

4 2011–2018

Liberalism Out in the Open, the Restitution, and the Loss

No other goal but the goal of freedom will emancipate you, so hold on to it with everything you do, and never give it up because it alone can end tyranny.

Michel Kilo¹

Liberals stood at the forefront of the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011, and yet studies on the Arab region and the Arab Spring have tended to ignore their role in the uprisings and the movement in its entirety.² Instead, academics, researchers, and analysts have generally focused on the rise of a leaderless movement of alienated youth, generally assuming a lack of ideological content, and focusing on structural, economic, and technological reasons for the onset of the revolutions. The different narratives agree that the groups that showed up at Tahrir Square in Egypt and that thronged the alleys of the old city in Damascus, Darra, Homs, and Hama were not ideologically driven, but rather were loose associations of activists and other disenfranchised citizens driven by a profound malaise with the status quo and who often didn't see eye to eye.

This overall analysis ignores years of liberal and pro-democracy activism against the extant patterns and nature of domination and authority in the region, and the fact that protestors have rallied behind a set of ideas that are consistently and categorically different from the ones rallied behind in the 1950s and 1960s.³ It also ignores the fact that the protest

¹ Michel Kilo's "Commandments to the Syrian People", *Zaman al-Wasl* (19 April 2021). Written a few days before his death in April 2021, as part of his recommendations to the Syrian people.

² Revolutions in the sense that they are the result of popular movements that seek to undermine the status quo, to change the nature of authority and its justification, and to transform the entire political system and society as a result. In so doing, the popular movements are a revolutionary process that fuse many people, socioeconomic classes and levels. For more on what the term revolution does and does not imply, see Bjørn Thomassen, "Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, 3 (2012), pp. 679–706.

³ Roel Meijer, "Liberalism in the Middle East and the Issue of Citizenship Rights," in Meir Hatina and Christoph Schumann (eds.), *Arab Liberal Thought after 1967: Old Dilemmas, New Perceptions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 66.

movement brought together people from a wide range of backgrounds and socioeconomic groups which, as shown in the previous chapters, became united in their shared fight for freedom and democratic rule.

What is missed in most studies is the deep and consistent transformation and reformulation of the object of discontent. In other words, the protestors' demands no longer reflected the post-colonial discourse with its emphasis on questions of economic egalitarianism, public ownership, rapid industrialization, class conflict and the economically marginalized, and imperialism, even though all of these questions remain concerns of the majority. After all, these regimes had also turned to crony capitalism and adopted neoliberal policies that produced devastating and wide socioeconomic chasms between the haves and the have nots in most societies of the region. One might then think that, instead of focusing on issues of citizens' freedoms and civil rights, the majority of the protestors would object to the end of the Welfare State.⁴ Yet this was not the case. One could argue that the protestors' focus on liberal notions emerged naturally from their opposition to the repressive nature of the regime. The liberal movement is certainly organic, as stated throughout this book, and a general disapproval of political repression has certainly driven the overall movement; but disapproval does not explain the consistently liberal nature and direction of the protestors' demands. It is this consistent nature and direction, found across the region, that testifies to the effectiveness of the work that liberal activists and public intellectuals had done in the years preceding the uprisings. Moreover, the fact that millions were willing to face their States despite fear of the regimes' violent security apparatuses so as to openly disseminate the liberal ideas showed that liberalism is vibrant and alive, and that it was hiding in plain sight in youth groups, NGOs, professional associations, on television shows, in theatre, art, at universities and in political forums as well as online discussions, and in literature.

Egypt

The Arab Spring's massive street protests picked up where the three months of demonstrations that took place in Alexandria and Cairo in June 2010 left off. The youth, representing diverse political groups and

⁴ This is not to say that economic issues were not an integral part of the protestors' concerns, social justice was clearly a main concern voiced by the movement; rather the point is that economic egalitarianism and joining the developed world's post-industrial order were no longer the main concerns, as they were in the 1950s, and that precedence was given to issues of political accountability and pluralism including to achieve greater economic empowerment.

backgrounds, appeared *en force*, continuing the demands of the 2000s. In so doing, they coalesced into what was later dubbed “the Coalition of the Revolutionary Youth”, composed of activists from the main political groups who organized the protests of January 2011: “the 6 April Youth Movement and Ayman Nour, the leftist Justice and Freedom Movement, the Dignity or Karama Party (social liberal), the liberal Democratic Front Party (al-Gabha al-Dimucratiya), the Social Democratic Party of Abul Ghar and Amr Hamzawi (leftist-liberal), and the National Association for Change (combining several political parties including representatives of civil society, led by a liberal, Mohammad el-Barade’i, and driven by its young members and a liberal platform).”⁵ Even conservative Islamist parties joined in at a later stage, committing to political pluralism and democracy, arguing that these liberal ideas are rooted in Islamic ideals and modalities of piety and social justice. And joining together the protestors was the chant, “The people want the fall of the regime.”

Activists and Politicians Went to Work

One of the instigators of these massive street protests in Tahrir Square was a young woman, Asmaa Mahfouz, a 26-year-old business graduate of Cairo University, and a member of the Kifaya movement. Mahfouz posted on Facebook on January 18, 2011, a 4-minute, 36-second video of herself, a video that was quickly reposted to YouTube. In it, she talked calmly and with conviction in an attempt to incite all Egyptians to take to the streets and to protest against the regime: “As long as you say there is no hope, then there will be no hope, but if you go down and take a stand, then there will be hope.” She held a sign saying she would go out and protest to try to bring down Mubarak’s regime. This was not the first time that a young activist used the Internet as a tool to organize and mobilize, as we have seen in the previous chapters; but her poignant message felt deeply personal and true, and it acted as the spark to trigger rupture with the existing political order. The spirit of her appeal inspired others, who started to post their own videos, holding similar signs to their chests and declaring their intention to take to the streets on January 25, 2011, to demand change.⁶ No one knew that it would be

⁵ Nadine Abdalla, “Youth Movements in the Egyptian Transformation: Strategies and Repertoires of Political Participation,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 21:1 (2016), pp. 44–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1081445>

⁶ Mona El-Naggar, “Equal Rights Takes to the Barricades,” *New York Times* (February 1, 2011), www.nytimes.com/2011/02/02/world/middleeast/02iht-letter02.html

the start of a new era – yet hundreds of thousands ended up protesting, and ultimately succeeded in toppling the presidency of Hosni Mubarak. Mahfouz said, “I, a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square, and I will stand alone ... I will say no to corruption, no to this regime. Come with us and demand your rights.”⁷ She added, “If you stay home, you deserve all that’s being done to you, and you will be guilty before your nation and your people. Go down to the street, send SMSes, post it on the ‘Net, make people aware.”⁸

In Tahrir Square, thousands showed up, with many liberals in the front rows including prominent artists, intellectuals and political leaders such as Wael Nawara and Ayman Nour, and younger activists such as Mahienour el-Masry, Esraa Abdel Fattah⁹ and Ahmed Maher, all captured on camera, and by their presence helping to drive others to do the same and thus setting in motion an Egyptian revolution.¹⁰ And in the same vein as the earlier protests, protestors made demands to dismantle the entire political apparatus: first, demanding that Mubarak had to go, then an end to emergency laws, a transitional government to replace the NDP-dominated cabinet and parliament, the holding of new elections, amending the constitution to ensure limits on presidential terms, the institution of an open political process and a political system based on pluralism, civil freedoms, and the rule of law.¹¹ Importantly, the more conservative groups only joined the protest movement at the end of January 2011¹², making the initial moment truly a liberal one.

⁷ Orla Guerin, “Revolution a Distant Memory as Egypt Escalates Repression,” *BBC* (December 9, 2014), www.bbc.com/news/world-30381292

⁸ Melissa Wall and Sahar el-Zaher, “I’ll Be Waiting for You Guys’: A YouTube Call to Action in the Egyptian Revolution,” *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011), www.researchgate.net/publication/298060207_I%27ll_Be_Waiting_for_You_Guys_A_YouTube_Call_to_Action_in_the_Egyptian_Revolution

⁹ Esraa Abdel Fattah was a member of al-Ghad Party and as a result of the Kefaya movement. She had also co-founded the Egyptian Democratic Academy, an organization meant to monitor the 2010 parliamentary elections. See Esraa Abdel Fattah, “Loaded Victory: Egypt’s Revolution and Where It Stands Post-30 June,” in Ronald Meinardus (ed.), *Liberalism in the Arab World – Just a good idea?* (Cairo: Al-Mahrosa for Publishing, 2014), pp. 115–128.

¹⁰ These include pro-democracy actors such as Khaled Abul Naja (or Naga), Amro Waked and Khaled al-Nabawi, who have used their fame to raise awareness about issues of human rights and democratic rule.

¹¹ Nadine Sika, “Youth Political Engagement in Egypt: From Abstention to Uprising,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 39:2 (2012), pp. 181–199.

¹² Gamal M. Selim, “Egypt under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood: The Triangle of Counter-Revolution,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 37:2 (Spring 2015), p. 179.

Mubarak was ousted on February 11, 2011, following twenty years of repression and authoritarianism. Liberals began to imagine what they could achieve next, and people began to think that Mubarak's ousting meant the opening up of the political space. As one observer noted, "Unprecedented opportunity to create a better system of rule presented itself and everyone went to work."¹³

The liberals went to work in order to initiate a democratic restructuring and a more liberal political and economic environment. The first hurdle they met was the takeover of the army during the transitional phase, which the liberals and other activists believed should have been the prerogative of the Revolutionary Youth Coalition. The army won that first battle, and the Coalition of the Revolutionary Youth and human rights groups started thinking of ways to ensure change, including concrete policy recommendations.¹⁴ The Human Rights Community, such as Bahey al-Din Hassan of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Ahmad Ragheb of the National Community for Human Rights and Law, and Hossam Bahgat of Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), focused on policies aimed at reforming the security establishment and freedom of information laws.¹⁵ Morayef explains that activists, "had to run their organizations, oversee the work of lawyers representing victims in the police trials around the country and respond to meeting requests from Government officials, political part[ies], and diplomats, who wanted policy recommendations. They also had to ensure that the new abuses by the police and the military (now running the country) were being documented, all while educating themselves on comparative transition experiences to learn how to deal with a set of issues they had never faced under Mubarak."¹⁶

Liberal politicians went to work as well. Among them were people like Amr Hamzawi and Ziad al-Eleimy (a close associate of Mohammad ElBaradei, who played a leading role in the Revolutionary Youth Coalition), who joined hands with Muhammad Abu el-Ghar (an ardent secularist and self-proclaimed social liberal) to form the Social Democratic Party (leftist-liberal) in 2011.¹⁷ Then Amr Hamzawi resigned from the Social Democratic Party in April 2011 and formed the Egypt

¹³ Abdalla, "Youth movements in the Egyptian transformation," pp. 44–63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44

¹⁵ Heba Morayef, "Reexamining Human Rights Change in Egypt," *Middle East Report* 274 (Spring 2015), p. 13.

¹⁶ Morayef, "Reexamining Human Rights Change in Egypt," p. 12.

¹⁷ The Social Democratic Party of el-Ghar and Hazem el-Beklawi would become co-opted by the military by 2015–2016.

Freedom Party in May 2011. Amr Hamzawi would later run for parliament instead of joining the transitional government under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), and would serve as a member of parliament in 2012 and 2013. In 2011, Ayman Nour established a new party, the Ghad al-Thawra Party (Tomorrow of the Revolution Party), and he planned on running in the 2011–2012 presidential elections only to be stopped by the Presidential Election Commission, under the control of SCAF, who disqualified his candidacy.¹⁸ But this didn't stop him from working with other liberals and Ghad al-Thawra members to unite ranks and gain seats in parliament.

Liberals also created new coalitions that reflected the 2000s trends of inclusion and cross-ideological cooperation, but also atomization. The Democratic Alliance for Egypt was formed in June 2011, consisting initially of 28 political parties. The alliance's main members were the Muslim Brothers, but also al-Wafd, the social liberal Dignity Party (Karama), the liberal Ghad al-Thawra Party, the Egypt Freedom Party of Amr Hamzawi, the Hadara Party, and the liberal Democratic Front Party of Osama el-Ghazali Harb, among others from leftist, Islamist, and liberal backgrounds. In its founding statement, the alliance asserted its commitment to the principles of democracy and civil rights. The alliance emerged to compete for the parliamentary elections of 2011, and one of its main concerns was that ex-regime figures could secure parliamentary seats if there was a lack of coordination between the different pro-democracy parties.¹⁹ The member parties signed a document outlining 21 nonbinding principles that would guide the constitution-drafting efforts following the parliamentary elections. The principles agreed upon included upholding constitutionalism, the rule of law, freedom of expression and belief, the right to form trade unions, the right to education and work, and that Islam would remain the religion of the State and its primary source of legislation.²⁰ But the alliance would soon be undermined due to disagreements between the liberals and the Islamists over the role of religion in politics. Thus both al-Wafd and the Democratic Front left the alliance soon after the groups' creation, citing major disagreements with the Muslim Brothers. The Wafd opted to stay independent while

¹⁸ Emran El-Badawi, "Conflict and Reconciliation: 'Arab Liberalism' in Syria and Egypt," in Fahmy and Faruqi (eds.), *Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism: Illiberal Intelligentsia and the Future of Egyptian Democracy* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017), p. 298.

¹⁹ Parties and Movements, "Democratic Alliance for Egypt," *Jadaliyya* (November 18, 2011), www.jadaliyya.com/Details/24648

²⁰ Ibid.

the Democratic Front then joined the Egyptian Bloc, which had a radically secular agenda, insisting on a hardline separation of religion and politics, and was essentially anti-Muslim Brotherhood.²¹ Karama Party and Ghad al-Thawra were more willing to compromise on certain principles and electoral lists and continued on within the Democratic Alliance until September 2012, when they realized that the Islamists were renegeing on significant liberal promises.

The Egypt Bloc was co-created by a number of liberal figures such as Mohammad Abu al-Ghar who were especially opposed to Egypt's Islamist groups, and thus to the Democratic Alliance for Egypt in principle, and Amr Hamzawi (who had initially joined the Democratic Alliance and then decided to leave). The Bloc initially included 21 groups of liberal and leftist leaning groups such as the Social Democratic Party, the Egypt Freedom Party, the Free Egypt Party, the Popular Socialist Alliance and the National Association for Change, to name a few. Later on, many would defect because of leadership rivalries and an inability to effectively coordinate, leaving only the Social Democratic Party, the Free Egyptian Part and the al-Tagammu' Party remaining in the coalition.

Other broad coalitions of leftists and liberals at the time were the Revolution Continues Alliance (consisting of two socialist and two new liberal parties, namely the Egypt Freedom Party and the Egyptian Current). The coalition was the result of the participation of elements of the Mubarak regime in the Egypt Bloc; the members of this new alliance felt the need to reassert the revolutionary spirit and demands, hence the name.

Liberals then took part in the National Salvation Front (NSF), which at one point included some 30 parties, some which had left the Democratic Alliance and joined the new coalition such as the Democratic Front, the Social Democrats, the Freedom Party, the newly created Congress Party (of Amr Moussa and Ayman Nour)²², the Free Egyptians Party co-founded by Ahmad Said, the Dignity Party and the Constitution Party (ElBaradei and Nawara). The NSF was formed on November 23, 2012, during a meeting at the Wafd Party headquarters with the purpose of overturning the newly elected President

²¹ Michele Dunne and Amr Hamzawi "Egypt's Secular Political Parties: A Struggle For Identity And Independence," *Carnegie Endowment* (March 2017), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/31/egypt-s-secular-political-parties-struggle-for-identity-and-independence-pub-68482>

²² Congress Party (Hizb al-Mu'tamar al-Masri) was created in September 2012 by Amr Moussa and included Ghad al-Thawra party.

