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Why No Democracy in Egypt?

Why No Democracy in Egypt?

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Democracy, Development, and Violence

Merrimack College

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Abstract

This paper will work to discover why the attempt at democracy in Egypt was a failure. It will analyze the aspects and features of democracy, and look at the features that Egypt lacked that made their democracy fail. It will also look at the results of the Arab Spring, and how that played a role in the deterioration of a democracy. Lastly, it will discuss what regime Egypt is currently under, and what it will need in order to become a functioning democracy. Through the use of scholarly articles, this paper will be able to better understand what is currently happening in Egypt as well as what can be done to change it. This paper will also use a variety of sources that help create a well-accepted definition of democracy.

Introduction

Throughout history, Egypt has maintained an authoritarian regime, with little hopes of democracy. This paper works to understand the history of Egypt, leading up to the possibility of democracy. After years of a dictatorship, Egyptians rose up during the Arab Spring in order to fight towards a more representative government. After this revolution, many had thought there was a chance at democracy for the first time in Egypt. This thought, however, was quickly diminished by yet another dictator. The essay hopes to determine some of the reasons that Egypt never became a democracy, and ultimately decide which explanation takes us the furthest. It will describe Egyptian history in order to set up the story prior to the hopes of democracy. Following history, we will define democracy in order to determine the exact reasons in which Egypt is not a democracy. Finally, this paper will look at four independent reasons for the lack of democracy in Egypt and conclude which reason is most legitimate in the case of Egypt. Overall, this paper will better understand the story of Egypt and why there is no democracy today.

Egyptian History and Government

Egypt has a history of dictatorship, dating back to the beginning of time. Due to this lack of democracy, it is not surprising the history that Egypt has undergone. To begin, it is important to outline some of the major organizations in Egypt. First, the Muslim Brotherhood has been and still is one of the most powerful organizations in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood is an opposition group in Egypt, that is focused on politics and religion. The Muslim Brotherhood believes that Islam should govern the state, and they reject the idea of secularism. They also reject the idea of foreign imperialism. The Muslim Brotherhood began by trying to educate citizens on the importance of Islam, but they quickly moved to political protests against the government. The group does condemn violence, but has often been linked to a variety of violent attacks. The Muslim Brotherhood is a major organization in Egypt, and often has a lot of say in government.¹

The first relevant regime was the Mubarak regime, which lasted from 1981-2011. Hosni Mubarak was the President of Egypt for thirty years, and during his time had very few checks and balances on his governance. He gave limited freedoms to citizens, there was political censorship, and there was often police brutality.² Mubarak also banned the Muslim Brotherhood, as he believed in secularism. He often jailed many of their members, as well as enacted laws to reduce the number of seats they held in Parliament. Despite Mubarak's efforts to remove the party, they still had the largest opposition party in Parliament.³

In 2011, when a Tunisian man sparked protests regarding the oppressive government, Egypt soon followed in their footsteps. Getting tired of Mubarak's dictatorship, Egyptians

¹ Jones, Bryony, and Susannah Cullinane. "What Is the Muslim Brotherhood?" CNN. July 03, 2013. Accessed May 10, 2018.

² "Egypt Profile - Timeline." BBC News. April 04, 2018. Accessed May 10, 2018.

³ Hessler, Peter. "Egypt's Failed Revolution." The New Yorker. June 19, 2017. Accessed May 10, 2018.

gathered in Cairo and protested all day and night. The Egyptian government tried to battle back and dozens died, but they protests still continued. This ultimately led to the Arab Spring, which was a series of protests throughout the Middle East. After these protests, Mubarak vowed to finish his term in office and then not run again. Mubarak, however, was pressured by protesters and forced to resign in February 2011, before his term was up.⁴ This then allowed for a new moment in time for Egypt, a chance for them to become a democracy for the first time in their history.

After the fall of Mubarak, Egypt held their first democratic elections, and had their first democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi. Morsi was a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, which in turn allowed for the Muslim Brotherhood to become one of the most powerful political parties in Egypt. The Brotherhood won half the seats in Parliament, but many suspected collusion. This time also allowed for Egypt to write a new constitution.⁵ Once in office, Morsi began his desire for power. He enacted a law that said courts could no longer overturn his decisions, which would allow him to be completely unchecked by the government. Given the rage Egyptians felt, more protests began to remove Morsi from office. Morsi, however, refused to leave office because of the protests. These protests and battles against Morsi led to the death of over 1,000 Egyptians. Later, Morsi was ousted by a military coup in 2013, only two years after he was elected.⁶

Since Egypt needed a new leader under this military government, Sisi, a member of the military council, was appointed temporary president. This military council was supposed to work toward a civilian led government, and was only in place until they could hold elections and write

⁴ Fantz, Ashley. "Egypt's Bloody Road from Arab Spring to Chaos." CNN. April 27, 2016. Accessed May 10, 2018.

