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Representing the People in the Street or in the Ballot Box? The Revolutionary Coalition Campaign during the 2011 Egyptian Elections

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Abstract

The results of the 2011–12 Egyptian elections highlight the gap that exists between the “emotional” and the “rational” conceptions of the people and its representation. If the revolutionary moment had allowed some organizations to temporarily gain legitimacy to speak in the name of the people, these organizations have been ill-equipped to compete within the existing structure of the social cleavages. This article examines the electoral system, the lack of resources at the disposal of the revolutionaries, the polarization of the political field around the religious issue, and the difficulties involved in conciliating between the electoral campaign and street activism.

Keywords

People; Representation; Revolution; Election; Egypt; Social cleavages; 2011; Electoral system

The disappointing results of the political parties and coalitions built upon revolutionary organizations and networks during the various electoral consultations following the Arab uprisings of 2010–11 highlight the gap that exists between the emotional-revolutionary and the rational-democratic conceptions of the people. This article sets out to examine the impact of the institutional rules and of the political polarization on the existence and depth of such a gap, drawing on the definition of “the people” used by Hamit Bozarslan, who has examined the creation of a “revolutionary coalition” in the different countries involved in the Arab Spring. This involved the building of a “people”, that is to say an alliance of the centre and the peripheries, the middle class and the working class, the young and the old, the men and the women (Bozarslan, 2015). Despite a common will, especially among the intellectuals, to picture the revolutionary vanguard as a coalition of young people from the middle classes (Mellor, 2014; Sabaseviciute, 2016), the notion of people –as in “the people want the fall of the regime”– was used when referring to a broader coalition gathered around this vanguard. This revolutionary coalition was born into the revolutionary moment, and its existence explains why all the opposition movements took part in the Arab uprisings, regardless of their individual ideological stances (Bozarslan, 2015). This concept of the people as an entity transcending social divisions contrasts with the concept of democracy as a perpetual competition between political parties as they seek to represent the existing social cleavages, such as the opposition between the social classes, the centre and the peripheries, the religions and the state, the urban and the rural world (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). It has been established, for instance, that the centre/periphery and the urban/rural cleavages played a major role in the Egyptian elections of 2011–12 (Rougier & Bayoumi, 2015).

If the revolutionary moment had allowed some organizations to temporarily gain legitimacy to speak in the name of “the people” in the sense of Bozarslan, these organizations have been ill-equipped to compete within the structure of the social cleavages that exist in the contemporary Arab world. Yaghi (2018) argues that, in the case of the Egyptian elections of 2011-12, this failure is due mainly to three factors: the lack of resources and organizational structures of the revolutionary youth groups; the ideological divisions among them; the disinterest of the youth in general for political parties. The present article will put the argument a step further, identifying four types of factor impeding the effort of the revolutionary youth groups to compete into politics: those related to the rules of the game; those stemming from parties’ power resources; those related to the structure of social cleavages (this explains the difficulty of the revolutionaries to mobilize any constituency into the ballot boxes, not only the youth electorate); and those inherent to the contradictions between street politics and electoral politics (this includes the ideological diversity among the youth revolutionaries, which was a necessary condition for them to mobilize people on Tahrir, but revealed itself a handicap during the elections).

The present article will focus on the campaign of the electoral coalition called “The Revolution Continues” (*al-thawra mustamira*), during the 2011–12 parliamentary elections in Egypt, when it managed to attract only 2.8 per cent of the vote. Based upon fieldwork carried out in three of the electoral districts during the elections (Cairo Central, Suez and Tanta), and upon several interviews with candidates and members of the revolutionary coalition campaign, this paper seeks to examine the difficulties encountered by the revolutionary organizations as they sought to represent “the people”, in an institutional context where the rules of the game had been defined by their adversaries, namely the military and the Islamist political forces¹. The goal of this discussion is not to analyze the influence of the youth organizations’ strategies on the transformation process (Abdalla, 2016; Alwazir, 2016), neither does it aim to assess the impact of the political transformations on the youth organizations and their strategies (Ryan, 1994). The objective here is to show how a given strategy aimed at representing the people can be effective during the