Mohammad Mursi's illiberal constitutional changes (more on these events hereinafter).²³

The transitional period (February 2011–June 2012) had already been difficult and disenchanting as SCAF appeared keen to block a genuine liberal democratic transition particularly because it could jeopardize its entrenched economic interests and privileges.²⁴ The years 2011–2012 would also reveal the liberals' weaknesses and inexperience. More specifically, some self-proclaimed liberals who were actively challenging the autocratic ways of the Sadat and Mubarak regimes turned out to be not so consistently committed to their liberal claims. For instance, a number of activists such as Abu al-Ghar and Saad Eddin Ibrahim (the chair of Ibn Khaldun Center) would betray the liberal cause by joining hands with the military leadership in order to rid Egypt of the Islamists.²⁵ Emblematic of Egypt's so-called "liberal" landscape, some self-proclaimed liberals would even be accused of having a "fascist nature" no different from that of the radical Islamists.²⁶ For the "true" and consistent liberals – who are the topic of this book – 2011 and 2012 showed their inexperience in day-to-day politics and their inability to stand together behind one leadership.²⁷ Others who had more experience, such as Amr Hamzawi, ElBaradei, and Ayman Nour, in addition to a number of younger NGOs' leaders and intellectuals, would find it difficult to navigate the atomized and divided environment. They also found themselves at the mercy of an electoral system that was purposely set up to hinder the chances of those operating outside the traditional party structure.²⁸ Finally, the liberal majority who had worked for

²³ Mursi had announced one day prior to the NSF foundational meeting a number of constitutional amendments that would place legislative and executive powers in the presidency, and that would let the president appoint the new general prosecutor. His statement also announced that the Constituent Assembly – responsible for drafting a new constitution – could not be dissolved by the Judiciary, and that the president's decisions were "final and unchallengeable" until a new constitution had been ratified and new parliamentary elections were held. The declaration was perceived as a power grab that most liberals and secularists felt the need to react to, and react fast and as a group. See: "Egypt's National Salvation," *BBC* (December 10, 2012), www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20667661

²⁴ Selim, "Egypt under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood," p. 180.

²⁵ Daanish Faruqi and Dalia F. Fahmy, "Egyptian Liberals, from Revolution to Counterrevolution," in Fahmy and Faruqi (eds.), *Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism: Illiberal Intelligentsia and the Future of Egyptian Democracy* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017), pp. 1–17.

²⁶ Bassem Youssef, "Egypt's Secularists Repeating Islamists' Mistakes," *CNN online* (July 20, 2013), www.cnn.com/2013/07/19/opinion/youssef-egypt-political-upheaval/

²⁷ See Introductory chapter for a definition of "true" liberal. One commentator stated that this can somewhat be linked to the messiness of social movements in general rather than saying something about the liberals at the time.

²⁸ Selim, "Egypt under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood," p. 181.

years away from the limelight and behind closed doors in order to avoid the repressive hand of the regime could not in a matter of months amass the public recognition required for them to be elected (more on this hereinafter). As Hamzawi and Dunne explained, adding to the difficulty was that parties such as the Social Democratic and Free Egyptians were new parties, “with no track record of election participation and limited organizational assets – unlike the Muslim Brotherhood and Wafd.”²⁹

The result was that things became very messy very quickly. The many liberal coalitions that appeared and kept shifting and rearranging themselves confused most voters. These coalitions didn’t seem to be cohesive enough within the transitioning environment, and they also underlined the actual fragmentation of the liberals at a time when they needed to show unity in order to gain seats and thus have a greater impact. Years of regime “divide and conquer” strategies could not be overcome in a matter of months. The presence of self-proclaimed and inconsistent liberals within these coalitions only complicated matters for those who were fighting against the return or rise of a new autocratic order. The result was voter confusion and an inability to face the mounting challenges of transition and to gain a large amount of seats in parliament.

It is important to underline that no one thought the transition was going to be easy. Indeed, a mere two weeks after the ousting of Mubarak, Egypt witnessed the ascendance of SCAF to executive power. Although the SCAF seemed initially accepting of the democratic game, it did not strongly endorse its liberal components, and did not hesitate to unleash its security forces against those protesting hasty and autocratic decisions that it made in 2011. Indeed, SCAF soon grew clearly anti-liberal and repressive, and lost the trust of the revolutionaries early on. For instance, SCAF was supposed to restore the 1971 liberal constitution with a number of amendments that voters had approved on March 19, 2011; but instead, it issued on March 30 an improvised declaration of 63 articles after consulting a few leaders on an ad hoc basis.³⁰ The declaration not only ignored the democratic process in its entirety, it also protected SCAF’s transitional role as a constitutional actor with lawmaking powers as well as the power to appoint and dismiss ministers until a new president is elected.³¹ SCAF

²⁹ Dunne and Hamzawi, “Egypt’s Secular Political Parties.”

³⁰ Nathan J. Brown and Kristen Stilt, “A Haphazard Constitutional Compromise,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (April 11, 2011), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/04/11/haphazard-constitutional-compromise-pub-43533>

³¹ The committee that was responsible for drafting the amendments was headed by an Islamist intellectual and judge, Tareq al-Bishri, and a number of professional jurists, including a leading attorney within the Muslim Brotherhood, Subhy Saleh, but none of the liberals. Selim, “Egypt under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood,” p. 180.

furthermore maintained the requirement that half of the parliamentary deputies be workers and peasants, a requirement that was not only out-dated but also worked against the interests of the liberals.³²

The opaque, unpredictable, and authoritarian way that SCAF dealt with the constitutional issue was revealing for what was to come. SCAF went on to mandate that the next elected parliament be entrusted with drafting the new constitution, which a majority of the liberals objected to, arguing that this created a clear conflict of interest as it would give undue power and influence to the first elected parliament. SCAF also canceled the 64-seat quota allocated to women in the 2010 parliamentary elections, significantly reducing the chances of women being elected to parliament.³³ This was significant because women were and continue to be a major force within the liberal movement. That autumn, the military used violence against the protestors including against a large protest by women in Cairo in October, and then outlined a number of supra-constitutional principles that entrenched the military's repressive power, by giving SCAF influence over the drafting of the constitution as well as power to veto any provision of the new constitution that it deemed to contradict the basic tenets of the Egyptian State.

The Kamal al-Ganzouri government installed by SCAF in December 2011 was also aggressively anti-NGO. This meant that things were bad from the outset even for the civil rights activists who did not necessarily want to join the political system. Prosecutors harassed pro-democracy workers, and questioned staff about their foreign funding and licenses.³⁴ About 73 democracy groups were also monitored and accused of possible treason, and seven US, German, and Egyptian NGOs were raided on December 29, 2011, by justice ministry inspections teams alongside armed military and police officers, all accused of being foreign players with a foreign (Western) agenda.³⁵ Groups harassed included the April 6 Movement, Kifaya, the CIHRS, el-Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture and the Hisham Mubarak Law Center.³⁶ Their staff were charged on February 5, 2012 with operating without a license, receiving unauthorized foreign funding, engaging in activities prohibited by law such as providing for political training, and violating tax codes

³² Brown and Stilt, "A Haphazard Constitutional Compromise."

³³ Selim, "Egypt under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood," p. 182.

³⁴ Ann M. Lesch, "The Authoritarian State's Power over Civil Society," in Fahmy and Faruqi (eds.), *Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism: Illiberal Intelligentsia and the Future of Egyptian Democracy* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017), p. 136.

³⁵ Lesch, "The Authoritarian State's Power," pp. 135–137

³⁶ Selim, "Egypt under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood," p. 184.

among other things.³⁷ EIPR director Hossam Bahgat along with Egyptian Organization for Human Rights' Abu Saeda and other human rights activists and journalists accused the ministry and the army of targeting organizations that were exposing the authorities' abuses.

Also under SCAF, some 12,000 civilians were referred to military courts in the first seven months, with only 7% of them acquitted.³⁸ Human rights organizations reported that this was larger than the number of those tried under the Mubarak regime's entire tenure.³⁹

New waves of protests took place, this time against SCAF, and new rights groups had to emerge to counter the renewed repression; these included No Military Trials of Civilians, the Anti Torture Task Force, and the Front to Defend Egypt's Protestors, all aiming to decry the new abuses of power targeting civilians and human rights activists.⁴⁰ Protestors demanded accountability and transparency, in addition to the resignation of the head of SCAF, Field Marshal Tantawi. NGOs such as the Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies and The United Group Law firm campaigned to raise awareness in villages about the electoral system and the role of civil society organizations within a democracy.⁴¹

Loss of Control

SCAF was not the liberals' only problem, since the Islamists had a clear head start when it came to preparing for elections. That is, they were better prepared in the sense that they had more extensive lists of candidates all over the country that they could rely on, they were better organized with hundreds of established networks of mosques, they were better financed, and they also seemed more cohesive as a group. But more importantly, they were favored by the SCAF, who set up the constitutional drafting campaign and the electoral game in ways that hurt the chances of the liberal forces.⁴² This coalition of convenience between SCAF and the Muslim Brothers, while brief, was actively and successfully working against the "true" liberals.

³⁷ Lesch, "The Authoritarian State's Power," p. 138.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

³⁹ Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-revolution and the Making of a New Era* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 116–117.

⁴⁰ Lesch, "The Authoritarian State's Power," p. 132.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁴² Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, p. 114; Selim, "Egypt under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood," p. 182.

Following the first parliamentary elections in 2011, secularists in general, including the liberals, won about 83 seats in the People's Assembly (out of 502). Seven seats went to The Revolution Continues, six seats to the Karama Party, which ran part of the Democratic Alliance coalition, amounting to 15% of the total seats.⁴³ This was no defeat, but the liberals feared their modest performance was a sign of future and more meaningful setbacks, especially in light of the army's continued manipulation of the system in favor of the repressive and illiberal forces. Hamzawi writes that inexperience and inability to see beyond the elections caused newly established liberal and social democratic parties to see their good performance within parliamentary elections as total defeat. As a result, the Egyptian Bloc refused to accept the results of the elections and hostility reigned in parliament.⁴⁴

The Muslim Brotherhood had initially continued to assert its commitment to the liberalization of the political environment and respect for human and civil rights, hence the preliminary joining together with liberals and leftists in its coalition. But soon enough, for many reasons including finding itself a majority working within a not-so friendly environment, the Brotherhood started renegeing on its liberal promises.⁴⁵ For instance, the Brotherhood had initially promised not to field a presidential candidate but then it reconsidered its decision claiming it distrusted the secularists, as well as SCAF.⁴⁶ Thus, the Muslim Brotherhood announced in April that it would field a candidate in the June 2012 presidential elections, a victory that would give the Islamists power over both the legislative and the executive branches. The announcement was interpreted as showing the Muslim Brotherhood's attempts to take power away from SCAF and to control all State functions, and it prompted the army to interfere.

The army's interference, as explained earlier, was not surprising. The military, which had remained in control of the political environment the entire time of the transition, would repeatedly step in under the pretense of ensuring stability, including making up rules, disqualifying candidates, imposing its will as it saw fit, detaining and killing protestors and civilians, and failing to lift emergency laws throughout

⁴³ Dunne and Hamzawi, "Egypt's Secular Political Parties."

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Line Khatib, "Challenges of Representation and Inclusion: A Case Study if Islamic Groups in Transitional Justice," in K. J. Fisher and R. Stewart (eds.), *Transitional Justice and the Arab Spring* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 131–145.

⁴⁶ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, pp. 116–117.

2011.⁴⁷ Two days before the second round of presidential elections, on June 14, 2012, Egypt's highest court dissolved the Islamist-dominated People's Assembly under military pressure, thus removing from the Brotherhood its power base in parliament, and boosting the candidacy of the SCAF's candidate, ex-General Ahmad Shafiq, instead. The SCAF also gave itself legislative powers until a new People's Assembly was elected.⁴⁸

In so doing, the army reinvented and reasserted itself as the guardian of the constitutional order, thus turning the military into a sovereign institution over Egyptian politics. These efforts were not unexpected. As mentioned earlier, the military was an integral part of the previous autocratic apparatus, with many entrenched interests and privileges at stake. But the move was a palpable assault on a possible transition towards a liberal democracy. And yet many parties, such as the Wafd and the Free Egyptians, the Democratic Front, as well as some from within the Social Democratic Party, cheered the undermining of the Muslim Brotherhood. Others, who were more clearly and consistently committed to their liberal ideals including the majority of the January 25 revolutionaries (notably leaders such as Hamzawi, Nawara, and Nour), were more worried about the integrity of a nascent democratic system, and denounced the move as a coup from above.⁴⁹ Some stated that the decision spelt the end of the revolution and the return to tyranny. El-Baradei declared, "The election of a president in the absence of a constitution and a parliament is the election of a president with powers that not even the most entrenched dictatorships have known."⁵⁰

The presidential elections, now contested between a military-backed candidate who was perceived by many to be an intrinsic part of the Mubarak regime and the Muslim Brotherhood's Muhammad Mursi,

⁴⁷ See for instance the SCAF supra-constitutional communiqué issued in November 2011, which gave the army autonomy from oversight, declared the army the guardian of constitutional legitimacy and gave SCAF alone the right to discuss matters related to the defense budget. See Yasmine Fathi, "SCAF's Proposal for Constitution 'Abuses Will of the People,' Charge Critics," *Ahram Online* (November 3, 2011), <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/0/25802/Egypt/0/SCAFs-proposal-for-constitution-abuses-will-of-the.aspx>. The SCAF withdrew the document following protests on the streets but it continued to act as the de facto ruler of the nation.

⁴⁸ SCAF's July 9, 2012, statement giving the military council broad powers in the name of continuity.

⁴⁹ See Wael Nawara, "Why General Sisi Should Not Run for President of Egypt," *Al-Monitor* (September 20, 2013), www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/09/generalsisipresidencialelection.html?amp

⁵⁰ David Hearst and Abdel-Rahman Hussein, "Egypt's Supreme Court Dissolves Parliament and Outrages Islamists," *The Guardian* (June 14, 2012), amp.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/14/Egypt-parliament-dissolved-supreme-court

would uphold democracy over a return to autocracy by giving power to Mursi with around 52% of the votes. And so, on June 30, 2012, and under pressure from the United States to turn power over to the winner of the elections, the SCAF relinquished authority to the first elected civilian president in Egyptian history, Mohammad Mursi.

This was not the liberal start Egyptian liberals and social democrats were hoping for. Neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor the military were committed to the political and socioeconomic transformation the civil rights activists had risked everything to achieve. The Islamists' ability to gain control of the legislative as well as the executive branches was indeed experienced as the return of authoritarian rule. At the same time, the secularist parties' fragmentation and inability to choose one leader facilitated if not ensured the ascendancy of Mursi to the presidency.⁵¹

The Mursi presidency did not make things easier on the liberals. It began to actively retreat from all previously made promises, and to antagonize many of its opponents, including SCAF. Between August and November 2012, the new government issued a number of constitutional decrees and a temporary constitutional declaration (all replacing the previous constitutional amendments passed by SCAF in 2011) that granted the president far-reaching powers, as well as a say in who continued the drafting of the constitution if the Administrative Judiciary Court were to find the current Constituent Assembly (tasked with drafting the constitution) illegitimate. More specifically, the constitutional decrees consolidated the power of the army and the Ministry of Interior, and more broadly the power of the executive, namely the president, over the legislative, including the power to create, promulgate, and object to legislation.⁵² Mursi also issued a decree that made the president and the upper house, the Shura Council, immune from judicial oversight, and that let him appoint the new general prosecutor.⁵³ He had also drafted bills to monitor and potentially control NGOs, to suppress protests and restrict freedom of speech, all in the name of the national interest and the revolution. At the heart of these provisions was the Islamists' fear that the judiciary would intervene to void the elections, as they had done with earlier ones.⁵⁴ It was also an attempt to counter the expected

⁵¹ Dunne and Hamzawi, "Egypt's Secular Political Parties."

⁵² Ahmed Aboulenein, "Morsy Assumes Power: Sacks Tantawi and Anan, Reverses Constitutional Decree and Reshuffles SCAF," *Daily News Egypt* (August 12, 2012), <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2012/08/12/morsy-assumes-power-sacks-tantawi-and-anan-reverses-constitutional-decree-and-reshuffles-scaf/>

⁵³ Dunne and Hamzawi, "Egypt's Secular Political Parties."

⁵⁴ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, p. 119.

dissolution of the Islamist-dominated Constituent Assembly, which was finalizing the draft of the new constitution to be approved in a referendum on December 15. To the liberals, Mursi's decisions spelled a return to dictatorship.

The November decrees forced the remaining few liberals to resign in vain from the Constituent Assembly and led 25 rights groups to reject the constitutional changes and to file a lawsuit against the draft constitution.⁵⁵ Liberals charged the government with violations of freedom of speech, arrests on political grounds and attempts to control the judiciary. As mentioned earlier, el-Baradei, Moussa, and other leaders would form the NSF after a meeting in the headquarters of the Wafd party in Cairo. The NSF united a group of liberal and secularist parties that felt especially concerned by Mursi's presidential decisions.