⁵ "Egypt Profile - Timeline."

⁶ Hessler, Peter.

another new constitution. Sisi was very popular to begin with, as he kept a lot of information to himself. He soon after won popular elections with 96% of the vote. After being in office, a series of video and audio tapes titled “SisiLeaks” revealed the absolute dictatorship Sisi had on the government. He revealed gaining control of all media outlets as well as working towards removing political freedoms and rights to Egyptians. This revealed Sisi to be much worse than Mubarak, putting Egypt behind since the Arab Spring.⁷

Today, Sisi is still the current president of Egypt. They rank a 6/7 on the Freedom House level of freedom, seven being the least free.⁸ Economically, Egypt is not doing very well. They have a GDP of \$3,548, which is significantly lower than many other countries. This would make Egypt a developing country, as they still have much economic development to do. Since the Arab Spring, many tourists have been afraid to go to Egypt due to the increased number of protests, which has hurt their economy significantly.⁹ Additionally, many Egyptians have lost the motivation to rise up against Sisi because they are more concerned with trying to survive economically.¹⁰ Overall, Egypt still has a lot of work to do before it is thriving both politically and economically.

Defining Democracy

What Democracy Is...and Is Not

This paper will use a strict definition of democracy that comes from Karl and Schmitter’s “What Democracy Is...and Is Not.” Karl and Schmitter emphasize the importance of holding

⁷ Hessler, Peter.

⁸ "Egypt." Freedom House. February 14, 2018. Accessed May 10, 2018.

⁹ Pariona, Amber. "The Economy Of Egypt." WorldAtlas. December 12, 2016. Accessed May 10, 2018.

¹⁰ Hessler, Peter.

people accountable. Democracy stems from being able to hold your leaders accountable, something that you can do through elections. Karl and Schmitter also review the procedures that make democracy possible. The procedures are; control over government by elected officials, elections happen frequently and fairly, practically all adults can vote, practically all adults can run for office, citizens have the right to express themselves without punishment, citizens can seek out more information, and everyone should be able to form a party. Having these procedures in place help to make democracy possible in any country. Lastly, Karl and Schmitter mention the two things that make democracy feasible. The first is contingent consent. Contingent consent means conditional consent between the government and the citizens. The citizens are okay with the government so long as the government does not do something crazy. The second is bounded uncertainty. This means that almost everything in a democracy is uncertain. Citizens cannot know what will happen in our democracy. These two features are important in making sure that democracy is possible in any given country.¹¹ Using these key features and definitions given to us by Karl and Schmitter, we will be able to analyze whether or not Egypt is a democracy.

Looking at this strict definition of democracy, we would not be able to classify present day Egypt as a democracy. Sisi controls a major portion of individual political freedoms as well as all of the media. Due to these restrictions, the citizens cannot hold Sisi and other leaders accountable, a major part of the definition of democracy. Additionally, there is no bounded uncertainty and contingent consent. In the most recent election there were only two candidates, Sisi and another candidate who was pro-Sisi. This eliminates bounded uncertainty, as many

¹¹ Schmitter, Philippe C., and Terry Lynn Karl. "What democracy is... and is not." *Journal of democracy* 2, no. 3 (1991): 75-88.

know who will become the next president. Also, since most Egyptians fear the government, they do not necessarily consent to the things that they do, however, they must let it happen. Overall, it is clear to see that Egypt could not be classified as a democracy today.

Egypt and Democracy

There are a variety of reasons in which Egypt could not have become a successful democracy. Of these reasons, it includes wealth, Middle Eastern culture, the timing and execution of the transition, as well as Islam and democracy. While all of these reasons are legitimate, each factor has a different level of importance in the case of Egypt.

Modernization Theories and Facts

Przeworski uses this article to analyze the relationship between economic development and democracy. First he mentions Lipset, who says that economic development breeds democracy. Przeworski challenges that with his own theories. Przeworski begins by outlining what about wealth creates democracy. He says that the wealthier the individuals, the more educated they are. Very educated people are not easy to fool, meaning they can figure out when the government is working towards a dictatorship. Wealthier populations can also afford media, which restricts the government from stopping the flow of information. Urbanization in wealthy countries also leads to more democracy, as urban populations are more likely to revolt. Lastly, the health of wealthy individuals is longer, giving people more time to expect something from their government. The theory is that as a country modernizes, they will gain more control of these features and thus will overthrow the government to become a democracy.

