A question of faith?
Islamists and secularists fight over the post-mubarak state

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As for deciding the political future of Egypt, since the military coup of 3 July 2013 guns and batons have mostly taken the place of debate and elections. But how are we to understand the political struggle over the shape and content of the reformed post-Mubarak state that took place during the period of relative free debate and tentative steps towards a democratic system, from February 2011 till July 2013? In the light of the deepening polarisation between the Muslim Brothers (MB) and the more secular political tendencies that characterised the period, it is common to portray the conflict as being between a project of Islamisation and a secularist agenda. But I will argue a) that what took place was more a power struggle involving competing elites as well as what is sometimes termed the “deep state”, i.e. the entrenched power holders from Mubarak’s time, especially in the military, the police and the judiciary, and b) that the attitude towards democratic reform would seem to have less to do with particular ideologies, whether Islamist of secular, and more with the perception of what system would promote the interests of one’s own group.

The talk of “the period when the Muslim Brothers were in power” must be cautioned against. In the period in question the Brothers and their political party, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), did well in elections, and the two referendums went their way. But at no point in time did they hold anything close to dominant power over the institutions of state power in Egypt. From February to June 2012 the FJP was the leading force in the Parliament, controlling 42 percent of the seats in the lower house, and an outright majority in the upper house, the Shura Council, which although generally powerless was now tasked together with the lower house of choosing the members of the constitutional assembly. In the combined meeting of the two houses the Brothers controlled 47 percent of the seats.

In this situation the FJP had to seek agreement either with salafi groups to their right or with some of the secular representatives. More importantly the parliament itself had limited powers. The appointment and effectively the direction of the government were wholly in the hands of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), so that parliament had no influence over the executive power.

And when one Muslim Brother eventually acceded to what was theoretically the highest post in the state on 30 June 2012, the parliament had already been dissolved. Even if the Shura Council continued to exist, having fulfilled its role in erecting the constitutional assembly this upper house was now devoid of powers. Furthermore the SCAF had just removed the president’s power over the military and had taken to itself legislative power. So Mursi became president with both the armed forces and the power to legislate under the full control of the generals.

Furthermore the courts, most especially the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC), acted as if it was in their right to exert veto power from
above the elected representatives of the people. In April 2012 an administrative court declared the first constitutional assembly unlawful, and in June the SCC proceeded to call for the dissolution of the lower, legislative, house of parliament, a ruling quickly effectuated by the SCAF. Since these institutions in their present shape was not the product of a democratic state, but had been part and parcel of the autocratic state, this represented a huge problem for the transition towards democratic rule.

The power exercised by the army and the judiciary throughout the transitional period over and above the elected institutions, was part of a more general problem: the fact that the core institutions of the Mubarak state continued in unreformed shape. The police and the security forces were under the command of an officer from their own ranks and acted, or refused to act, according to their own agenda. The core triangle of army, police and judiciary could largely rely upon the media, where both the state owned and the private pulled most stops in attacking the actions of the elected parliament and the elected president.

Against these formidable forces the 2011 uprising had only succeeded due to two factors: the temporary unity of the whole spectrum of oppositional voices, and a growing conflict of interests within the established power circles themselves, pitting the military against the business elite. As the revolutionaries split into vehement confrontations between the Brothers and the others, and as the sobering lessons of the Arab spring forged greater coordination among the counter-revolutionaries, now under the undisputed leadership of the army, the tables turned once again. The deep state could prepare for its major attempt to recreate the status quo ante bellum.

While it is far too early to write the history of the exact nature of the relation between the Muslim Brothers and the main secular groups during the transition period, the main features of the following picture seem reasonably clear: After it became manifest that the Muslim Brothers were the dominant force in terms of voter support, and came out as the strongest force in the short-lived parliament and the ensuing constitutional assembly, and then won the presidency, the secular forces were unwilling to take part in any form of coalition as junior partners to the MB and its FJP. And when the same forces were dissatisfied with the constitutional assembly that had been named by the elected parliament their solution was to boycott the assembly in an effort to delegitimise it. Over time a line became clear were the seculars did not accord any legitimacy to the elected institutions as such, tending to view them as negative factors because they were controlled by an ideological opponent. In the end this worked to cement the attitude that the way to change the political rule was not to campaign for a change through elections, but to topple the elected president, along with the transition process he was administering, through popular mobilisation in the streets.