Liberals also rallied on the streets in the biggest cities, demanding greater diversity in the Constituent Assembly, the annulment of the November decrees and cancelation of the referendum on the draft constitution planned for the 15th of December. They argued that the new government should review its decision to present the constitution to a referendum before the highest court in the land had the chance to review the legality of the assembly drafting it. This was important in the name of democracy and in order to salvage Egypt's democratic transition, explained the spokesperson of the NSF.⁵⁶ The street rallies and public meetings amassed strong popular participation, and spelled a new wave of revolutionary activity, which forced the government to repeal some components of the announced changes. The legislative prerogatives were delegated to the sitting Consultative Council and the immunity of presidential decrees and decisions from scrutiny and inquiry including by the public was annulled. However, the new government refused to take back the right to interfere in the judiciary by appointing the new general prosecutor.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the government went against the liberals' demands to give the draft of the constitution time to be publicly discussed, and continued its push to hold a referendum on the draft constitution on December 15.

The referendum ended with 63.8% in favor of the army and Islamist-backed constitution and 36.2% against it.⁵⁸ But the voter turnout was

⁵⁵ Lesch, "The Authoritarian State's Power," p. 142.

⁵⁶ "Egypt's Morsi Rescinds Controversial Decree," *Aljazeera* (December 9, 2012), www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/12/9/egypts-morsi-rescinds-controversial-decree

⁵⁷ Dunne and Hamzawi, "Egypt's Secular Political Parties." Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, pp. 120–121.

⁵⁸ Dunne and Hamzawi, "Egypt's Secular Political Parties."

only 33% of eligible voters, thus casting doubts on the legitimacy of the referendum and the Constitution in its entirety. The document itself was not as authoritarian as some had characterized it to be. For instance, it enshrined the principles of democracy and regular rotation of powers and limited presidential terms to 2 four-year terms, a significant improvement on the 1971 constitution, which allowed an unlimited number of terms for a president once elected. The new constitution declared all citizens equal, although was intentionally and typically vague and failed to make specific provisions on women's rights and minority rights. It enshrined freedom of speech although it also included a provision that protected prophets and individuals from "insults."⁵⁹ The new constitution was thus democratic to a certain degree, but illiberal in many ways: It gave the president the right to appoint the heads of independent bodies and regulatory agencies charged with supervising his/her work, to veto laws, and to appoint judges to Egypt's highest court. The constitution also legalized military trials of civilians in the case of offenses against the military. And it created a new government-appointed council to supervise the media and to "observe the values and constructive traditions of society."⁶⁰

The Mursi government's failure to set Egypt on a liberalish path put the entire country on a slippery slope towards instability especially as it antagonized a large part of the population. And while its compromises satisfied some liberal leaders who were relieved to see that the democratic process was safeguarded and looked forward to implementing changes over time, the entire environment seemed prone to reactionary and at times inflexible and rigid politics. Further, a majority of activists and politicians, but also women and Copts (Egypt's Christian minority), viewed the new government's policies and decisions as attempting to impose the Islamists' will over that of other citizens, bringing to the fore fears that the autocratic and monist order was creeping back in.

With so much at stake, millions took to the streets for a second time to call for early elections and support the military coup against Mursi at the end of June 2013. Liberals were again divided between those who supported the military intervention, thinking the constitution could be better drafted to safeguard freedoms and rights, and others who were worried about the integrity of the electoral system, and were more suspicious of the army and wanted the military out of politics as soon as possible.

⁵⁹ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, p. 121.

⁶⁰ Selim, "Egypt under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood," p. 192.

No matter which side one took, overall, time was conspiring against the liberals and liberalism in general. The complexity and criticality of the situation at the political level denied them the time to think of better strategies to organize, to negotiate as part of an attempt to ensure respect for a liberal environment in which freedoms are safeguarded, and also to come up with a long-term plan instead of getting stuck in a reactionary mode.

At the cultural level, Egypt seemed for a moment to be thriving. Freedom of expression was flourishing on TV shows, in newspapers articles, and on the news in general. Prominent actors such as Khalid al-Nabawi and Amr Waked, and directors Dawud Abd al-Sayed and Khaled Youssef, became vocal about the need to change and endorse liberal democracy. Actor and human rights activist Khaled Abol Naga – who had been an ardent supporter of women’s rights and children’s rights since the mid-2000s – organized concerts, events, and candle-lit vigils in support of the revolutionaries and their ideas. Bassem Youssef, an equivalent to the American broadcaster Jon Stewart, hosted a satirical news program, *el-Bernameg* (the program), from 2011 to 2014. The show was first broadcast on ONTV, owned by liberal businessman Naghib Swaris, then on CBC. It featured many writers and artists and politicians who spoke freely about their ideas, their work, and their activism. Millions tuned in every week to watch *el-Bernameg*, which had become a huge hit in the entire region, so much so that the show received 200,000,000 hits on its online Youtube channel.

But the show was too popular while also being too critical of the new Mursi leadership as well as of the military regime following the ousting of Mursi. It was indeed representative of a true liberal program, enjoying and aspiring to help shape what it thought was a nascent liberal democratic environment. But the environment would turn out to be not liberal enough, or at least not yet. Youssef was accused of circulating false news, of disrespecting the president, in addition to disrespecting Islam. Youssef appeared in court donning an oversized hat, similar to a hat Mursi had worn during a visit to Pakistan and that Youssef had mocked during his show.⁶¹ He was fined and the case stopped there. Youssef continued to make fun of events and the people behind them, cautioning Egyptians not to return to the security mentality of previous regimes.

⁶¹ Joel Gordon, “Egypt’s New Liberal Crisis,” in Dalia F. Fahmy and Daanish Faruqi (eds.), *Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism: Illiberal Intelligentsia and the Future of Egyptian Democracy* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017), p. 330.

Rise of Military Dictatorship

The Mursi Islamist-dominated government would last in office from June 2012 to July 3, 2013. As explained earlier, Mursi was disappointing to too many who had risked everything to topple autocracy and who yearned for freedom of expression, freedom of action including of assembly, and for their civil rights as citizens. His polarizing and majoritarian attitude and his attempt to interfere in the judiciary gave a green light for the military to continue its interference in order to assert its will. There were some within the April 6 movement who supported this interference, as well as liberals such as Abu al-Ghar, Amr Musa, and ElBaradei himself for a period of time (more on this hereinafter).

Less than a year after the army had removed and arrested Mursi⁶², Chief-General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was elected president (in May 2014). This began a new phase that heralded new lows for Egyptians in general and for Egypt's liberals more specifically. Most secularists (Wafd and Free Egyptians included) and the many parties that emerged post-2011 sided with the new government or remained silent. Some who had joined liberal initiatives and even fought for liberal ideals under the Mubarak regime, such as Abu el-Ghar and Saad Eddin Ibrahim, and even Mubarak's executive director, Dalia Ziada, became part of the For the Love of Egypt Coalition created by General Ehab Saad of the general intelligence services, a coalition that gave significant support and credibility to General Sisi.

Others held fast to their liberal convictions, and thus turned out to be more committed to their ideals than fearful of the Islamists, such as Hamzawi and Ayman Nour. Very soon after the rise of Sisi, el-Baradei, as well as many young activists such as Ahmed Maher and Esraa Abdel Fattah, became targets of the new government.⁶³ Then in July 2013, Nour publicly refused to support the military's deployment against Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood. He explained that only liberals and liberalism could save Egypt from tyranny:

I am not a terrorist and [el]Baradei is not a terrorist, but the regime deals with us ... in a more violent way than they do with Islamists. You also have another internal issue that we as liberals, since the March 1954 crisis, have ... with military in government. After January 25 [2011], we were shouting slogans: let the reign of the military fall, well before Sisi came to political life. During

⁶² David D. Kirkpatrick, "Army Ousts Egypt's President; Morsi Is Taken into Military Custody," *The New York Times* (July 3, 2013), www.nytimes.com/2013/07/04/world/middleeast/egypt.html

⁶³ Dunne and Hamzawi, "Egypt Secular Parties."

7 July [and the military coup against Mursi], a small number of liberals [supported the coup] ... but they left on the first stop ... The ones still on board that train are not liberal forces. They are the parties allied to Mubarak and some pro-Nasserites, who see similarity between the image of the military under Nasser and the military under Sisi. There is no solution for the crisis going on in Egypt but to have a liberal solution that refuses elimination and believes in the national partnership.⁶⁴

Nour felt compelled to leave the country following a phone conversation with Sisi in July 2013 in which he felt directly threatened. Indeed, Nour became one of the first martyrs of the liberal cause against the military chief Sisi when a lawsuit requesting to rescind his Egyptian citizenship was filed against him. The lawsuit was launched because of his public defiance of the military-instated roadmap that was announced on July 3, 2013.⁶⁵

Nour would not be the only victim. The new Sisi administration launched a massive crackdown on all of the Islamists and the liberals who refused to work within the restrictive confines imposed by the military.⁶⁶ This crackdown included intellectuals, journalists, professors, satirists, artists, and actors among others. For instance, both Amro Waked and Khaled Abol Naga had to leave the country.⁶⁷ The military regime indeed did not tolerate any liberal or illiberal opposition, and the Sisi government issued a number of draconian laws to control public life. Protest Law 107 was published in November 2013, a law that the elected Mursi government would not have been able to issue. This is because contrary to Mursi, the new military rulers enjoyed the full backing of the security forces. The law stipulates that gatherings of more than ten people require permission from the State, thus giving the Ministry of Interior the tools to control protests and public gatherings, and the police the right to use lethal force, and to imprison demonstrators for up to seven years.⁶⁸

Law 136 was issued on October 27, 2014, and placed most public buildings under the security and protection of the military judiciary, thus controlling as much public space as possible. The thousands of

⁶⁴ David Hearst, "Interview with Egyptian Opposition Leader Ayman Nour," *Middle East Eye* (2015), www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-interview-egyptian-opposition-leader-ayman-nour

⁶⁵ "Court to consider withdrawing Ayman Nour's Citizenship," *Cairo Post* (January 23, 2014), <https://archive.vn/20140131075204/http://thecairopost.com/news/78414/politics/court-to-consider-withdrawing-ayman-nours-citizenship#selection-465.7-469.203>

⁶⁶ Abdalla, "Youth Movements in the Egyptian Transformation," p. 48.

⁶⁷ Both actors would be accused of treason in 2019.

⁶⁸ Lesch, "The authoritarian State's Power," p. 148.

protestors who demonstrated in buildings or on roads that were by then under the protection of the military thus faced military trials. Indeed, the prosecutor general shifted 700 cases that dated back to 2013 to military judges. A new law on terrorist activity and entities defined a terrorist group as any group that intends, “to advocate by any means to disturb public order or endanger the safety of the community and its interests, or risk its security, or harm national unity.” It defined “terrorist” in extraordinarily broad terms: In addition to language about violence and threats of violence, the law left it to the authorities to decide if actions had harmed “national unity” or the environment or natural resources, or had impeded the work of public officials or the application of the constitution or the laws. A “terrorist” became anyone who supported such an entity – support that could include “providing information” that “impedes the work of public officials”; further, “application of the Constitution” became a potential terrorist offense.⁶⁹ This meant that human rights groups as well as journalists, writers, artists, TV hosts and political parties members could all be open to accusations of being terrorists.⁷⁰ An additional decree was added in 2015 that shielded the military and police from legal penalties when they used force against prisoners and fining anyone for writing statements that contradicted the official version of events of the military or the police. These new laws supplemented existing Penal Code articles such as 98(f), which prescribed prison and a fine for “exploiting religion” in any manner that “promotes extremist ideologies,” “stirs sedition,” disparages “any divine religion” and prejudices “national unity.”⁷¹

Tens of thousands of political dissidents were detained. Others were banned from appearing on TV or radio stations, and journalists were banned from writing critical reports about the political apparatus. Outspoken journalists and TV hosts who were critical of the State were forced off air.⁷² This became the fate of Bassem Youssef, who was forced to resign following the rise of Sisi to power. The third and last season of the program *el-bernameg* had focused on the military coup, then the new government under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and finally General Sisi himself. The show was canceled shortly after the critique of Sisi, and Youssef was accused of slandering the leader of the nation and summoned to court. The court verdict condemned satirical television shows, and accused

⁶⁹ Joe Stork, “Egypt’s Political Prisoners,” *Open Democracy* (March 6, 2015), www.hrw.org/news/2015/03/06/egypts-political-prisoners

⁷⁰ Lesch, “The Authoritarian State’s Power,” p. 149.

⁷¹ Stork, “Egypt’s Political Prisoners.”

⁷² Lesch, “The Authoritarian State’s Power,” pp. 154–155.

Youssef of disturbing public peace and security. Youssef had to tread very carefully but he could not ignore a claim, backed by the Sisi regime, that Egyptian military doctors had found a cure for cancer and for AIDS. In June 2014, he announced that he could no longer stand the intensifying censorship and had to cancel his show.⁷³ He later had to flee the country, thus becoming one of the many liberal victims of the new military regime.⁷⁴

Hundreds of NGOs also had to close their doors. Further, about 13 new prisons were built.⁷⁵ Someone like Belal Fadl, a columnist and a screenwriter, who once wrote, “the government should be proud of its care for the mentally ill: ‘Egypt is the only country that allows the mentally challenged to reach decision-making circles’” was blacklisted for writing a column ridiculing the promotion of General Sisi to the rank of field marshal.⁷⁶ Blogger and student Karim Ashraf Mohamed al-Banna was given a three-year sentence for a Facebook post that was perceived as promoting atheism.⁷⁷

Thus the renewed repressive environment impacted many dissenters, including all pro-democracy groups and liberal activists. The Sisi government also filed criminal charges against prominent liberal intellectuals and political leaders like Professors Emad Shahin and Amr Hamzawy, who had criticized the military takeover. Liberal activists and the new generation of liberals faced the same fate. April 6 Movement liberal activists such as Ahmad Maher, Ahmad Douma, and Muhammad Adel were found guilty of organizing unauthorized protest in November 2013, and were sentenced to 3 years in prison for violating law 107, among other charges.⁷⁸ Others who also protested military trials of civilians, such as Alaa Abdel-Fattah (a prominent opposition activist who has been in and out of jail since the days when Hosni Mubarak was president), activists Yara Salam and Mona Seif (Alaa Abd el-Fattah’s sister), Nazly Hussein, and Salma Said, as well as human rights lawyers like Ahmed Heshmat, Mohamed Abdelaziz, and Osama al-Mahdy, and

⁷³ Gordon, “Egypt’s New Liberal Crisis,” p. 332.

⁷⁴ Interview with Bassem Youssef, “Scaling Free Speech: The Reputation and Replication of AlBernamag,” (October 14, 2015), www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0RK-yhZsZQ

⁷⁵ Zvi Bar’el, “60,000 Political Prisoners and 1,250 Missing: Welcome to the New Egypt,” *Haaretz* (September 11, 2016), www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-60-000-political-prisoners-and-1-250-missing-welcome-to-the-new-egypt-1.5440308

⁷⁶ Mayy El-Sheikh, “A Voice of Dissent in Egypt is Muffled but not Silent,” *The New York Times* (May 2, 2014), www.nytimes.com/2014/05/03/world/middleeast/an-egyptian-voice-of-dissent-is-muffled-but-not-silenced.html

⁷⁷ Stork, “Egypt’s Political Prisoners.”

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

journalists such as Ahmad Ragab and Rasha Azab, were all charged with and convicted of violating law 107. Before being charged, Rasha Azab, Mona Seif and Nazly Hussein were beaten up by the police and dumped in the desert.⁷⁹

Ahmad Maher, who had initially supported the military coup against the Mursi government, became vocal about his “stupidity” in supporting the military intervention against the Brotherhood. He realized that the military that he thought would safeguard the revolution was reasserting everything the protestors rose against in January 25, 2011.⁸⁰ Emad Shahin was sentenced to death in absentia for conspiring to undermine national security and for espionage. Shahin, a well-known academic and professor of political science, had denounced the military’s project of mass political exclusion, and had written about mass killings and mass arrests committed since Sisi’s rise to power.⁸¹ The April 6 Youth Movement was finally entirely banned in April 2014, accused of defaming the State.⁸²

The 2015 parliamentary elections were rigged. As expected, the pro-Sisi bloc won the majority of seats. The new State declared its intention of focusing on combatting terrorism and curbing Islamism, with little reference to anything else. Repression became official, forceful, and in plain sight. Overall, more than 40,000 were arrested.⁸³ Egyptians and liberals thus suddenly woke up to a newly powerful, violent, and despotic regime, and saw the State’s determination to prevent pluralism and liberal values and practices in every way possible.⁸⁴ Even co-opted parties such as the Free Egyptians Party and the Social Democratic Party were divided and weakened through State manipulation. The “security crisis”

⁷⁹ Sarah El Deeb, “A Sinister Night for 3 Women in Egypt Protest Wave,” *Associated Press* (November 28, 2013).