1 Pro-military, old regime and Islamist forces agreed to support the text submitted to the referendum of 19 March 2011, in order to set out the main stages of the political transition. Liberal and revolutionary forces opposed this roadmap, arguing that the transition process should be allowed more time, and that the planned steps should be reversed (e.g. the writing of a constitution before the election of a Parliament)

revolutionary moment and reveals itself to be counter-productive in the electoral process. This contradiction relies on the dual nature of the people, an entity united beyond its pluralism in a time of crisis and “desectorization” (Dobry, 1986), and a divided body in a time of election. We will first point out that the so-called “rational” vision of the people, as expressed through democratic procedures, is highly dependent on institutional rules, and that these rules advantaged large political organizations during the 2011–12 elections. Then, we will recall which were the political forces competing in these elections, and examine the nature of their respective resources. Relying almost exclusively on revolutionary legitimacy, “the Revolution Continues” coalition had a hard time as it sought to face up to strong religious movements and wealthy liberal political parties in a fair and free electoral contest. In addition, the polarization of the public debate and the political field at that time contributed to the marginalization of the revolutionary candidates, who were positioning themselves essentially on secondary and tertiary cleavages, but were almost inaudible on the primary concern of the electorate, i.e. the religious issue². Lastly, the practical and ideological difficulties involved in conciliating between the electoral campaign and street activism handicapped the coalition’s candidates.

The Effects of the Electoral System on the Ability to Represent the People

In order to understand the challenge faced by the revolutionary coalition, one should start by undertaking an overview of the electoral system. Indeed, this system was new in the context of Egyptian political life, and also extremely complex, due to the large number of contradictory forces and factors that were operating in relation to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) when it issued the electoral law. Despite all the myths surrounding the democratic exercise of free and fair elections, the representation-mandate is not as easy to grasp as it seems, and the legal representation of the people in Parliament can be very different from one electoral system to another, regardless of any other disruptive factors, such as fraud and violence. The majoritarian systems, for instance, are viewed as less representative, because of their lack of proportionality in relation to the choice of the voters and actual political representation. In addition, single member district (SMD) systems induce lower incentives for participation, and reinforce a clientelistic attitude, because of the close proximity between the elector and his representative in Parliament (Reynolds & Sisk, 1998). On the other hand, proportional representation (PR) systems present a higher degree of fidelity between the will of the electorate and the allocation of seats. As a result, they provide higher incentives to vote, as well as favouring political parties at the expense of the traditional notables. In addition, PR systems ensure that a greater number of parties win legislative seats than is possible in SMD systems, which are regarded as favouring bipartisan systems. These are the well-known laws established by Duverger (Duverger, 1986). As a consequence, SMD systems produce stronger majorities and more stable governments than PR ones.

From 1990 to 2010, the Egyptian electoral system was a strictly majoritarian one. Significantly, the opposition parties boycotted the 1990 elections, due to the contested boundaries of the electoral districts. According to observers, all the following elections (1990, 1995, 2000, 2005 and 2010) were dominated by notables, and by patron-client relations, despite the oversight of the judicial branch in 2000 and 2005 (Gamblin, 1997; Singerman, 1997; Ben Néfissa & Arafat, 2005; Haenni, 2005; Vannetzel, 2008; Kohstall & Vairel, 2011). During this period, the ability to co-opt powerful individuals in each of the electoral districts became the main feature of the National Democratic Party (NDP). At that time, 80 per cent of the candidates were officially labeled as independent of any political party. This rate remained more or less the same until the revolution, along with other characteristics of these elections: e.g. the large number of candidates, the stiff competition between

² This point is closely related to the previous one, the hierarchy of social cleavages having been shaped at least partially by the distribution of resources by the old regime. Indeed, the control of workers unions (and also by a lesser extent of professional and student unions) by the state contributes to explain the weakness of the left, when the relative autonomy left to the Islamist religious and charity organizations and to the liberals (at least to the members of the Wafd party) under Mubarak played a major role in their electoral successes following the revolution (Resta, 2018).