The political struggle in the transitional period could best be grasped as a three-way competition for long-term and short-term positions of power between three main groups of actors: Islamist groups, secular political groups and the state apparatus. Of these groups the first possessed the power of its organisational strength and popular roots, crucially translated in a capacity to win elections. The last group possessed the power of the repressive force of this state, as well as the negative force of its ability to block the effectuation of any political decision not to its liking. The secular political groups, however, had no power to shape the events on their own, and could only influence things by acting in conjunction with one of the two others. It was the temporary alliance between the Islamists and the oppositional secular elite in the early months of 2011 that made possible the toppling of Mubarak. Yet gradually, and especially after their poor performance in the parliamentary elections, the secular forces started sharply to distance themselves from the Islamists and gradually slid towards a de facto alliance with the military and the judiciary. But even the Islamists, while far stronger than the secular groups, were not strong enough to stand on their own. Having fallen out with the secular groups on the question of the transition process, the Muslim Brothers in particular relied on the SCAF sticking to the roadmap. So when the radical wing of the secular groups kept pushing forward with demonstrations demanding rapid advance for the demands of the revolution, the Islamists became worried that a chaotic situation could derail the process towards the establishment of institutions of elected power. During late 2012, with most secular groups boycotting the constitutional work and campaigning ever harder against Mursi, the Islamists were not in a position to push the military with regard to the constitutional text. The immunisation of the military from democratic control in the 2012 constitution most likely reflected this situation.

For their part the entrenched elites running the state institutions seem to have bided their time, while fending off any attempt at democratic reform of their institutions. For the army in particular, which was running the show unchallenged until Mursi became presi-
dent, it seems a main strategy was to secure in the new set-up of things that the military forces would remain an independent entity in control of its own resources and command structure and with the capacity to interfere in political life should its interests become threatened. Nevertheless there is no reason to doubt that across the state institutions there was a sustained fear of the Muslim Brothers. This fear had little to do with its Islamism, but everything to do with the fact that the Brothers was the only group independent of the state with a disciplined organisation and deep roots in Egyptian society strong enough to contemplate the herculean task of reforming the state apparatus. So when the intensifying polarisation between the Brothers and the other forces that had supported the 2011 revolution gradually prepared the conditions for an offensive move, the military grasped with both hands this opportunity to try to rid itself completely of its main competition for power.

It would seem that the attitude towards democratic reform has less to do with particular ideologies, whether Islamist of secular, and more with the perception of what system would promote one’s own group interest. This is why in the Egyptian post-Mubarak setting we see the Islamists most committed to the establishment of a system of rule based on popular elections. They knew that they were the best organised and enjoyed the broadest popular support. The state institutions have no love lost for democratic institutions. Under pressure they might be willing to accommodate them, provided the “deep state” was insulated from reform instigated by these institutions. But given the opportunity they will reduce these institutions back to what they were under Mubarak, a mere façade for authoritarian rule. As for the secular political groups, they are mostly ideologically committed to democracy. It is just that confronted with a situation where free elections would give power to the alternative elite of the Islamists, their inclination in practice has been first to try to postpone elections and to gain an influence on constitution-making larger than what reflects their degree of popular support, and when this strategy fails to prefer their Islamist competitors being removed by military force.

The core problem in terms of prospects for democracy, perhaps, is a pronounced lack of faith in the other. To accept that you have lost elections and now the others will rule for four years, you need to have faith in the system, and trust that those elected into power will not draw up the ladder of democracy behind them. This, of course is a trust which can only be consolidated over time, through practice. The initial phases of a democratisation process, then, will always be tense. In order to consolidate the democratic institutions the losers need to gamble on a trust that is not yet fully there. In the Egyptian case they chose not to. So we will never know whether given time the Islamists would have stuck to democratic procedure also when the opinion polls were turning against them.

Recommendations:

- Support demands for a return to the democratisation process in Egypt, including the release of all political prisoners, ending the restrictions on free speech and publication and on organised political opposition.
- Support efforts at reconciliation between Islamist and secular forces in order to render a future democratisation process more sustainable.
“The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends” is a five-year research project funded by the Section for Peace and Reconciliation at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is based at the Centre for Islamic and Middle East Studies at the University of Oslo and involves researchers from the Institute for Labour and Social Research, Fafo, The Peace Research Institute Oslo, PRIO, and the University of Oslo. The project is headed by Professor Bjørn Olav Utvik.

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