⁸⁰ Stork, “Egypt’s Political Prisoners.”

⁸¹ Emad El-Din Shahin, “Sentenced to Death in Egypt: How I Became Defendant 33 – Yet Another Casualty of the Return to Military Rule,” *The Atlantic* (May 19, 2015), www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/05/death-sentence-egypt-emad-shahin/393590/

⁸² Leila Fadel, “Examining the Years since Egypt’s Arab Spring,” *NPR Morning Edition* (February 11, 2015), www.npr.org/2015/02/11/385396424/examining-the-4-years-since-egypts-arab-spring; April 6 movement democratic Front split from April 6 movement, in Spring 2011. Leaders: Tarek Alkholy, Amr Ezz, Yasser Shams Aldden, Selim Alhway. Both movements banned by an Egyptian court on April 28, 2014. See “We Will Not Be Silenced: April 6, after Court Order Banning Group,” *Ahram Online* (April 28, 2014).

⁸³ Guerin, “Revolution a Distant Memory as Egypt Escalates Repression”; Lesch, “The Authoritarian State’s Power,” p. 148.

⁸⁴ Mohamad Elmasry, “Egypt’s Protests: Sisi’s Iron Fist Is No longer Enough,” *Middle East Eye* (September 30, 2019), www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/egypt-protests-sisi-iron-fist-is-no-longer-enough

claimed by the new political leadership meant that blind obedience was expected from everyone, co-opted or not.

By 2016, all serious opposition parties and groups were banned and opposition media shut down. According to the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, “nearly 106,000 Egyptians were incarcerated in 504 prisons, over 60,000 of them are political prisoners and detainees. The regime spent \$95 million alone on Gamasa General Prison, at a time when Egypt has agreed a \$12-billion loan from the International Monetary Fund ... 1,250 people have disappeared in the basements of Egypt’s jails, and about whom there is no information ...”⁸⁵ The Egyptian Council for Human Rights felt the need to develop a new phone application, iProtect, that allows activists to send text messages alerting their contacts about their whereabouts, and an email with similar information to the Human Rights Council. The application is disguised as a calculator to avoid the scrutiny of police officers checking their cell phone. It is meant to locate arrestees and send lawyers to them before they disappear.⁸⁶

Why the Defeat?

There are a number of reasons why liberals were unable to translate their mobilization into assertive leadership and larger sociopolitical change in line with their goals.⁸⁷

Firstly, liberals failed to present a united front at the institutional or party level, which is not so different from other liberals worldwide, but deadly within the context of a systemic transition away from dictatorship.⁸⁸ This could be related to their approach. Indeed, their shift in focus in the 1970s away from the institution of the State and from the paternalistic role of the intellectual and the leader as part of an attempt to engage with and be closer to the people (see Chapters 2 and 3) while also avoiding the repressive State made them vulnerable in an environment that now required assertive, decisive, and recognized leadership. Secondly, the many years of awareness raising by working tacitly, horizontally, and independently in smaller groups – in order to bypass the authoritarian State – impacted upon the liberals’ ability to work as a collective within

⁸⁵ Bar’el, “60,000 Political Prisoners and 1,250 Missing.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Karim Emile Bitar, “The Dilemmas of Arab Liberalism,” *Your Middle East* (March 12, 2014), www.yourmiddleeast.com/opinion/the-dilemmas-of-arab-liberalism_22184

⁸⁸ This inability to present a united front is not new, it is symptomatic of the authoritarian context in which the opposition, including the liberals, have to work. For more on this, see Dina Shehata, *Islamists and Secularists in Egypt: Opposition, Conflict, and Cooperation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 51–82.

a hierarchical structure with clear leadership in order to compete and win elections. Thirdly, as amply discussed earlier, their divisions regarding how to deal with the possible threat of the illiberal Islamists divided their ranks and empowered the illiberal forces. Fourthly, their focus on complex issues such as human rights, tolerance, and separation of powers also weakened their position as political leaders to a people looking for a transition towards freedoms and rights, but also towards concrete stability and security. Certainly the liberals could have spent more time addressing how they planned on providing for stability. Overall, their rational sober messaging failed to stir people's emotions at that specific liminal moment. Fifthly, an added impasse was that the young leaders, so used to working outside formal channels, refused to join established or nascent political parties.⁸⁹ Finally, the liberals struggled to recalibrate their methods in a matter of months in order to reclaim their place of impact in the transition and to achieve what was needed in order to recapture the State, namely to create a hierarchical structure that would bring together all liberals in order to showcase a leadership and produce a concrete political program. The result is that both the army and the Islamists were able to undermine the liberals' work.

But the miscarriage of the revolution was not entirely a result of the liberals' failings, far from it. The success of SCAF in bringing back the autocratic order was also the result of regional (from Saudi Arabia and the UAE) and international backing (from Russia) and tacit approval (from the United States and the EU). Indeed, although leaders of powers such as the EU and the United States claim that democracy promotion is an implicit goal of their foreign policy, they also have interests that are often more compelling such as regional stability, trade, and more importantly, a steady energy supply into the international market.⁹⁰ It is against the background of this realist logic that a military chief like al-Sisi was "allowed" to violently disregard the revolutionary movement against him and SCAF in 2011–2012, to topple an elected government in 2013, and to reinstate brutal dictatorship in Egypt in 2014.

This failure of Western leadership – and of their top advisors – to uphold democratization is not new, indeed, as we have seen throughout this work, liberal leaders have historically played a negative and at times

⁸⁹ Dunne and Hamzawi, "Egypt's Secular Political Parties"; And yet youth movements in Egypt had proved capable of framing the issue of regime change effectively, leading ultimately to contention on the streets and the toppling of Mubarak. See: Sika, "Youth Political Engagement in Egypt," pp. 181–199.

⁹⁰ Oz Hassan, "Undermining the Transatlantic Democracy Agenda? The Arab Spring and the Saudi Arabia's Counteracting Democracy Strategy," *Democratization* 22:3 (2015), p. 480.

a destructive role when it comes to supporting liberal democratic groups and individuals in the Middle East. It remains significantly more appealing for democratically elected leaders to support autocrats and to rely on their repressive measures to stabilize the Arabic-speaking region, no matter how much the region's liberals and pro-democracy activists suffer or what they say about the destabilizing and far-reaching impact of the autocratic systems in place.

Indeed even the United States and the EU stood by during the pre-Sisi and post-Mubarak transitional phase, emphasizing economic stability and economic liberalization rather than pushing for democracy and human rights.⁹¹ It is within this logic that President Macron invited al-Sisi to France in December 2020 in order to discuss trade liberalization and other geostrategic interests, thus effectively disregarding Sisi's abuses of power at home.⁹² This focus on economic liberalization as a means of ultimately promoting political liberalization (consistent with the still-disputed modernization theory) has not really led to democratic transformations and liberalization in the region. If anything, it has inadvertently empowered illiberal regimes, that have instead undertaken only cosmetic changes, as well as turning to other powerful funders when needed. For instance, with Sisi's rise to power, Saudi Arabia was able to replace the United States and the EU as patrons by simply providing more financial assistance to the new despot, while the United States and the EU stood by.⁹³ Börzel tells us that, “[c]ountervailing democracy promotion is not the same as autocracy promotion. Yet, the outcome of such activities may be still autocracy enhancing.”⁹⁴ Nowhere is this more palpable than in Egypt and Syria, as we will see in the Syrian section of this chapter.

The Sisi regime and the military establishment in general have especially benefitted from their close ties to their autocratic patrons in Saudi

⁹¹ Hassan, “Undermining the Transatlantic Democracy Agenda,” pp. 483–484; Danya Greenfield and R. Balfour, *Arab Awakening: Are the US and EU Missing the Challenge?* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2012), p. 2; Michael Peel, Camilla Hall, and Heba Saleh, “Saudi Arabia and UAE Prop Up Egypt Regime with Offer of \$8bn,” *Financial Times* (July 10, 2013), <https://amp.ft.com/content/7e066bdc-e8a2-11e2-8e9e-00144feabdc0>

⁹² Macron had to even award Sisi the country's highest award, the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, an honor that is given to heads of states who visit France. The award is being challenged by Ghad al-Thawra Party in France's Courts. See: “Macron gave Sisi France's highest award on Paris visit: official,” *France 24* (December 10, 2020); and Ghad al-Thawra Facebook Page.

⁹³ Hassan, “Undermining the Transatlantic Democracy Agenda,” p. 485.

⁹⁴ T. A. Brözel, “The Noble West and the Dirty Rest? Western Democracy Promoters and Illiberal Regional Powers,” *Democratization* 22:3 (2015), p. 524 (pp. 519–535).

Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The two countries have acted as al-Sisi's main backers against the Mursi government and the Muslim Brothers (perceived as a threatening alternative to the two self-proclaimed religious regimes), and against the homegrown liberal movement that was effectively deemed as threatening to the autocratic regimes in the region more generally. Saudi Arabia and the UAE's financial support has further allowed Sisi to avoid negotiating or compromising with Western powers when it comes to easing repression on pro-democracy activists and allowing for some freedoms within the country.⁹⁵

Finally, Sisi has developed ties with yet another powerful illiberal power, Russia, which has provided his leadership with financial, security, diplomatic, and military support in return for a presence and increasing influence in Egypt. President Putin visited Egypt in 2015 and 2017, and Sisi has visited Moscow three times since 2014, with regular bilateral visits between government officials.⁹⁶ Moscow is currently building a nuclear plant in Dabaa city, Russian airplanes and military presence was allowed near the border with Libya, and the Russians have signed arms sales contracts with Egypt totaling about 3.5 billion dollars.⁹⁷

The Arab Spring has indeed revealed not only some of the inexperience of liberals, but also the crisis of liberalism worldwide. The inability of the liberal world leaders to provide meaningful and impactful help and to support Arab liberals in their quest has been confusing and ultimately deadly to many activists and intellectuals within the region, who wonder if the liberal world would ever back them up (a theme that is also pertinent in the Syria section of this chapter).

Hope Is not Dead

The present bleakness, with the revolution a distant memory and the future seemingly hopeless, has devastated most liberals and democrats. And yet these activists and intellectuals are not done yet. Once

⁹⁵ Hassan, "Undermining the Transatlantic Democracy Agenda?," pp. 479–495; Line Khatib, "Challenges of Representation and Inclusion," pp. 131–145.

⁹⁶ Dalia Ghanem Yazbeck and Vasily Kuznetsov, "The 'Comrades' in North-Africa," in Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru (eds.), *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?* (Luxembourg: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2018), p. 74.

⁹⁷ Yehia Hamed, "Joe Biden's Administration Should Start Listening to all Egyptians," *Middle East Eye* (November 17, 2020), www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/joe-bidens-administration-should-start-listening-all-egyptians; Roland Dannreuther, "Russia and the Arab Spring: Supporting the Counter-Revolution," *Journal of European Integration* 37:1 (2015), pp. 77–94; Yazbeck and Kuznetsov, "The 'Comrades' in North-Africa," p. 75.

ingrained, the idea is there to stay and to flourish despite the setbacks, says one liberal activist.⁹⁸ Activists, like Shahin, think the youth that broke the barrier of fear cannot be intimidated.⁹⁹ In the words of Nazly Hussein, “Some died for their dream ... This dream is my compass and until it comes true, I will stay on the streets.”¹⁰⁰ Bassem Youssef asserted in 2015, “challenging the status quo ... is happening all over the Arab World. The status quo is not sustainable.”¹⁰¹ Many other liberals agree it is no time for resignation.

Social activism remains one way to resist repression and to maintain hope. Against this background, liberals say that they have so much to learn but that they will continue trying to liberate their country. And while American and European political leaderships seem apathetic to the liberals’ pleas in the Arab region, parties and organizations such as ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), the Liberal International, and the German Friedrich Nauman Foundation for Freedom have pledged to increase their support of the Arab liberals.¹⁰² Human rights groups that have survived the Sisi regime such as the EIPR, the Arabic Network of Human Rights Information, the Human Rights Center for the Assistance of Prisoners, and el-Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture (shutdown in 2016) vow to continue working no matter what is hurled at them. Their hope and will become their most precious weapon.

Liberal parties have also continued to oppose the new military dictatorship and they remain active and hopeful. These include the Egypt Freedom Party, the Constitution Party (liberal) and the Dignity Party (social liberal), which together formed the Democratic Current Coalition in 2013. Strong Egypt (liberal Islamic), and Bread and Freedom (Social Democrat – Islamist) have also joined the movement, while the Social Democratic Party joined it later on. They have all continued to work from inside Egypt within the restricted political and social space

⁹⁸ Interview with author, December 2020.

⁹⁹ Fadel, “Examining the Years since Egypt’s Arab Spring.”; April 6 movement democratic Front split from April 6 movement, in Spring 2011. Leaders: Tarek Alkholy, Amr Ezz, Yasser Shams Aldden, Selim Alhway. Both movements banned by an Egyptian court on April 28, 2014. See “We Will Not be Silenced: April 6, After Court Order Banning Group,” *Ahram Online* (April 28, 2014).

¹⁰⁰ El Deeb, “A Sinister Night for 3 Women in Egypt.”

¹⁰¹ Interview with Bassem Youssef, “Scaling Free Speech: The Reputation and Replication of AlBernamag” (October 14, 2015), www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0RK-yhZsZQ

¹⁰² Koert Debeuf, “From Arab Spring to Arab Revolution: Three years of ALDE Representation in the Arab World,” in Ronald Meinardus (ed.), *Liberalism in the Arab World – Just a Good Idea?* (Cairo: Al-Mahrosa for Publishing, 2014), pp. 165–167.

that they have been allowed since 2014. It seems as if they are back to square one in the sense that they have to work on raising their profile and reasserting their narrative and ideals. To do so, they have issued press statements and conference releases that decry abuses of power and human rights, as well as reported on the draconian laws that target civil society activists and citizens. They have also worked with professional syndicates in their struggle against the security services interference. In the House of Representatives, the Civil Democratic Current (Dignity Party, Constitution Party, Socialist Popular Alliance, Freedom Egypt, Popular Current, Bread and Freedom, Socialist Party, Egyptian Social Democratic Party) has mobilized the MPs representing the Socialist Popular Alliance, the Social Democrats, and some independents, to organize an opposition platform in Parliament.¹⁰³

Others who were forced to leave the country are working from outside the system such as the Ghad al-Thawra Party, and the Guardians of the Revolution. Nour explains,

There is no solution for the crisis going on in Egypt but to have a liberal solution that refuses elimination and believes in the national partnership. Thus, there is no exit from this crisis but to have two solutions: developing [nuancing] the voice of the Islamists and development of the behavior of the liberals, and to establish a partnership between the two.¹⁰⁴

Nour and others within the Ghad Party and el-Baradei's followers proposed to form a shadow government that would encompass multiple political parties in order to ensure representation of the voice of the people.¹⁰⁵

These liberals turned out to be right in their suspicions of the military, as the ranks of dissidents and human rights defenders who channeled the 2011 revolution have been fractured by mass arrests since 2013.¹⁰⁶ But the crackdown against them, although brutal and meant to stop them

¹⁰³ Dunne and Hamzawi, "Egypt's Political Secular Parties."

¹⁰⁴ David Hearst, "Interview with Egyptian Opposition Leader Ayman Nour," *Middle East Eye* (2015), www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-interview-egyptian-opposition-leader-ayman-nour

¹⁰⁵ This was not the first time that the proposition for a parallel government was suggested. Al-Ghad Party and the National Association for Change thought of creating a parallel parliament in 2010 in the Ghad Party headquarters following the regime's rigged parliamentary elections, which at the time prompted Mubarak to say "let them have fun." See Esraa Abdel Fattah, "Loaded Victory: Egypt's Revolution and Where It Stands Post-30 June," in Meinrdus (ed.), *Liberalism in the Arab World*, p. 121.