them, and the integration of the victorious independents within the hegemonic NDP after the results were proclaimed (Ben Néfissa & Arafat, 2005: 143–4). In the 1995-elected People’s Assembly, 99 of the 318 NDP members of Parliament (MP) were elected as independents, i.e. 22 per cent of the total of the seats in this assembly (Al-Sayyid, 1997: 14). In 2005, 195 independents were elected, constituting 45 per cent of the 432 MPs, as against only 141 official NDP candidates (33 per cent). 170 of these independents ultimately joined the NDP, providing the hegemonic party with 311 seats, along with 72 per cent of the assembly (Zahrân, 2006).

Consequently, the growing number of independents elected to Parliament never endangered the hegemony of the NDP. Actually, they were independents mainly because the NDP had chosen to support someone else’s candidacy in their district. Under such a system, parliamentary elections became a competitive mechanism, through which the hegemonic party allowed the voters to designate the most powerful man in each district, without threatening its own domination (Ben Néfissa & Arafat, 2005). In doing so, these elections facilitated the objective weighting of power of the different notables who were in competition for each seat. This power was measured by their ability to mobilize voters, depending on the different means at their disposal (wealth, the number of employees, familial or tribal loyalties, etc.) In this configuration, the NDP was not a mere party, but rather a national web, which had the capacity to gather together all the local networks offering allegiance to the regime. So, the central power was able to gain its legitimacy from its ability to coordinate and organize the social power that was present in these networks for its own benefit, as embodied in the NDP MPs.

The removal of Hosni Mubarak (11 February 2011), followed by the dissolution of the NDP by court order (16 April 2011), led to the disorganization of these networks, and temporarily deprived them of their ability to act at a national level. Nevertheless, they did not disappear, and one of the most crucial questions at that time was in relation to the new political parties’ ability to defeat these networks in the elections. On 30 May 2011, the SCAF published an electoral law project, proposing a mixed electoral system for parliamentary elections, one third of the seats being elected through a PR system, and the remaining two thirds by the SMD system. The political parties thus reclaimed a higher degree of PR, which was supposed to advantage them to the detriment of the notables of the old regime. On 7 July, the government presented a new project, planning to elect one half of the People’s Assembly by means of a PR system and the other half by the SMD system. Finally, a definitive law was adopted on 24 September 2011, reversing the initially proposed distribution of seats: only one third of the assembly would be elected by the SMD system and the remaining two thirds by a PR system.

Mixed electoral systems can be defined as “electoral systems that provide voters two votes for the legislature: one for a party list in a proportional representation (PR) tier and one for a candidate in a single-member district (SMD) tier” (Moser & Scheiner, 2004, p. 576; see also Sartori, 2001, p. 99). Such systems are generally regarded as the best way to satisfy two contrary imperatives: representative justice and governing capacity (Dunleavy & Margetts, 1995), but the Egyptian mixed system of 2011 has been on the opposite described as failing to produce a pluralistic assembly able to build consensus (Tavana, 2012)³. Lastly, scholars have focused on the “contamination effects”, i.e. how PR and SMD proprieties tend to interfere with each other (Herron & Nishikawa, 2001; Cox and Schoppa, 2002; Moser & Scheiner, 2004). Henceforth, we have to focus on the district level in order to understand the effects of such systems (Sartori, 1986; Cox, 1997). For instance, it is now established that in PR systems, the higher the magnitude of the district –and thus its size–, the greater the degree of proportionality and the number of political parties represented in Parliament (Taagepera & Shugart, 1989; Lijphart, 1994). Also, given the smaller number of representatives elected through the SMD system, the size of each district has to be larger in a mixed electoral

3 In contrast, it is worth noting that Rashîd al-Ghanûshi, the leader of the Tunisian Islamist movement Ennahda, pushed for the adoption of a full PR system in his country in 2011, in order to avoid a domination of his own party over the Parliament, and to favour the formation of a governmental coalition bringing together Islamist and Secular forces (Stepan, 2018).

system than in a full majoritarian system.