Przeworski then outlines the endogenous (internal) and exogenous (external) factors that inhibit democracy. He says that some exogenous factors, such as death of a dictator or foreign pressures, can inhibit democracy. After doing an empirical analysis, Przeworski finds that after \$7,000 per capita income, there is no chance of switching from a democracy to authoritarianism. Essentially, this tells us that wealthy countries that are democracies do not collapse. Once a country is wealthy, it just remains a democracy. This happens because rich people have a lot to lose, thus they do not want to bet it all. Overall, this theory reveals that once a country is wealthy, they will remain a democracy.¹²

This theory is important to understand when grasping what happened in Egypt. Egypt has had a dictatorship since the beginning of time, so a switch from dictatorship to democracy would require a great deal of wealth. Since Egypt has lacked wealth throughout time, it makes it difficult to imagine that they would have ever become a democracy. Egypt, with a GDP of \$3,500, is nowhere near Przeworski's starting number of \$7,000. Przeworski tells us that Egypt did not become a democracy because it lacked the wealth that would sustain a democracy. This theory is hard to disprove, as the economy reveals it all.

The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective

Bellin works to evaluate the lack of development in the Middle East in her article "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective." Bellin begins by disproving many theories as to why the Middle East did not develop, such as civil society and geography. She then moves to produce her own understanding

¹² Przeworski, Adam, and Fernando Limongi. "Modernization: Theories and facts." *World politics* 49, no. 2 (1997): 155-183.

of why the Middle East has not developed. Bellin argues that the fact that the state is willing to suppress democracy as well as having a monopoly on the means of coercion, allows for the Middle East to remain a dictatorship. She also argues that the states use of coercive apparatus is strong, and also prohibits development. A coercive apparatus is the use of violence to maintain a state, such a military, secret police, and more.

There are four reasons in which the coercive apparatus is strong in the Middle East. The first reason is international support. Many countries will give support to nations because of what the nation gives back to them. For example, the U.S. gives Egypt aid in order to stabilize the region and promote our own interests. The next reason the coercive apparatus is strong is because of the fiscal health of the nation. If the nation has a lot of money, they are able to pay their soldiers and give their army more resources. Another part of the coercive apparatus are the institutions. The people that are in charge give the high level positions to those that are close to them, thus maintaining control of the government. Lastly, the coercive apparatus is strong because of popular mobilization. When people rise up against the coercive apparatus, they are often killed. This has taught many Middle Easterns to not rise up against the apparatus. Bellin argues that because of these features in the Middle East, the dictatorships are able to continue without the threat of democracy.¹³

Bellin's argument is relevant and useful in the case of Egypt. Since Egypt is a Middle Eastern country, it contains many of the features that Bellin discusses. First, it is clear that Egypt is given international support. The United States gives roughly \$1.5 billion to Egypt every year, which gives Egypt the support to continue their regime. Additionally, this foreign aid also helps

¹³ Bellin, Eva. "The robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in comparative perspective." *Comparative politics* (2004): 139-157.

with the fiscal health of the nation. The Egyptian army is paid well and has a variety of resources, making them a significant threat to the citizens. The Egyptian government also often keeps the leaders as someone they trust, backing Bellin's ideas about institutions. The only argument that falls through for Bellin, however, is the argument about popular mobilization. Egypt has shown a great amount of popular mobilization, but it may have been the other strong factors of the coercive apparatus that allowed authoritarianism to stick. Bellin creates a new theory about the strength of a violent state, which seems to make sense in the case of Egypt.

Religion, Democracy, and the "Twin Tolerations"

"Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations'" by Alfred Stepan, evaluates the impact Islam has on democracy. First, Stepan defines democracy by saying that it needs to have a robust and critical civil society that checks the state. This is similar to Karl and Schmitter, being that the leaders need to be held accountable. Next, Stepan moves to discuss the literature and what it says on Islam and democracy. He says that separation of religion and state stems from Islam, going back to the words in the Koran. The Koran emphasizes fixed laws that you have to follow, and many Islamists believe that democratic public opinion is disobeying the Koran. Additionally, the Koran discusses a lack of inclusive citizenship. Many believe that there is no legitimate space for other religions. Having these preconceived ideas, it does not make for Islam and democracy to be compatible. Stepan also mentions the idea of Islamic free-elections trap. This is when an Islamist country allows for free and fair elections, which in turn leads to a democratic country that works to destroy democracy. Lastly, he says that the Islamic world remains the most resistant to the spread of democracy.