¹⁰⁶ Ayman Nour, "Egypt's Choice is Clear: Democracy – or Chaos under Sisi," *Middle East Eye* (January 23, 2020), www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/repression-corruption-and-poverty-egypt-has-recipe-new-uprising)

once and for all¹⁰⁷, has not been a success. On September 20 and 21, 2019, thousands took to the streets to protest against al-Sisi across Egyptian cities, confirming that their fight for rights is not over. The protests followed an online video published by actor and contractor Mohammad Ali claiming that Sisi is engaged in flagrant corruption. “The Arab Spring is not over,” says one activist. “It might not be making the news in any of the countries that could help us and others in the region achieve our dream of dignity and freedom, but activists and dissidents are still here, writing, listening, raising awareness, and protesting.”¹⁰⁸ Surveys show activists are right to be hopeful. The Advocacy and Communications Director for Human Rights Watch’s Middle East and North Africa office and one of the best investigative journalists in the region, Ahmed Benchemsi, reports, “... if we set aside media institutions and music celebrities, seven out of the 10 most followed Twitter accounts in Egypt are those of liberal commentators such as satirists Bassem Youssef and Belal Fadl or the secular politicians Mohamed ElBaradei, Hamdeen Sabahi, and Amr Hamzawy.”¹⁰⁹

And so the large crowds that gathered in Tahrir Square, the focal point of the 2011 uprising that toppled Mubarak, shouted again in 2019, “the people want to topple the regime” and “step down Sisi.”¹¹⁰ Of course this resulted in more crackdowns, as more than 4,000 individuals were arrested, including journalists, lawyers, and political leaders that had been in and out of prison before and throughout the Arab Spring, among them award-winning human rights lawyer Mahienour el-Massry, as well as prominent activists Esraa’ Abdel-Fattah¹¹¹ and Alaa’ Abdel Fattah.¹¹² But the goal remains, to move toward a liberal, peaceful, inclusive,

¹⁰⁷ For instance, Ayman Nour’s Egyptian passport was not renewed, and he was accused of being a traitor and working against Egypt. See Mahmoud al-Shorbaji, “Hikim niha’i birafd tajdid jawaz safar ayman nour,” *Masrawi* (June 6, 2020), www.masrawy.com/news/news_cases/details/2020/6/6/1803171)

¹⁰⁸ Author’s conversation with Egyptian activist while visiting Dubai, May 2018.

¹⁰⁹ Ahmed Benchemsi, “Arab Liberalism Is Alive and Well, Thank You,” *Free Arabs* (February 22, 2015), www.freearabs.com/index.php/ideas/102-stories/2166-jb-span-arab-liberalism-jb-span-is-alive-and-well

¹¹⁰ Nadda Osman, “Egypt’s Protests: Who Is Demonstrating and Who Is Being Arrested?” *Middle East Eye* (September 26, 2019), www.middleeasteye.net/news/arrests-egyptian-anti-sisi-protesters-broken-down

¹¹¹ As mentioned earlier, Esraa Abdel Fattah was an active member of the Ghad Party and the Kefaya Movement, and was one of the initiators of the April 6 Movement. She also joined ElBaradei’s National Association for Change in 2010, and co-founded the Egyptian Democratic Academy, which helped monitor the 2010 parliamentary elections.

¹¹² Osman, “Egypt’s Protests”; “Egypt Detains Human Rights Lawyer Representing Anti-Sisi Protesters”, *Middle East Eye* (September 22, 2019), www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-detains-award-winning-human-rights-lawyer-representing-protesters

feminist, and humanist alternative that undermines the regime's narrative. Yet the regime is not going quietly, indeed, it added the BBC and Al Hurra TV channels to the list of 513 other websites already blocked in Egypt, and disrupted online messaging applications. Then there were the promises of political reform, including by the speaker of the parliament, who argued that repression is necessary to build a strong state and infrastructure.¹¹³

Still the opposition continues to push however. Thus in November 2019, member of the House of Representatives Ahmad Tantawi submitted a proposal for institutional reforms and to end Sisi's presidency in 2022 instead of 2024. On December 28, Muhammad Ali released the "Egyptian Consensus Document" with a list of main demands, which Ali claimed represented the consensus of a wide range of Egyptian opposition. The following day, the Egyptian National Action Group (ENAG), a group of Egyptians working to overthrow Egypt's military dictatorship, was launched with a consensus program to replace the Sisi regime. Ayman Nour has also helped create ENAG from exile.¹¹⁴ The group reflects the liberal approach of inclusion and consensus creation. Nour announced that the group includes people from diverse political backgrounds including liberals, leftists, and Islamists who decided to "set [their] differences aside" in order to rid Egypt of its latest military dictatorship. The main values guiding ENAG are democracy, human dignity, justice, equality and freedom. Ayman explains that after more than six years of Sisi's vicious rule, the spirit that directed the Arab Spring has not faltered. It has only matured, and they are more determined than ever. In 2020, Nour addressed al-Sisi and his supporters:

You don't want to understand that there are no countries without disagreement in opinion and thought, and that disagreement is a healthy feature if it takes place within a democratic environment, and a binding social contract that does not eliminate any party and does not tie citizens' rights to the wishes of one leader ... I know that the problem of previous *mustabidin* (despots) and yourself is that you are arrogant and delude yourselves into thinking that you alone are patriotic while everyone else is a traitor, and that you are the reformers and the saviors, and that there are no reformists but you, and corruptors but those who

¹¹³ Ezzeldine C. Fishere, "Egypt's Dictatorship Is Sitting on a Powder Keg," *Washington Post* (October 17, 2019), www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/10/17/egypt-dictatorship-is-sitting-powder-keg/; MEE Staff, "Egypt's Parliament Speaker Favourably Compares Sisi to Hitler," *Middle East Eye* (October 2, 2019), www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-top-lawmaker-praises-hitler-parliament-speech

¹¹⁴ "Egypt: Opponents of Sisi Launch Anti-Regime Group," *Middle East Monitor* (December 31, 2019), www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191231-egypt-opponents-of-sisi-launch-anti-regime-group/.

disagree with you ... and the truth is that you are a disaster, and no good will come [to Egypt] unless you are gone ...¹¹⁵ [author's translation]

Like other liberal activists, Nour then asserted, "The Arab Spring is not over. What is less certain is how long it will take Western countries to realize how short-sighted they have been in failing the Egyptian people. The 'strongman policy' has only brought more instability and more support for extremists in the region. The costs may be much higher than the income from arms contracts. A genuine democratic transition will benefit everyone, especially compared with the chaos that will come if Sisi's rule continues."¹¹⁶

Other activists agree. Yehia Hamed writes, "I can clearly see something happening in our region. This wave of democratic unrest is not over and the counter-revolution allies have failed to convince Arabs everywhere that they can rule. The only means they use to silence anger are brutal ones. So far they have succeeded in keeping a lid on this kettle, but the time may soon come when they cannot – after the Covid epidemic dies down and the real impact of it on jobs and the economy makes itself felt."¹¹⁷

In this environment of political dictatorship, still-potent Islamism, poverty and widespread economic inequality, international betrayal of the liberal cause and a COVID-19 pandemic that has further empowered the despots, the future seems bleaker than ever. But it is within this bleakness that liberal activism is renewed and revitalized, and that lessons are learned for future opportunities. After all, liberalism seems almost an inevitable outcome of the autocratic setting, and thus ultimately inescapable.

Syria

According to an activist interviewed for this book, the Damascus Spring activists and intellectuals were not at all responsible for the protests that erupted across Syria in March 2011, rather, it is argued, those protests were the direct result of regime repression and a demonstration effect arising from the images of demonstrators rebelling in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Bahrain. The activist is not alone in his assertion. Multiple observers and analysts of Syrian politics agree that the

¹¹⁵ AymanNour, "Al-Sisiyal'abbi-Inarwanad'ual-'uqalaabirafdsiyasatihi," *Arabi21* (April 8, 2020), <https://arabi21.com/story/1259526/أيمن-نور-السيسي-يلعب-بالنار-وندعو-العقلاء-لرفض-ممارساته>

¹¹⁶ Nour, "Egypt's Choice Is Clear."

¹¹⁷ Hamed, "Joe Biden's Administration."

intellectuals and human rights advocates who have dedicated years and risked so much in their struggle to raise political awareness and provoke change in the country were not a meaningful force. And yet this narrative ignores the fact that leaders who were active during the Damascus Spring such as Michel Kilo, Riad Seif, Zaynab Lutafji, Suheir Atassi, and Razan Zaitouneh, were in the first demonstrations in 2011 and helped organize the first protests¹¹⁸ as well as the first revolutionary committees (*tansiqiyat*). The demonstrators also demanded a number of rights that these intellectuals and advocates had nurtured for years: “the lifting of emergency laws, freedom, peace, democracy, dignity, and citizens’ rights.” Like in the Egyptian case, demonstrators focused on political liberalism rather than the need for economic egalitarianism and universal subsidies. They thus gave precedence to their political grievances, this despite the fact that the economic restructuring of the 2000s had been very hard on the poor and lower middle classes in both urban and rural settings, and had widened the gap between the rich and the poor while exponentially multiplying the wealth of a crony elite. Protestors expressed their adherence to “peaceful demonstrations” (*silmīyeh*), to freedom, to equality and justice, and to political inclusion. They chanted, “We are Syrians, we stand united,” and their emphasis on unity and peace was a reminder to all that they stood together across socioeconomic cleavages against the repressive political order. When the regime started attacking the protestors, cities that included a majority of ethnic and religious minorities harbored mostly Sunni refugees, thus demonstrating “the protest movement’s grassroots solidarity.”¹¹⁹

The revolutionary spark that transformed the Syrian protests into a movement for complete political rupture started in the southern city of Dar‘a, where 15 schoolboys had been arrested and tortured for anti-regime graffiti.¹²⁰ One hundred people were then killed as thousands

¹¹⁸ Suheir Atassi, Razan Zaitouneh, and veteran activist Zaynab Lutafji were some of the first protestors in Damascus on February 22, 2011, protesting alongside about 150 others in support of the Libyan revolution. It was then that the slogan “traitor is he who kills his people” was shouted by Suheir Atassi. On her Facebook page she explains that it was Zainab Lutafji who whispered the slogan in her ear before everyone picked it up and started yelling it. Suheir Atassi was also one of the organizers of the protest at the Ministry of Interior in Damascus on March 16, 2011. Jonas Bergan Draege, “The Formation of Syrian Opposition Coalitions as Two-Level Games,” *The Middle East Journal*, 70:2 (April 2016), p. 197.

¹¹⁹ Joseph Daher, “Pluralism Lost in Syria’s Uprising: How the Opposition Strayed from its Inclusive Roots,” *The Century Foundation* (May 7, 2019), <https://tcf.org/content/report/pluralism-lost-syrias-uprising/?agreed=1>

¹²⁰ Radwan Ziadeh, “The Syrian Revolution: The Role of the ‘Emerging Leaders,’” in *Revolution and Political Transformation in the Middle East: Agents of Change* (Vol 1) (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, August 2011), p. 43.

took to the streets to protest the detention and torture of the boys. By the end of March, protests had spread to other cities, and by July 1st, more than 100,000 protestors gathered to openly question the legitimacy of the Syrian president Bashar al-Asad.¹²¹ As demonstrations grew in size and multiplied, spreading across towns and the major cities including Aleppo, Hums, Hama and Damascus, so the actions of the military brigades grew and multiplied, with the aim of intimidating, detaining and killing the protestors. By May 2011, the Syrian military started besieging entire cities. And by September 2011, the country “had gone from hopeful popular demonstration to armed rebellion”¹²² The UN estimates that in less than two years, more than 60,000 people were killed in Syria, most at the hands of the Syrian regime. The militarization of the revolt became almost a foregone conclusion as people felt the need to defend themselves against the regime’s military and thugs (*shabiha*). By 2014, the UN announced that it could no longer keep track of the total number of deaths in Syria, an announcement that in effect allowed the Syrian regime and its patrons to do as they wished without outside scrutiny.

Activists Went to Work

In their attempts to rise to the magnitude of events and the possibility for change – change that had been thought to still be years away¹²³ – Syria’s liberal opposition showed unity and reasserted their political positions against the regime by joining the protests. The first groups to materialize during the first year of the uprising were the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), the Syrian National Council (SNC), and The Free Syrian Army (FSA).¹²⁴

¹²¹ Mona Yacoubian, “Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad,” *United States Institute of Peace* (September 18, 2020), www.usip.org/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad.

¹²² El-Badawi, “Conflict and Reconciliation,” p. 306.

¹²³ See the work of prominent activist Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *Al-thawra al-mustahila* (Beirut: al-mu’asasa al-‘arabiya li al-dirasat wa al-nashr, 2017) in which he states that the “impossible revolution has taken place”!

¹²⁴ In addition to a left-leaning group, the National Coordination Council for Democratic Change (the NCC). The National Coordination Council for Democratic Change (NCC or NCB) was established soon after the LCC, in June 2011, with Hasan Abd al-Azim as its chairman. Although the NCC also imagined a liberal democratic Syria and worked to achieve that, the majority of those who signed the Damascus Declaration did not join it. Activists who had initially signed the NCC statement such as Michel Kilo then withdrew because its leaders were not able to unite a majority of the strands of the opposition and thus it remained more limited in its scope. Most of the 15 member parties in the NCC came from the leftist National Democratic Group, but the Bureau also included some Kurdish parties and independent intellectuals.

The LCC (*lijan al-tanseeq al-mahaliya* also known as *tansiqiyat*) were established in March 2011, as a loose umbrella network to coordinate on-the-ground activism. They included many of the Damascus Spring opposition leaders, as well as many youths, mostly university students who had witnessed and were actively part of and supported the Damascus Spring and its initiatives. The LCC eventually united under the presidency of their co-founder, lawyer, and human rights activist Razan Zaitouneh (more on Zaitouneh hereinafter).¹²⁵ Like their Egyptian counterparts, the LCC relied on social media, Skype rooms, and online communication and forums to consolidate their network, to coordinate protests, and to organize strikes and civil mutinies, to document war crimes and human rights abuses, and to keep the foreign media – banned from Syria at the start of the revolution – aware of events.¹²⁶ Activists were tech savvy and were able to breach the regime's media blackout and connect with the world's digital infrastructure. In so doing, they brought together a network of 70 groups responsible for managing the civil disobedience, for disseminating information, providing aid to those in need, as well as expanding and driving the movement all over Syria. They soon became the primary engine of the uprising and its mind and soul, playing a crucial role as it expanded into Damascus and its suburbs as well as into other cities such as Dar'a, Homs, Idlib, Baniyas, Hasakah, Qamishli, Hama, Raqqa and Suwaida, to name a few.

While these grassroots corps were not formally part of the political parties and groups of their predecessors, they were students and apprentices of the older generation of activists including young artists and actors, and they had formed groups and begun carrying out their activism around the need for liberal democratic change as early as 2009.¹²⁷ As stated above, they were especially active within schools and universities as well as in social and online forums, and asserted themselves as being the next generation of politically liberal activists in Syria. This generation also included Syrians in the diaspora (particularly in France, Britain, and Germany) who facilitated the activism as well as media outreach.

By 2012, there were around 400 coordinating committees doing work, this despite the regime's incredibly violent attempts to stop their efforts

¹²⁵ Fouad Gehad Marei, "Local Coordination Committees," in J. K. Zartman (ed.), *Conflict in the Modern Middle East: An Encyclopedia of Civil War, Revolutions, and Regime Change* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2020), pp. 192–193.

¹²⁶ Zaina Erhaim, "How the Syrian Revolution Was Organized – And How it Unraveled," *Newlines Magazine* (March 16, 2021), <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/how-the-syrian-revolution-was-organized-and-how-it-unraveled/>

¹²⁷ Erhaim, "How the Syrian Revolution Was Organized."

and silence their leaders.¹²⁸ The committees were able to function partly by relying on their decentralized structure, and by focusing on neighborhoods, towns, and city suburbs – such as Dareya in Damascus – that they were familiar with and in which they had developed extensive and close knit networks of activists, journalists, and colleagues. These networks made it possible for them to escape the scrutiny and repression of a regime that had initially focused its efforts on controlling the cores of the major cities. Then each committee coordinated messages and tactics with other committees nationwide.