Thus, in 2011, one of the unexpected effects of the last-minute compromise which determined the proportion of each system in the Egyptian parliamentary elections, was that the lower the number of seats elected by the SMD system, the bigger the average size of each district became. Previously, the Egyptian electoral map was divided into 222 districts; this time there were only 83, almost three times bigger on average than the previous ones. As the huge size of such districts was far beyond the traditional influence zone of most of the notables, their individual means were largely insufficient to campaign at the level of the whole district. Consequently, they had no choice but to look for the support of the only organizations powerful enough to campaign and mobilize voters at such a level: namely the political parties⁴. The result was that 508 representatives were elected to the People's Assembly, with 332 elected by the PR system and 166 by the SMD system –with 10 being appointed by the executive branch. Yet, in practice, it was impossible for independent candidates to compete for the two thirds of seats that were allotted through the PR system. Hence, they could only try to win one third of the 498 seats, i.e. 166 (Hasan, 2012). Egypt's electoral map was thus divided into 46 districts for the PR vote (meaning an average of 7.2 representatives per district), and 83 districts for the SMD system. Indeed, two representatives were elected in each district, one of them at least being a worker or a peasant.

Given this, these first post-revolutionary elections allowed the emergence of new political players, and 81.2 per cent of the members of this People's Assembly were elected for the first time, this rate being around 62 per cent during the three previous elections (Abû Rîda, 2012). Moreover, of the 23 political parties represented inside this assembly, 19 had not existed or had been banned before the revolution. Generally speaking, political parties were the real winners of these elections (Steuer, 2012), and only 22 MPs ran as independents, meaning 4.4 per cent of the new representatives⁵. Even, if we take into account the 166 seats elected under the SMD system, only 13.3 per cent of them were won by independent candidates. These results contrast sharply with the previous elections, and also with the weakness of political parties under the previous regime.

To summarize, the 2011 electoral law exercised a very significant influence on the results of the elections, contributing to the removal of the notables of the old regime, thus benefiting the political organizations, particularly the most powerful among them, i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood Freedom and Justice party and the Salafist Nour party. Additionally, the mixed electoral system facilitated the expression of the plurality and diversity of the people within Parliament, even if the weakest parties were disadvantaged compared to the potential results of a full PR system (Tavana, 2012). But by doing so, it contributed to the exacerbation of the divisions between the people to the point where they would become irreconcilable in the future. Lastly, this particular electoral system advantaged the political organizations that had access to important resources, among them the claim to be the representatives of the people was not the most powerful.

4 Actually, Sarah Ben Néfissa and Alâ Al-dîn Arafat noted a similar phenomena concerning the only previous elections organized under a mixed system in this country, i.e. the 1987 ones. However, they did not develop the argument (Ben Néfissa & Arafat, 2005, p. 142).

5 As a matter of fact, the Higher Constitutional Court dissolved the elected Assembly on 14 June 2012, because of the alleged unfairness of this system toward independent candidates. In particular, it objected to the fact that party members could stand in the election as individual candidates for the seats appointed by the SMD system, giving them an unfair advantage over independent candidates. It is interesting to observe that the Egyptian constitutional judge considered the local notables to be at least as legitimate as the political parties in relation to expressing the popular will. This conception is commonly shared by many institutional players in Egypt, and this may explain why –in the new political context born from the ousting of President Muhammad Morsy on 3 July 2013– the committee of ten experts appointed to propose amendments to the 2012 Constitution suggested a movement back to a full SMD system for subsequent parliamentary elections. Eventually, the 2015 parliamentary elections were organized again through a mixed electoral system, but with a higher share of SMD seats (4/5). Consequently, most of the MPs elected during this election were independent candidates (circa 60 per cent).

