more they maintain their distance from the ballots (now considered by the majority of Egyptian citizens as the only source of legitimate power), the greater the political polarization. By refusing to continue to engage with government forces within the institutional loci, a voting boycott would further reduce the presence of civic forces on the political stage, precisely when they have a better chance of grabbing consensus from the Islamists whose influence is beginning to wane.

It would appear preferable to attempt to persuade Islamist voters to move over to the side of the civic movements. In persisting to use the tired public square as its main, if not only arena for political battle, the opposition will end up having mostly press conferences and appearing on television programs that will be increasingly under the control of government forces.

Appendix 1: A chronology of the birth of the new Egyptian civic parties³⁴

Before January 25, 2011:

- *Al-Wafd*, liberal party founded in 1978;
- *Al-Tagammu*, left-wing party founded in 1976;
- *Al-Ghad*, liberal party founded in 2003 by Ayman Nour, who was arrested and imprisoned in 2005 after daring to defy Mubarak at the presidential elections.

March – May 2011:

- *Al-Masry al-Dimucrati al-igtima'i*, the Egyptian social democratic party;
- *Al-Masriyin al-Harar*, the free Egyptians, party founded by the Coptic tycoon Naguib Sawaris;
- *Masr al-Hurriya*, Egyptian freedom;
- *Al-tahaluf al-Sha'abi al-Ishtiraki*, People's Socialist coalition.

April – November 2012:

- *Al-Dostour*, the Constitution, founded by Mohamed Al-Baradei;
- *Hizb al-muttamar al-Masry*, the party of the Egyptian conference, by Amr Moussa;
- *Al-tayar al-Sha'abi al-Masry*, the Egyptian Current Party, conceived from an idea by Hamdeen Sabahi;
- *Masr al-qawia*, Strong Egypt Party, founded by Abdel Moneim Abu El-Fotouh.

³⁴ For an in-depth analysis, see Georges Fahmi, "L'opposizione laica avanza in ordine sparso", cit.

Appendix 2: the youth initiatives in defense of the revolution

- From October to December 2011, a group of activists that wanted to condemn violence by the supreme Council of the Armed Forces against the demonstrators started a campaign known as *Askor Kazeboon* (The Military are Liars). With a projector hooked to a computer, the activists were able to show the atrocities perpetrated by the Army and brought the images into the rural zones where access to the Internet is limited.
- During the election campaign for the parliamentary vote a youth initiative called *Esmikflol.com* was born to decry the presence of members of Mubarak's party among the candidates running for office.
- And I just take initiative, this time, was *Mosireen's*, a youth collective that gave birth to a YouTube television channel by the same name, to counter the official coverage by the state media.
- Finally, as soon as Mohammed Morsi was elected president, a new website was born called *Morsimeter*, that purported to evaluate the president's legal performance³⁵ by regularly publishing his achievements, or lack thereof.

³⁵ To analyze the president's performance, the *Morsimeter* employs five categories: security, traffic, bread, healthcare, and fuels.

About Insight Egypt

The series is part of a two-year research project on Egypt, started in 2013, which aims at monitoring the uncertain transition taking place in the North African country. Following closely the evolution of events, the series explores the transformations of the socio-economic and political-institutional, as well as energy policy and foreign policy of the country, including its relations with Italy and Europe

A specific attention is devoted to the actors of the transition: opposition movements, youth groups, the judiciary, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the Muslim Brotherhood and other social actors such as trade unions and business associations.

Possible scenarios of the political, economic and social evolution in Egypt are also prepared and discussed.

The project will be realized by a multidisciplinary research team of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), which has developed over the years a solid experience on Egypt.

About the author

Azzurra Meringolo is a researcher within IAI's Mediterranean and Middle East programme. Her research interests include the politics of the Arab world with a particular focus on Egypt.

She holds a PhD in International Relations and works as journalist, travelling towards the Middle East for years. Contributor to national and international newspapers, she is member of the editorial board of the IAI's webzine *Affari Internazionali* and scientific coordinator of the *Arab Media Report*.

Author of *I ragazzi di piazza Tahrir*, in 2012 she won the Ivan Bonfanti journalism award and her doctoral thesis on Egyptian anti-Americanism awarded the Maria Grazia Cutuli prize.