The LCC were able to gain the trust of many within and outside Syria because of the legitimacy that they gained by standing at the frontlines of the confrontation between the pro-democracy movement and the regime. Indeed, their members were the first to be imprisoned and to be killed; young activists such as Yahya Shurbaji who was a pacifist, Jihad Jamal, a journalist, and Hasan Azhari, a 5th-year pharmacology student, all arrested in 2012 and subsequently tortured to death.¹²⁹

Communication became the most important tool to foster unity under a regime that aimed to choke off any political communication between activists and the general public inside and outside Syria, and that manipulated facts to disseminate false information and create alternative narratives. The LCC leaders quickly understood the need to push back against the regime's narrative. The LCC's bi-monthly newspaper titled *Rising For Freedom* (*tli'na 'al huriyeh* in colloquial Arabic) became an essential tool to set stories straight, to defend the cause of freedom and democracy and to raise the activists' morale, to promote peaceful resistance, and to share the LCC's social and political vision for Syria.¹³⁰ Another important newspaper was *Enab Baladi*, published online and in print in Dareya. *Enab Baladi* chronicled the revolution and imagined and planned for an eventual democratic and emancipated society. As one observer writes, "Incredibly, even after the regime recaptured Daraya and expelled its remaining inhabitants to Idlib in 2016, *Enab Baladi* continued to be published online – not simply as an homage to the town's memory, but as a necessary investment in the ongoing struggle against the regime ... [as] emancipation begins in the imagination of Syria's dreamers and dissenters"¹³¹ Both *Rising for Freedom* and *Enab Baladi* continue to publish (on and off) alongside dozens of other blogs,

¹²⁸ Daher, "Pluralism Lost in Syria's Uprising."

¹²⁹ Erhaim, "How the Syrian Revolution Was Organized."

¹³⁰ For more on the magazine, see freedomraise.net

¹³¹ Riad Alarian, "Imagining a Free Syria," *UNA-UK Magazine* (March 20, 2017), <https://una.org.uk/imagining-free-syria>

magazines, and newspapers that deal with the regime's misinformation, the displacement, the grief, and the loss, but also the hope and the work for human and citizens' rights and freedoms, and for discussing how the principles of constitutionalism and liberal democracy could (ultimately) be applied in the Syrian case.¹³²

The LCC also organized social campaigns that helped in their efforts to build social capital and connect with and help the public, including those who had experienced torture and who were terrified of the regime's *shabiha* (thugs). Some of these campaigns include "Syria is Colorful," and "the Revolutionary Flag Represents Me," both initiatives launched to fight Islamist radicalization and the divisive narrative being propagated by the regime as well as the Islamists. Other initiatives are "Tomorrow Will be Better," which aims to help children and adults deal with the war and imagine a peaceful and bright future.¹³³ The committees focused on empowering women, providing food supplies, and on providing education and psychological support to children who were witnessing the instability and the violence first hand.

Initially, the LCC was against the militarization of the revolution, but by early 2012 it began to support it as they realized the extent to which the regime was willing to use violence against the civilian population and the peaceful protestors. They also began calling on the international community to actively take a stand against the oppressors within the region.

The LCC also assumed the responsibilities normally undertaken by government when services stopped in regime-controlled areas. So for example they acted as centers of civic authority, providing medical and legal services and administering humanitarian relief including distributing food supplies. They also helped form Local Administrative Councils in liberated territories, which relied on volunteers and which were self-governing, as well as delivering municipal services such as garbage collection and medical services. Further, they coordinated with the rest of the democratic movement as well as held democratic elections when they could.¹³⁴

By August 2011, the increasing involvement of the Syrian Army in violently quelling the protests meant that some of the liberal dissenters were forced out of Syria in an attempt to avoid imprisonment, and thus

¹³² Another prominent liberal Syrian newspaper that has provided Syrians with an online platform to discuss political issues since 2012 is *aljumhuriya.net*, which launched its English platform in 2016.

¹³³ "Local Coordination Committees of Syria" *Syria Untold* (June 24, 2014), <https://syriauntold.com/2013/06/24/local-coordination-committees-of-syria/>

¹³⁴ For more on Syria's Local Councils, see the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces website, at <https://en.etilaf.org/>

organized opposition meetings outside the country and with the help of Syrian expatriates. Thus the SNC was formed in Istanbul, Turkey on August 23, 2011. The SNC allowed the liberal opposition inside the country to re-unite with the exiled opposition, which was considered an integral part of the liberal opposition (see Chapter 3). This was not a new approach for the opposition – indeed, activist Ammar Abdulhamid and others often argued that the Syrian diaspora is an essential part of the Syrian opposition and that building a successful reform program relied on coordination between the inside and outside forces.¹³⁵ This approach is related to the autocratic reality within Syria, which had forced most political activists to leave their country even though they often wished to stay. Other activists were able to go in and out of Syria depending on the political environment at the time.

The SNC represented itself as the temporary leaders of the Syrian resistance and the coordinators of the transitional process toward a free and democratic Syria. Consisting of activists that had fought the regime for years, mostly the signatories of the Damascus Declaration such as Riad Seif, Suheir al-Atassi, and Michel Kilo, but also a number of Kurdish leaders who opposed the regime, representatives from the LCC, the Syrian Muslim Brothers, and independent and exiled liberals such as Bassma Kodmani, the SNC was considered a legitimate representative of the hopes and dreams of Syrians, and it enjoyed ample international support, at least at first. The SNC elected its first Chairman, Burhan Ghalioun, a prominent liberal activist and academic who lived and worked in France. In April 2012, more than 100 countries came together informally as the “Friends of Syria,” and gave their recognition to and signaled their support for the SNC. It seemed as if Syrians finally had a strong, united actor that was going to work to create the liberal democratic home they had been dreaming and working for. The SNC goal was complete rupture with the autocratic order and its symbols. As they put it: to embody the aspirations of the Syrian Revolution, “to build a modern democratic, pluralistic, and civil state” by toppling the existing regime including all its operatives and symbols, supporting the peaceful revolution, representing all opposition forces and recognizing the diversity of the Syrian people.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Ammar Abdulhamid, “Syria: Mobilizing the Opposition,” in Jeffrey Azarva, Danielle Pletka and Michael Rubin (eds.), *Dissent and Reform in the Arab World: Empowering Democrats* (American Enterprise Institute, 2008), p. 86, www.jstor.com/stable/resrep03025.14

¹³⁶ “Syrian National Council Mission and Program,” www.syriancouncil.org/en/mision-statement.html

But morale started deteriorating quickly. While most of the members of the different groups agreed on upholding the principles of liberal democracy, they disagreed on how to achieve this goal within the volatile environment of the Syrian revolution. Some disagreed on the question of foreign intervention and on militarization of the revolution, others on whether they should engage in any dialogue with the Syrian regime and the Islamists. For instance, Syria's front-liners distrusted Western powers and the Gulf States and although they supported the use of arms "in cases of self defense and as a protection of peaceful protesters," they were not in favor of the overall militarization of the conflict. By contrast, the SNC leadership was more willing to work with the outside powers, was more connected with the Syrian expat communities, enjoyed cordial relations with Western and Gulf governments, saw the possibility for creating mutually serving agreements, and worked to attract international support to help topple the regime by force if necessary.¹³⁷

The rise of the FSA, an affiliate of the SNC and composed of defecting soldiers who refused to fire on the peaceful protestors as well as civilians who took up arms to defend themselves, complicated and intensified the existing divisions, this despite the fact that most agreed that the FSA was needed to confront the violence that the regime was using against civilians. Like the LCC, the FSA too was composed of local, small units and lacked an actual central command, so much so that it could not agree nor effectively communicate a military strategy. At the same time, they were an organic extension of the revolution having emerged naturally to defend the civilian population, and represented the democratic aspirations of the protestors. Indeed, ideologically, unlike the radical Islamist militias that would soon emerge, most of the rebel fighters agreed to uphold the liberal principles of their civilian counterparts. They favored a secular and democratic system and process.¹³⁸ As for the more pious among them, they felt the need to reassert their commitment to a secular democratic movement, declaring that religion is for God and the homeland for all.¹³⁹

The FSA would lose ground almost immediately following its creation. This is because Syria began witnessing the rise of more radical militias and less liberal activists, mostly radical Islamists, the majority of whom were released from Syrian prisons in 2011 by a regime looking

¹³⁷ Draege, "The Formation of Syrian Opposition," pp. 198–199.

¹³⁸ This was based on a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and Pechter Polls of Princeton in June 2012. See Daher, "Pluralism Lost in Syria's Uprising."

¹³⁹ Daher, "Pluralism Lost in Syria's Uprising."

to overwhelm the liberal opposition. Indeed, the secular and liberal factions of the FSA were no longer only fighting the regime, but the radical Islamists as well.¹⁴⁰ This unexpected turn of events in favor of an illiberal and rather violent group, which was aided by the Syrian authorities to put a halt to the liberal movement and their hopes-for transition, confused and further divided Syria's liberals.¹⁴¹

Like in Egypt, the liberals disagreed on the role and place of the Islamists (whether liberal or illiberal) within the opposition as well as within a future democratic Syria. The issue was increasing in importance as the SNC grew to include a large Islamist component, notably the Muslim Brothers but also a group of powerful businessmen who were affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and that had ties to international and regional actors.¹⁴² This latter group kept a low profile and occupied one-quarter of the 310 seats in the council. And so while some liberals felt that the inclusion of the Islamists reflected the overall liberal principles of the Syrian opposition and its commitment to a secular and pluralistic political framework – a framework that the Syrian Muslim Brothers had themselves vouched for in March 2012 in a new “pledge and charter”¹⁴³ – and moreover argued that it was important that the SNC represent all currents within Syria, many were growing wary of the Islamists' influence within the liberal movement and argued that they were becoming too powerful for the SNC to remain a liberal democratic group.¹⁴⁴ To complicate the situation, the leaders' positions were also changing as time went on.

Indeed, time was not on the side of the liberals. The increased involvement of outside powers and the militarization of the revolution exacerbated their divisions and disenchantment. The disagreement over how to respond to foreign interference and the inclusion of the Islamists did not affect the liberals' consensus over the other guiding principles, though it did hinder their overall unity and ability to align around a consistent and well-defined program and roadmap, and thus to convince those

¹⁴⁰ Line Khatib, “The Pre-2011 Roots of Syria's Islamist Militants,” *The Middle East Journal* 72:2 (Spring 2018), pp. 209–228; Line Khatib, “Syria, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar: The ‘Sectarianization’ of the Syrian Conflict and Undermining of Democratization in the Region,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 46:3 (2019), pp. 385–403.

¹⁴¹ Khatib, “The Pre-2011 Roots of Syria's Islamist Militants,” pp. 209–211.

¹⁴² Ammar Diub, “George Sabra ... Khatib Did al-Tarikh,” *alaraby aljaded* (July 28, 2017), www.alaraby.co.uk; “The Syrian National Council,” *Carnegie Middle East Center* (September 25, 2013), <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48334>

¹⁴³ “The Syrian National Council,” *Carnegie Middle East Center* (25 September 2013), <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48334>

¹⁴⁴ Diub, “George Sabra ... Khatib Did al-Tarikh.”

members of the opposition who were on the frontlines in Syria to fully rally behind them.¹⁴⁵

Despite this however, the opposition inside Syria would eventually support the Free Syrian Army, and the pro-democracy movement would go on to issue in July 2012 two documents, a National Pact and a Joint Political Plan for the Transitional Phase. Yet the different groups were not able to come together as a unified body.¹⁴⁶ The SNC was also unable over the next few months to increase the representation of the frontliners and the growing civilian structures within Syria.¹⁴⁷ The result was that some of the LCC decided to leave the SNC until it reformed its organizational structure.

Meanwhile, those who were still inside Syria felt the need to continue their activism by becoming more direct and more defiant. Critics like cartoonist Ali Ferzat (see Chapter 3) depicted President Asad as a broken dictator, sitting on a broken armchair over a broken country.¹⁴⁸ Ferzat was part of the Damascus Spring, using his art to ridicule despotism and to advance principles of humanism, equality, and fairness. He was also emboldened by the democratic movement finally coming out into the open in all its might, and thus published a cartoon showing President Bashar al-Asad hitching a ride out of town with Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya, who had just been toppled from power. The regime's response was rapid and brutal: masked gunmen pulled Ferzat out of his car and shattered his hands and fingers, thereby sending a clear message that his life was at risk if he continued to draw such cartoons. Like so many others, Ferzat had to leave Syria and continue his activism from abroad.¹⁴⁹

Other artists, such as director Hatem 'Ali (considered the Godfather of Syrian drama), his wife Dala' Rahbi, who is a feminist writer and human rights activist, and well-known actors such as Fadwa Suleiman, Abdelhakeem Kutifan, Fares Helou, Jamal Suleiman, and May Skaf, all known critics of despotism and proponents of the liberal movement and the Damascus Spring, became victims of forced displacement when they sided with the protestors and supported their pleas for rupture with

¹⁴⁵ "The Syrian National Council," *Carnegie Middle East Center*.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Jamie Merrill, "Syrian Cartoonist Ali Ferzat Turns Spotlight on UK's Failure to Take in More Refugees," *The Independent* (January 27, 2015), www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrian-cartoonist-ali-ferzat-turns-spotlight-uk-s-failure-take-more-refugees-10006638.html

¹⁴⁹ Ferzat was awarded the Sakharov Prize for Peace in 2012 and named as one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* magazine.

the existing political order.¹⁵⁰ Fadwa Suleiman led the protests in 2011 and 2012, thus risking her life to voice her dissent and to counter the regime's claims that the protests are radical and sectarian¹⁵¹, and to promote peaceful resistance to despotism: "Freedom has its price and we all have to chip in," she said.¹⁵² May Skaf also took part in many of the protests and was arrested in August 2011 and subjected to torture. She was one of the first artists to challenge the government crackdown on the protestors, and went on to continue her political advocacy in Europe on behalf of the Syrian people.¹⁵³

'Ali, Rahbi, Skaf, Helou, Kutifan, Fadwa Suleiman, and Jamal Suleiman, among others, were soon blacklisted and dismissed from the Syrian Artists Association. The regime was unable to tolerate their damaging insubordination and their intellectual and artistic resistance; yet it could not hide their work and their refusal after 2011 to be atomized and subsumed into the autocratic order. Nonetheless, they had to flee Syria. And so 'Ali left for Canada and continued to direct and produce critical works until his death in 2020, while May Skaf and Fadwa Suleiman fled to France where they continued their activism and became powerful and inspiring symbols of the revolution abroad until their death. Jamal Suleiman meanwhile escaped to Egypt, where he also continued his political resistance.¹⁵⁴ Helou and Kutifan fled to Europe. All of them used and continue to use their art and their fame to expose the impact of despotism and to help change the political culture in Syria and the region, but also to reveal the crisis of liberalism at the international level. May Skaf died in 2018 of a heart attack following news that two other dissidents

¹⁵⁰ Many other directors, actors, and artists can be mentioned here such as Muhammad Malas, Yara Sabri, and Khalid Taja.

¹⁵¹ Fadwa Suleiman is of Alawi origins, a minority sect within Syria and Bashar al-Asad's own sect. Thus her background as a prominent Alawite made her message more impactful and dangerous to a regime that claims that the protests and the opposition in general advanced sectarian messages. A large number of protestors, activists, and intellectuals are of minority origins, such as Michel Kilo and May Skaf (Christian), Muhammad al-Maghout (Ismaili), and Hassan Abbas (Alawi) to name a few we have discussed in this book, but this is outside the scope of this study.

¹⁵² Emily Langer, "Fadwa Suleiman, Syrian Actress Who Led Resistance to Assad Regime, Dies," *The Washington Post* (August 19, 2017),

¹⁵³ Sam Roberts, "Mai Skaf, Syrian Actress Who Defied Assad Regime, Dies at 49," *New York Times* (July 27, 2018), www.nytimes.com/2018/07/27/obituaries/mai-skaf-syrian-actress-who-defied-assad-regime-dies-at-49.html

¹⁵⁴ Suleiman's Syria Tomorrow Movement, a liberal party that was founded in 2016 in Egypt. Suleiman had planned on challenging the presidency of Bashar al-Asad in the 2021 elections if the Constitution was changed and the regime allowed competition, but the regime disallowed it by adding a requirement that the presidential candidate should have lived in Syria for 10 consecutive years prior to the elections, a requirement that most liberals cannot meet.

had died under torture in Damascus prisons. One blogger wrote, “Mai Skaf and the two prisoners all died together ... maybe because they all refused to live this ugly moment of Syrian history.”¹⁵⁵

As for Syria’s other political activists and leaders, most were in self-imposed exile by 2012; yet they organized meetings in September and October 2012 in Doha, Qatar, during which Western governments urged Riad Seif – who was perceived as one of the most legitimate and credible figure of the Syrian liberal movement (see Chapter 3) – to create a new opposition council. On November 11, 2012, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (henceforth the National Coalition) was launched.