The Different Competing Forces and the Resources at their Disposal

Many political parties and coalitions entered these elections. The most powerful organization was the still illegal, but tolerated, Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which had established, during the few months following the fall of Mubarak, a political party called the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). The Muslim Brothers tried at first to gather around them a national unity coalition, their main partner in this attempt being a liberal and secular organization, the Wafd party. The goal of the coalition was to solidify and make durable the unity of the Egyptian people, as had been established during the eighteen days of the uprising against Mubarak. They sought to achieve this objective by bringing together the main political forces, thus representing all the ideological families coexisting within Egyptian society. The alliance between the champion of the Islamist camp, the MB, and the oldest and greatest secular party was supposed to constitute the axis of this national coalition, alongside other Islamist, liberal, and even nationalist organizations. But the Wafd and the MB failed to agree on the allocation of the seats on the lists of candidates for the PR districts, leading the former to withdraw from the coalition. Eventually, the Salafist political organizations, and the Islamo-centrist Wasat party, also decided to leave the alliance with the MB. Nevertheless, the FJP gathered around itself a dozen small political parties and independents from different ideological strands, in the so-called Democratic Coalition. Given the respective weight of the different partners, the Democratic Coalition was mainly a vehicle for the MB, but the presence of liberal parties (such as the Tomorrow of the Revolution Party) and Nasserite organizations (such as Karâma) within the ranks of this alliance, allowed its leaders to present it as a symbolic embodiment of the unity of the people.

In this regard, the existence of a Salafist bloc helped the Democratic Coalition to occupy the centre of the political field, i.e. between the secular forces and the advocates of an Islamic state. The Salafist coalition was led by the Nour Party, the political branch of the Salafist Call. This organization, created during the 1970s in Alexandria, became the most powerful Salafist movement in Egypt despite, or maybe because of, its low profile policy. It spectacularly entered the political field after the dismissal of Mubarak, by the creation of the Nour Party, officially recognized on the 12 June 2011, only six days after the FJP. This party allied itself with the Authenticity Party, representing the Cairene Salafist arena, and the Building and Development Party, the political branch of the once terrorist organization, the *Gamâ'a Islâmiyya*, with a powerful power-base in Middle and Upper Egypt (Lacroix, 2012). Just like the MB, the Salafists were able to rely on their large network of religious preachers, schools and charity organizations, in order to mobilize the electorate. This electoral bloc represented an identity vision of the Egyptian people as part of the Islamic Umma.

The secular camp was represented by the Wafd on the one hand, and by the Egyptian Bloc on the other. The latter is a coalition of three political parties, the biggest of them being the Free Egyptian Party, a neo-liberal organization created after the revolution as a result of the inspiration of a Coptic tycoon, Naguib Sawiris, the owner of the big telecommunication company, Orascom. Its main ally was the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, a centre-left organization, built after the departure of Mubarak by collaboration between scholars and artists. Lastly, the Unionist party was the smallest and the oldest party within the Egyptian Bloc. Born in 1977 from the leftist wing of the former unique Nasserite party, it relies mainly on its strong base among the official trade-union federation of Egyptian workers. Altogether, these three political parties proved themselves to be capable of mobilizing white-collar employees from the private sector through the Sawiris networks, blue-collar workers from state-owned companies, as well as students and artists. In addition, Sawiris was at that time the owner of a television channel, OnTV. These three parties were also popular among the Coptic electorate, as they represented one of the strongest opponents to the Islamist coalitions. On its side, the Wafd also benefited from long and well-established popularity among the Christian voters, and its president was also a business tycoon, Sayyid Badawi, who also possessed his own television channel, Al-Hayyât. Furthermore, unlike the Egyptian Bloc, the Wafd was able to reach the countryside through its network of notables all across the country. This camp represented yet

another definition of the Egyptian people, i.e. as a nation bringing together both Muslims and Christians.