Given all these arguments presented by other literature, Stepan moves on to present his own argument on Islam and democracy. He says that there is not enough evidence to support that Islam rejects democracy, and that often times the greatest obstacle in democracy is the military and intelligence organizations that are accountable to democratic authority. The harshest part of Islam law was often implemented under military rule, pointing more towards a military influence on the lack of democracy. Additionally, he says that all religious civilizations are multivocal, meaning that some Islamists will reject democracy while others will embrace it. Lastly, he points out that Islam is not the same as Arab culture. There are no democracies in the Islamic countries of the Arab world, but there are plenty of Muslims who live in democracy. The Islamic free-election trap is also often refuted in other countries. Overall, Stepan argues that it is quick to assume that Islam is the reason that there is little democracy in the Middle East.¹⁴

While Stepan makes some valid points, he fails to analyze Egypt as a case. The case of Egypt is a case in which the driving government that was supposed to implement democracy and instead delivered dictatorship, was backed by an Islamic institution. To ignore Islam in the case of Egypt would be naive, as it was a major element in the switch after the Arab Spring. Also, the arguments made about the relationship and democracy have yet to be disproven. The Koran does often advocate for exclusive citizenship and following fixed laws. Once elected, Morsi worked to implement Islamic ideals into the government, which resulted in a dictatorship. Lastly, the note about the Islamic free-elections trap sounds similar to the situation in Egypt, making it difficult to deny this claim.

Tracking the “Arab Spring:” Egypt’s Failed Transition

¹⁴ Stepan, Alfred C. "Religion, democracy, and the" Twin Tolerations"." *Journal of democracy* 11, no. 4 (2000): 37-57.

Nathan Brown examines the Muslim Brotherhood's takeover of the Egyptian government and analyzed why this takeover was not successful for the Islamist party. Brown discusses what would be needed for a successful democratic transition, and why that transition fell through. First, he says that in order for democratic development, there needs to be a broad agreement among the elites on how the transition will go. Since elites have the most power in any country, this will help to make the transition smooth. Additionally, there needs to be an outlet in which people can express their will without having things happen behind the scenes. If things are to happen without the voice of the people, the whole idea of democracy is diminished. The first problem that arose in Egypt was the problem of rewriting the Constitution. By giving Islamists the ability to rewrite the Egyptian constitution, they were set on making sure this new constitution was an Islamic one in which secularism was not a part of it. The Muslim Brotherhood got their voice out early, thus leading to an election of an Islamist majority parliament. In order to rewrite the constitution, they sent a group of 100 Egyptians taken from parliament, which happened to be an Islamist majority. They then backed a President, who of course, was an Islamist. Morsi quickly came into office and took powers away from other institutions. Brown argues that because of the desire to elect someone quickly, it allowed for the Islamist party to guide the way to a new Islamist president.

Brown moves on to discuss the bad decisions made in Egypt. When the election happened so quickly after the fall of Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood was able to dictate how it went. The opposition parties that attempted to rise above fought each other, rather than the Muslim Brotherhood. Also, Brown mentions the authoritarian past of Egypt. He says that authoritarian actors played a key role in the transition, and civilian political actors went through

the military instead of working with each other. This again, allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to dictate the election. Overall, Brown argues that there is a lack of democracy because the elections in Egypt were not timed well and done poorly, Egypt has an authoritarian past, and there was little design to the transition when it came about. Thus, Islamists were able to successfully gain control, but were unable to maintain and govern.¹⁵

Brown's argument makes a series of important points. Brown looks specifically at the Egyptian election to understand why an Islamist party was elected in the first place. His argument about time and execution makes sense, but it is hard to believe that this would be the only factor that resulted in a lack of democracy. It seems more as though Brown pointed towards a poor election that led to Islamist leaders, and Islamist leaders are not successful at creating a democracy. This argument is important to understand, but needs a supplemental piece regarding Islam to entirely dictate what happened in Egypt.

Conclusion

Overall, all of the listed reasons are important to understanding what has happened in Egypt. First, the theory of modernization and wealth in Egypt explains a large portion of the lack of democracy. Due to Egypt's poor economy, they never would have been able to sustain a democracy, even if one had happened. Additionally, Bellin's argument that outlines the coercive apparatus is able to successfully explain the governing style in Egypt, and why that may have resulted in no democracy. Stepan gives us an important argument regarding Islam, but does not dig deep enough into the case of Egypt, in which Islam was the driving force behind no democracy. Lastly, Brown tells us the problem with the election itself, but points more towards a

¹⁵ Brown, Nathan J. "Egypt's failed transition." *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (2013): 45-58.

problem with Islam and democracy rather than an election. All of these factors together have proven that there was little chance at democracy in Egypt, and it is not surprising they continued with a dictatorship. To conclude, democracy could have survived in Egypt, but because of all of these features in Egypt at the time, it had a decent chance of not surviving at all.

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