The National Coalition had a similar membership body to that of the SNC, which merged with it and was awarded 22 of the 63 seats in the Coalition’s governing political council; other members of the SNC were given seats as independent national figures.¹⁵⁶ The National Coalition included the Free Syrian Army within its Military Council, but it was different from the SNC in that it gave more room to grassroots activists that had emerged on the ground. Mu’adh al-Khatib, a Damascene Sunni cleric, was elected president of the National Coalition, and Riad Seif and Suheir Atassi were elected vice presidents. The National Coalition was well received among the Friends of Syria countries: Turkey and France immediately recognized the coalition as “the legitimate leader of the Syrian people”, while the United Kingdom and the United States followed suit soon afterwards.¹⁵⁷

In an attempt to integrate everyone within the coalition, Islamists were also allowed to join – for example, Mohammad Alloush, who created the army of Islam with his brother, Zahran Alloush.¹⁵⁸ Others participated in some meetings. The leaders of the SNC such as George Sabra (member of the liberal People’s Democratic Party, the former communist party led by Riad Turk) and other activists such as Michel Kilo would at first justify the National Coalition’s support of Islamist groups such as the Nusra Front by arguing that unlike the radical Islamists, these groups believed in compromise, democracy, and national consensus. In reality however, the issue of the influence of the Islamists and religion was not solved within the National Coalition, and would continue to divide the opposition.

¹⁵⁵ Phil Davidson, “Mai Skaf: Syrian Actor and Democracy Activist Exiled by the Asad Regime,” *Independent* (July 30, 2018), www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/mai-skaf-may-skaf-syria-actor-assad-activist-exile-syrian-refugee-a8469876.html

¹⁵⁶ “The Syrian National Council,” *Carnegie Middle East Center* (September 25, 2013), <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48334?lang=eng>

¹⁵⁷ Draege, “The Formation of Syrian Opposition,” p. 200.

¹⁵⁸ Zahran Alloush was arrested in 2009 and then released in 2011 from the Sednaya prison, a few months following the start of the revolution in Syria.

Inside Syria, the most active and recognized liberals continued to vanish at the hands of the security apparatus. Like in Egypt, the individual activists who had joined initiatives demanding democratic change would suffer enormously after 2013. One of those killed was a prominent activist, journalist, and civil society leader Raed Fares. Fares used satirical and witty banners to increase the world's understanding of the Syrian revolution, and his banners represented the thoughts and dreams of many of the Syrian protestors. For instance, one of the banners said, "It is not against a system of governance only, our revolution is against the infiltration of minds and against intellectual tyranny in all its forms" (April 12, 2013, author's translation).¹⁵⁹ The banners also denounced and poked fun at the absurdity of the regime's tactics in fighting the people: "Black Friday Special Offer: Whoever, Wherever You are, Bring your Enemy and Come To Fight in Syria For Free (Free Land and Free Sky), Limited Time Offer."¹⁶⁰

Fares believed in the power of ideas to challenge injustice: "The revolution is an idea, and ideas cannot be killed with weapons," Fares asserted. In 2012, he started an organization called the Union of Revolutionary Bureaus in Idlib. The union supported local media projects and a free press, ran a radio station and a media center, ran a relief center and provided health and education services for women and young people. Fares believed in peaceful struggle against both dictatorship and the religious radicals, and held that the revolution in Syria was worth it despite its casualties, which he was very familiar with, because, he argued, it was the only way for Syrians to stop being treated like animals in Asad's farm.¹⁶¹ He believed that the Asad regime terrorized Syrians twice, directly and then indirectly through the radicalism that succeeded the regime's terror on civilians. And yet Fares was hopeful and spread optimism around him, arguing that Syrians' peaceful ideas and quest for liberty and fairness would change the Arabs from the inside, by shattering monolithic discourses and monist systems: "that's why our revolution will change the Middle East," he asserted.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ See "As'ilat al-thawra al-Suriya al-Mulihha fi Zikraha al-'Ashira ... ru'iya siasiya wa shahadat haiyya," Markaz Harmoon lil-dirasat al-mu'asira (Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, March 16, 2021), www.harmoon.org/reports

¹⁶⁰ Photo of banner available in Marta Vidal, "Fighting for democracy and a free Syria," *Qantara.de* (November 22, 2019), <https://en.qantara.de/node/38119>

¹⁶¹ Al-Manbar al-Suri with Musa al-Amr, "Interview with Raed Fares," *AL-Ghad al-Arabi* (March 24, 2014), www.youtube.com/watch?v=l9fqH5Km-ys

¹⁶² Speech by Raed Fares, "Building a Free Syria one town at a time," *Oslo Freedom Forum* (May 23, 2017), <https://oslofreedomforum.com/talks/building-a-free-syria-one-town-at-a-time-1>.

Fares launched Radio Fresh in 2013. The Radio station was meant to warn residents about incoming bombs in order to minimize the casualties. But it turned out to be a station about everyday life in Idlib, about hope for a better future, and about building a free Syria one step and one city at a time.¹⁶³ Despite this positivity, he was too charismatic and popular to be left standing. Thus Fares and his cameraman and fellow activist, Hammoud Jneid, were shot dead in Kafranbel in Idlib in November 2018. “The smell of 50 years of oppression and pain is marked in my memory,” he had said before the fatal incident.¹⁶⁴ When he died, a banner in English read, “the assassination was the result of the world’s indifference.” Another banner in Arabic read, “They didn’t kill you, you are still among us as a beacon of freedom.”¹⁶⁵

Another activist who dedicated her life to the quest for democracy and freedom in Syria was Razan Zaitouneh, a prominent human rights activist and lawyer who was awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and the Anna Politkovskaya Award for defending human rights in 2011. Zaitouneh and other activists were forced into hiding at the start of the uprising because of their pro-democracy work as well as their reporting for the foreign media, which transgressed the regime’s ban.¹⁶⁶ Zaitouneh was one of the main leaders of the liberal movement that remained inside Syria despite the deadly risk. She was a theorist as well as a committed practitioner, heading protests and co-founding along with her colleagues such as Mazen Darwish¹⁶⁷ the first LCC, as well as presiding over the entire network. She also created the Violations Documentation Center (VOC) in April 2011 in Damascus, and contributed to the founding of many other NGOs and citizens’ initiatives, with a focus on empowering women and children. She published many articles and reports about issues of human rights, defended prisoners’ rights and lobbied for civil liberties, and did not shy away from confrontation with the Syrian regime. Her popularity, charisma, sincerity, strength, and determination made her an especially powerful opponent of the regime, and in hindsight, the leader that many Syrians were looking for to unite them and guide them in their transition toward democracy.

¹⁶³ Raed Fares, “Building a Free Syria One Town at a Time,” *Oslo Freedom Forum* (July 7, 2017), www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIWt-kI7_LQ

¹⁶⁴ Fares, “Building a Free Syria One Town at a Time.”

¹⁶⁵ Vidal, “Fighting for Democracy and a Free Syria.”

¹⁶⁶ Razan Zaitouneh, a human rights lawyer, spoke to Al-Jazeera English about the death toll caused by the regime in the city of Tall Kalakh and its growing pro-democracy movement (May 6, 2011).

¹⁶⁷ Syrian lawyer and activist and head of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression. His wife Yara Bader is also an activist. Both spent time in jail in 2012, and felt compelled to leave Syria thereafter.

At the very start of the revolution, Zaitouneh said in a video: “we are confronting with peaceful protests, and freedom songs, and chants for a new Syria, one of the most brutal regimes of the region and the world. I am proud to be Syrian and to be part of these historical days, and of the greatness of my people.”¹⁶⁸ [author’s translation] She and her colleagues refused to leave the country despite knowing the risks of staying, dismissing the pleas of many colleagues asking them to flee to safeguard their lives.¹⁶⁹ Her husband, Wael Hamada, had been in prison for three months when Zaitouneh was forced into hiding underground for two years.¹⁷⁰ She finally moved to the Damascene suburb of Douma in 2013, which had fallen under the control of the rebels and the Army of Islam of Zahran Alloush.

That August, the VOC reported on the regime’s use of chemical weapons against civilians in the Eastern Ghouta region, killing more than 1000 Syrians including 400 children. Razan wrote then, “I witnessed the massacre, I saw the bodies of men and women and children on the streets, I heard the screams of mothers when they found the bodies of their children” [author’s translation]. In Douma, Zaitouneh also witnessed and fought against the rise of militant groups such as the Army of Islam and the Islamic State (IS or Daesh), who had begun fighting with each other to gain control over the territory and everybody within it, including reporting on their crimes. She also challenged their attempts to rule, refused to compromise with them, dissected their narratives, and revealed their abuses of power and their tyrannical ways: “We did not start a revolution and lose thousands of souls so that these monsters repeat the same history of injustice...they have to be held accountable just like the regime”¹⁷¹ [author’s translation], she explained.

Zaitouneh was kidnapped along with the activists Samira Khalil, Nazim Hamadi and her husband Wael Hamada, nicknamed the Douma Four, in December 2013 by men presumed to be from the Army of Islam.¹⁷² Right before her kidnapping, Zaitounah was very active, talking to prisoners, and documenting the regime’s torture especially within the military intelligence branches.¹⁷³ Her last tweet to the world was on December 1, 2013.

¹⁶⁸ Quote from Lewis Sanders, Brigitta Schülke, Waffa Albady and Julia Bayer, “Razan Zaitouneh ... wajah al-thawra al-suriya al-mughayab,” *Deutsche Welle* (March 15, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3CGBjm8>

¹⁶⁹ Brigitta Schülke, Lewis Sanders and Waffa Albady, “Video: The Missing Face of the Syrian Revolution,” *DW news* (March 2021), <https://fb.watch/4gzChmQG6Y/>

¹⁷⁰ Salma el-Hosseiny, “Syria: Reveal the Whereabouts of Razan, Samira, Nazem and Wa’el,” *ISHR* (December 12, 2018), www.ishr.ch/news/syria-reveal-whereabouts-razan-samira-nazem-and-wael

¹⁷¹ Quote from “Razan Zaitouneh ... wajah al-thawra al-suriya al-mughayab.”

¹⁷² Zahran Alloush never admitted to the kidnapping.

¹⁷³ <https://twitter.com/razanz>

Less than two years later, in October 2015, one of Syria's best-known cartoonists, Akram Raslan, was confirmed to have been killed by Syrian police. A fellow prisoner said that Raslan died in a prison hospital, possibly after torture. It had been three years since he was first taken into custody and four since the Syrian civil war began. Raslan's "colorful, almost optimistic scenes mocking corruption and senselessness set his work apart from his colleagues."¹⁷⁴ He was an inspiration to many Syrians. And more recently, the year 2020 saw three other prominent activists die: Hassan Abbas, the father of citizenship awareness in Syria, Michel Kilo, who had fought against tyranny under Asad the father and the son, and veteran lawyer-activist Habib Issa. The fate of these activists, including of the revolution's symbols Razan Zaitouneh, Raed Fares, Fadwa Suleiman and May Skaf, would come to be perceived as representing the fate of the peaceful and liberal revolution and its moral and intellectual prospects.

Loss of Control

With the loss of so many liberal leaders from both inside and outside Syria and the concomitant rise of the radicals, Syrian liberals would soon completely lose control of the revolution, and in the process of their own ability to shape the fate of Syria.¹⁷⁵ International actors, fighting for influence and control of Syrian territory that was now nearly entirely open to outside powers such as Russia, Iran, and Turkey would organize a series of "peace talks" in an attempt to control the situation on the ground and agree on zones of influence. Such attempts would include peace talks involving the UN and other international powers in Geneva, Vienna, and Riyadh, and mostly Russia, Turkey, and Iran in Moscow and Astana. While Geneva and Vienna had the goal of facilitating and creating the modalities of transition toward a democratic political regime, relying on UN Security Council resolutions 2118 and 2254¹⁷⁶, the Moscow and Astana meetings were focused on writing a new constitution by an appointed body, on negotiating and compromising with the regime and on accepting that it would be part of Syria's next phase. Further, the talks in Astana saw armed Islamist groups given more importance than the

¹⁷⁴ Asher Kohn, "The Syrian Cartoonists Who Live and Die by Their Pen," *Roads and Kingdoms* (November 20, 2015), <https://roadsandkingdoms.com/2015/drawn-in-blood/>

¹⁷⁵ See Documentary "Ahat al-Huriya," *Al-Jazeera* (March 12, 2014), <https://youtu.be/yroOTxnkZJI>

¹⁷⁶ Both resolutions call for a Syrian-led transition in addition to the creation of a new constitutional and legal order that would be subject to the approval of Syrians.

Syrian liberal opposition.¹⁷⁷ To many activists, the Moscow and Astana talks offered the Bashar regime the time and opportunity to stay on in power as they emphasized continuity and stability instead of rupture and liberal democratic change.¹⁷⁸ Nonetheless, the liberals' attempts to unite and come up with a tangible plan out of the crisis continued. The Syrian National Coalition and the inside leftist opposition, namely the NCC, reached a political agreement on July 23, 2015. But their efforts to unite and to reach a deal with the Syrian regime ultimately failed.

In 2015, Russian airstrikes sealed the fate of liberalism and the liberal movement in Syria, at least for the next few years. These airstrikes, launched against Western backed rebels and civilians on September 30, 2015, effectively turned the war in favor of the regime of Bashar al-Asad. It was in light of this that on October 20, Asad flew to Moscow to thank Russia for its involvement and military and advisory support. Then on November 14, 2015, the International Syria Support Group, which was composed of 17 countries and international bodies including the UN, the EU and the Arab League and also including Iran (a patron of the Syrian regime), met in Vienna to hammer out an agreement between the Syrian opposition and the regime. On December 18, 2015, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2254, which called for a transition to "credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian governance" within six months. It also scheduled the drafting of a new constitution and elections for a new government within 18 months.

February and April 2016 saw the UN host a third and fourth round of negotiations in Geneva between the regime and a new Syrian body called the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), which was a new broad umbrella body representing the opposition. But these talks broke down. A fifth round of indirect peace talks took place in Geneva in 2017, with participants including the regime, the HNC, the National Coalition, as well as two minor groups that are considered to be closer to the regime than to the liberal opposition, the Moscow and Cairo platforms. A sixth round took place in May 2017, and then a seventh and an eighth round in July and November 2017, with the ongoing stalemate underlining that Asad was unwilling to discuss a political transition, as was made clear in the observation that "nothing substantial will come out of the talks."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ See "bayan hawla a'mal al-lajna al-dasturiya al-suriya", <http://chnq.it/8xBrT7Gv>; "bayan hawla al-intikhabat al-suriya" (November 2020), www.ipetitions.com/petition/TheSyrianelections

¹⁷⁸ Ghassan Nasser, "Hiwar Ma'a Hussein Hamada: al'Ttilaf yu 'ani hashasha fi buniyatihi al-tanzimiya wa huwa mabni min kital wa ahzab wahmiya," Harmoon Center (April 1, 2021), www.harmoon.org/dialogues

¹⁷⁹ "Syria War: Peace Talks Restart in Geneva," *BBC news* (May 16, 2017), www.bbc.com/news/amp/world-middle-east-39934868

The regime refused to discuss constitutional reforms and presidential elections, while the liberals within the different bodies refused to consider allowing Asad a future role in Syria.¹⁸⁰ In October 2019, the Syrian Constitutional Committee was created in Geneva, drawing together 50 people from the Syrian regime, the opposition and civil society groups to draft a new Constitution for Syria. This underlines then that the Syrian regime has become part of the transition whether the revolutionaries like it or not. The latest round of talks (at the time of writing) in Geneva to draft a new Constitution ended without progress in January 2021.¹⁸¹ For Syrian liberals, there has been a need to look inside themselves, to try to come to terms with the loss, the betrayal, and the sadness, and to understand how they can learn from the failures and possibly even still safeguard their revolution. Understandably, some are more optimistic than others.

Why the Defeat?

In the Syrian case, as in the Egyptian case, a number of variables combined to facilitate the victory of the autocratic forces.

Firstly, the Syrian regime adopted a strategy of divide and rule, focusing on mobilizing its popular base through sectarian, tribal, regional, and clientelistic connections, releasing from prison radical Islamists who had been captured by the Syrian authorities while crossing the border from Iraq (and thus providing an opportunity for Islamists to join the movement for change, although with an entirely different agenda than the liberal movement). The regime's aim was to scare the public masses that change would mean fewer liberties, not more, and in so doing to ensure its ultimate goal of regime survival.

Secondly, the regime also soon realized that its usual tactics of co-optation, of harassing and detaining activists, banning communication, and blocking internet access, were not halting the movement. As a result, they opted to use incredible violence to repress the peaceful resistance, killing thousands of civilians, and imprisoning and killing the most well known of the activists and leaders who inspired and guided the peaceful protestors. Targeting the liberal and pro-democracy activists was meant to deny the protests their inclusive, humanitarian, feminist, democratic

¹⁸⁰ Abdallah al-Ghudwy, "George Sabra li-Zaman al-Wasl: Sira'at Muqbila fi al-Mu'arada," *Zaman Al-Wsl* (August 8, 2017), www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/80760

¹⁸¹ "UN Envoy on Stalled Syria Talks in Geneva: 'We Can't Continue Like This,'" *SWI* (January 30, 2021), www.swissinfo.ch/eng/unenvoy-on-stalled-syria-talks-in-geneva---we-can-t-continue-like-this-/46331318

and peaceful dimensions, dimensions that undermined the regime's propaganda that radicals were behind the protests.

Thirdly and more importantly, as in Egypt, the liberals' approaches to ensure their survival and encourage change within a repressive environment in fact decreased their chances of success in the short term. More specifically, their nonhierarchical and often noiseless approach, coupled with their reliance on self-sufficient, independent small groups, had allowed the liberals to maintain their presence, propagate their message, and effect change within the repressive environment of dictatorship from the 1970s onwards; but it became a hindrance to their ability to effectively present a leader and a united front post 2011. This is because the approach of working in atomized groups and circles as part of a horizontal rather than a vertical hierarchical structure meant that decision-making was decentralized and that coordination/efforts to unite were slow and difficult. It became especially difficult to agree on one set of leaders and one overall strategy, foundational texts, as well as inspiring speeches and messages. Thus the challenge became not how to agree on political principles, but on technicalities and on leadership, a problem that did not pose itself for example during 2000's Damascus Spring given that there was no need to present one leadership then. In fact if anything, multiplicity and diversity led to better outcomes. The issue of how to include the Islamists while curbing their illiberal trends only exacerbated the leadership problem.

Fourthly, in both Syria and Egypt, the intervention of foreign powers shifted the balance of power in favor of the despots. For instance, the foreign military and advisory assistance and financial aid provided by Iran, the Hizbullah movement of Lebanon, and Russia (Russian troops were on the ground in Syria well before their official intervention in 2015) ultimately tipped the scale in favor of the despots. The Gulf countries, which had preferred to see the fall of the Syrian regime because of its pro-Iran predilections, still feared the rise of a democratic and liberal Syria and the propagation of liberal ideals within the region. They thus preferred to take a path that weakened the regime and its Iranian patron, while making sure the liberal democratic movement would not win the race.¹⁸²

The interventions by illiberal powers with the aim of serving their geopolitical interests including undermining any liberal democratic movement success in the region was expected and debated within the liberal movement. The role of the established liberal democracies in

¹⁸² Khatib, "Syria, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar," pp. 385–403.

undermining the movement was less expected by a majority, although it was consistent with historical patterns (see Chapter 1). Indeed, as with their Egyptian counterparts, established liberal democracies have been unwilling to give support to the Syrian protest movement and to its liberal intelligentsia, and have instead continued to prioritize the usual geopolitical considerations that see the survival of Assad as essential to maintain the current regional order, at the expense of ethical and moral priorities. They thus stood by as authoritarian regimes and their illiberal patrons violently suppressed the liberal movement and protests.¹⁸³ And in so doing, Western governments continued to perceive their interests in realist terms and to prioritize their own (short-term) stability while relying on the Gulf States, Iran, Turkey, and Russia to control the explosive situation, a strategy that ignored and undermined the Syrian people's pleas for democratic change, and minimized the incredibly severe humanitarian crisis within the country. In so doing, the Syrian crisis, more so than the Egyptian one, has exposed the hypocrisy at the heart of the international liberal order and regime.

Further, the established democracies' strategy has also ignored the actual implications of the Syrian crisis for the liberal democratic world. Only the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate in 2014 pushed the Obama administration to create a plan to defeat ISIS, and even then it was arguably largely motivated by the desire to stop the radical group from using terror tactics in the Western world. Yet at the same time, the American administration continued to deny the secular and pro-democracy Free Syrian Army battalions much-needed resources: the battalions were badly funded and not provided with the military assistance they needed, not even defensive assistance such as anti-aircraft missiles, even as the world witnessed the radical militarized factions emerging and taking over within Syria.¹⁸⁴ This can at least partly be attributed to the inability of the Syrian liberals to form the necessary coalitions at the domestic level to push for democratic change.

Thus domestic and regional conditions have certainly complicated decisions and undermined the liberal project, in particular the illiberalism of the Arab neighborhood. And yet the involvement of foreign powers in addition to domestic, regional, and international developments that put the focus elsewhere, in turn gave time for authoritarian rulers to adjust and increase their repressive methods against their people in order

¹⁸³ T. A. Börzel, "The Noble West and the Dirty Rest?" p. 526.

¹⁸⁴ Yezid Sayigh, "A Melancholy Perspective on Syria," *Carnegie Middle East* (April 8, 2014), <https://carnegie-mec.org/2014/04/08/melancholy-perspective-on-syria-pub-55256>

to ensure regime survival.¹⁸⁵ More importantly for this work, it exacerbated the sense of failure and guilt within the opposition, including a tendency to place blame on themselves and even for some to doubt the liberal project in its entirety, thus further weakening an already divided, frustrated, disillusioned, and demoralized opposition.

Hope Is Not Dead

The initial hope of the Arab Spring soon dissolved into renewed authoritarianism, with war being waged against civilians and widespread suffering across the country. Illiberal forces mobilized quickly and with all their might in the entire region: Russian bombs and Iranian and Syrian air strikes were dropped on the protestors in Syria; Saudi and Emirati air strikes against civilians took place in Yemen; Tribal warfare broke out in Libya; and, Islamist militancy whether by Shi'a or Sunni militias was coupled with the use of violence and repression, and triumphed over reason, freedom, rights, and communication. The region witnessed the demolition of entire cities, with refugees fleeing for often hard-to-reach unaffected zones. The world saw the images of defenseless people marching through the rubble of what were their homes, and heard about casualty figures not witnessed since World War II. Even in a city like Dubai that was seemingly unaffected by war, people feared the proximity to the inferno next door. Meanwhile in Egypt, the Gulf-sponsored military regime under Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi worked swiftly to consolidate its rule and to render political contestation impossible at the institutional level as it stripped parliament of any meaningful power and reverted to arbitrary detentions, harassment, and torture to silence pro-democracy activists at a scale that had scarcely been seen before.¹⁸⁶ The question thus arises: Is Arab liberalism defeated? Have autocrats successfully killed the liberal narrative and activism once and for all?

¹⁸⁵ For more on the autocrats' increased use of repression, see Maria Josua and Mirjam Edel, "The Arab Uprisings and the Return of Repression," *Mediterranean Politics* (February 18, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2021.1889298>. Also Aras and Oztig argue that rather than encouraging democratic change, the Arab Spring has "stimulated the learning process of authoritarian rulers" in other areas such as the Caucasus and Central Asia. Autocrats have thus increased the levels of repression targeting not only the protestors but the entire structure that has allowed the resistance movement to coordinate their efforts and to communicate. See Bulent Aras and Lacin Idil Oztig, "Has the Arab Spring Spread to the Caucasus and Central Asia? Explaining Regional Diffusion and Authoritarian Resistance," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* (February 16, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2021.1888249>

¹⁸⁶ Beesan Kassab, "Why Is Sisi Afraid of the Constitution and Parliament," *Mada Masr* (September 15, 2015), www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/why-sisi-afraid-constitution-and-parliament.

History tells us that some actions can have paradoxical or hard-to-predict outcomes. The incredible levels of regime repression, aided by authoritarian powers such as Iran and Russia, could in the long run enhance the position of the liberals. After all, liberalism has emerged in the region, as was shown in the previous chapters, as a result of the experience of oppression and thrived despite the repression visited against it. In the words of Advocacy and Communications Director for Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa office and investigative journalist Ahmed Benchemsi, "there are no indications that the liberals' power to inspire the Arab people has receded since 2011. In fact, it may have increased."¹⁸⁷ Benchemsi adds,

Even in Saudi Arabia, where the alliance between the ruling family and the Wahhabi establishment is more solid than ever, six out of the 10 most watched YouTube channels (telecom and gaming companies aside) are satirical shows produced by rebellious youth groups. By November 2014, the total views for the videos uploaded by these channels were no less than 915 million—with Saudi Arabia having only 30 million inhabitants. For those who care to look closer, many other surprising trends are taking over the Arab Internet, such as a surge in atheism via dedicated Facebook pages with tens of thousands of followers—unthinkable just five years ago—and gay rights groups popping up in every online corner. And each year, we hear of more attempts to move these groups from the virtual to the real world by staging gay pride parades in Arab cities.¹⁸⁸

New generations of Arab liberals are rising and fighting assert others. "Many of those still fighting for the cause are building new businesses, publications, charities, startups and manifestos that they still believe can yield change – if not a revolution, for now."¹⁸⁹ Indeed, new movements and protests for democracy keep rising in the region, including in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Tehran, and Istanbul. What this indicates then is that the Arab Spring is not over yet, it is simply regrouping, readjusting, and will continue to do so according to activists. Protestors see through the attempts by their governments to blame their miserable situations on the Imperialist West. In Syria, like in Egypt, activists on the ground have dealt with the immediate impact of the crisis, and many of those who are left, including those who have seen family members disappear or killed, have pledged to continue to struggle for liberal democracy, and to learn from their mistakes. In fact, as one observer puts it,

¹⁸⁷ Benchemsi, "Arab Liberalism Is Alive and Well, Thank You."

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Elizabeth Dickinson, "What Happened to Arab Liberalism? Four Years after the Arab Spring, Activists Are Trying to Revive an Enfeebled Movement," *Politico Magazine* (December 17, 2014), www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/12/arab-spring-anniversary-113637

The lesson has been learned: social pressure can indeed bring a bad ruler down, but ultimately democratic activism, as sincere as it may be, is not what it takes to prevail in a competition for power. Rather, the ultimate winners are those who have guns and deep pockets and, perhaps more importantly, can rely on solid, organized, and long-lasting networks—including at the grassroots level—to channel change in the direction they want. Unlike the young liberals, the Arab military and royal establishments have been amassing power and capital for decades. Such resources came in handy when these actors followed up on 2011's uprisings.¹⁹⁰

Activists agree, they should have been better prepared, more organized, and better aware of the geopolitical reality around them. And yet, many believe that their struggle is not over yet. In 2015, the godfather of Syria's citizenship movement, Hassan Abbas wrote, "Call it whatever you want, criticize it as you wish, betray it, deceive it, divert it, dig the ground under its feet, color it, curse it, do whatever you want ... because as Galileo Galilei told his detractors, it still revolts despite everything, and it goes on, for it had started only to go on until it achieves that which the people want: a dignified life without injustice and without obscurantism."¹⁹¹ Another prominent activist, Fayeza Sara, wrote in 2020 on his Facebook account: "It wasn't just daring to dream, but seeking that which the Syrians will eventually reach, freedom, justice and equality despite everything"¹⁹² [author's translation]

Yassin al-Haj Saleh, the husband of activist Samira Khalil, himself a social liberal activist, a writer, and a former political prisoner wrote,

Adequate punishment for crimes committed in Syria may never happen, yet we must not give up on justice.... As the decade comes to a close, I am faced with the dark truth that we live in a world far worse than we did 10 years ago – worse even than we dare admit to ourselves ... what are we to do now that those with the most power in the world [world powers] are devoid of the most instinctive of characteristics, compassion?I am Samira in her absence ... We have been crushed, true – but we create meaning from suffering. We struggle to the end, hope needs us as much as we need it. Our powerful enemies do not feel safe and secure unless we surrender ourselves to despair.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Benchemsi, "Arab Liberalism Is Alive and Well, Thank You."

¹⁹¹ "Rahil Hassan Abbas ... al-thaqafa al-suriya takhsar safiraha," *Al-Mudun* (March 7, 2021), www.almodon.com/print/510245b1db1-8cac-447a-899e-ea8b01db740c/fd37c6b8-1eed-4e90-8ec0-1ee20eff76ab

¹⁹² "Ma kanat al-jur'a ila al-hilm faqat. Bal kanat sa'iyun ilayh wa sayasel al-suriyun ila al-huriya wa al-'adala wa al-musawat raghma kul al-dhuruf."

¹⁹³ Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "Syria War: The Love of My Life Disappeared Six Years Ago, but Still I Cling to Hope", *Middle East Eye* (December 26, 2019), <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/syria-war-love-my-life-disappeared-six-years-ago-still-i-cling-hope>.

When asked if she regretted the revolution, Syrian writer Suzanne Khatimi said,

If the revolution hadn't happened, we would still be applauding the hero of fake victories, and be forced out to support rallies, and would watch the members of the National Assembly cheer the rise to power of Hafez al-Asad's grandson, and be silent about the arrests. Our youth would disappear without us being able to mention their names or ask about them, and we'd be insulted and silenced, and tremble when one of the security branches is mentioned. It is not a happy picture no matter what!¹⁹⁴ [author's translation]

In line with this, right before his death in April 2020, veteran activist Michel Kilo wrote a letter to remind Syrians to unite in their struggle against tyranny and to focus on the demand for individual freedoms and citizens' rights.¹⁹⁵ What this underlines is that for many liberals, hope continues, as does the struggle.

Conclusion

Arab liberals were an essential and vital part of the Arab Spring having played a key role in shaping the narrative and the demands of the uprisings over a period of years. But their loosely organized horizontal and leaderless structures that were meant to shun elitist politics and to draw them closer to the public masses in order to better reflect wider needs and aspirations did not facilitate their position as the ultimate leaders of change, even if these characteristics had proven essential to their survival during previous decades of authoritarianism in the region. Further, the Egyptian and Syrian regimes' widespread use of imprisonment, forced exile, violence and killing of some of their most promising and trusted leaders left a big gap in the movements in each of the two countries – indeed, the people who were looking for assertive and clear leaders to follow and trust were in many ways left on their own. The result was that protestors and activists who risked their lives and at times those of their family members to protest authoritarianism and to achieve civil freedoms and rights were violently silenced. Further, the Islamization of the revolution and the intervention of foreign powers on the side of the despots

¹⁹⁴ "Al-thawra al-suriya fi zikraha al-'ashira: al-masira wa al-ma'alat," *Tli'na 'al Huriya* (March 16, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3wFhIPH>

¹⁹⁵ Kilo was buried in France. His headstone reads: "Michel Kilo 1940–2021: Writer, thinker, and Syrian politician who dedicated his life to defending his people and the values of freedom, of citizenship, of justice and of democracy" (author's translation from Arabic and French).

left the liberals divided, while the inability/unwillingness of the established democracies to take a stand against the terror and horror these regimes hurled at their people left many liberals in the two countries bitter, isolated and as a result often fatally compromised. Thus the Arab Spring, which brought out into the open the liberal element within Arab society and the possibility of change, also brought disarray as the existing regimes' resilience turned out to be stronger than anticipated by most.

And yet many Syrian and Egyptian activists agree that hope is not dead. New ways of organizing and of mobilizing will emerge, and a new generation will do a better job at putting an end to despotism and humiliation, with liberalism becoming the inevitable outcome of repressive and exploitative contexts. For now, the liberal movement will continue to struggle, but is highly unlikely to simply disappear. In the words of one activist, "they will wake up and see that we are all interconnected and allow us to achieve our dignity."