Lastly, even though the NDP had been disbanded by a court ruling on 16 April 2011, its former members had not retired from politics, and several political parties were trying to engage with its heritage. The Reform of Development Party, led by Mohammad Anwar al-Sadat, had been created before the revolution, and at that time represented a liberal attempt to reform the regime from the inside. After the revolution, it was often presented as a recycling bin for ex-NDP members. In addition, a number of other political parties were –or were to become– mere offshoots of the former hegemonic party, such as the Egypt Nationalist Party, the Freedom Party and the Conservative Party. These organizations did not try to build coalitions, but competed against each other in the election. Nevertheless, they still relied on some of the old networks of notables previously associated with the NDP. From an ideological point of view, this political family not only regarded the Egyptian people as a nation, but also as an immature people, needing the tutelage of the security apparatus.

These different competing groupings all had a number of powerful resources at their disposal, mainly religious, financial and organizational in nature. Regarding symbolic resources, the ex-NDP could proclaim their previous experience in the government of the country, while the Salafist, as well as the MB, could both pretend to be the “true Muslims”. But, at that time, the revolution still represented a really important source of legitimacy (Sabaseviciute, 2013), with many political players trying to tap into it by claiming to represent the will and the unity of the people, as had been witnessed during the eighteen days of the uprising. The Democratic Coalition and the Egyptian Bloc were both engaged in the process of gathering political organizations from different strands (Islamist, liberal and nationalist for the former, liberal and socialist for the latter). In addition, the Egyptian Bloc and the Wafd placed national unity at the forefront of their campaigns, arguing the importance of guaranteeing equal rights for all the citizens, regardless of their religion. Since its creation, the logo of the Wafd had been the Crescent and the Cross, a symbol of the unity of the Egyptian people in the face of British domination. Nevertheless, “the Revolution Continues” coalition was the best positioned to claim revolutionary legitimacy at that time.

This coalition was indeed the coming together of six political parties, along with the support of a coalition of revolutionary youth. Its composition indicated the unity of the Egyptian people and of the revolutionary movement beyond the ideological divides, since some of its members were socialists (the Socialist Popular Alliance Party and the Socialist Party of Egypt), some others were liberals (the Equality and Development Party, the Freedom Egypt Party and the Egyptian Alliance Party), and one was an Islamist (the Egyptian Current party). Lastly, one of the major components of this coalition was not actually a party, but a network of young revolutionaries called the Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution (CYR). Created during the insurrection, this organization was by far the biggest of the hundreds of youth movements from this time. From the very beginning it brought together previous organizations such as the leftist 6 April Youth movement, the liberal El-Baradei campaign, some young people from the MB, and the Khaled Saeed Facebook group administrators. By itself, the CYR embodied the unity of revolutionary youth, regardless of their ideological orientations. It was one of the pillars of the revolutionary electoral coalition, alongside the Socialist Popular Alliance Party and the Egyptian Current party. The former was born from an alliance between a group of left wing students (the *Tagdîd*) and some dissidents from the Unionist party. It is the only one within the coalition with strong roots among blue-collar workers. Lastly, the Egyptian Current party was founded by young dissidents from the MB, disappointed by the lack of revolutionary enthusiasm shown by the Islamist leaders during the eighteen days and thereafter.

It is not only the electoral process that tends to exacerbate the divisions of the people, which were magnified as a manifestation of pluralism during the time of revolution. Each section of opinion makes use of its own definition of the people as a united entity, claiming to be its true representative. Unlike the other coalitions, “The Revolution Continues” coalition was not dominated by a single party or organization, but by three movements with roughly equivalent

strength, allied with three smaller political parties. Bringing together youth and workers from the entire political spectrum, this coalition had the more legitimate claim to act as the embodiment of the people as it had appeared during the uprising and to perpetuate this experience. Nevertheless, this symbolic source of legitimacy was by far the most important resource at the disposal of the coalition, who –unlike its adversaries and competitors – was lacking in financial resources, charity and religious networks, and significant leaders. Beside this, some other political parties (for instance, the party of the Democratic Front, the Justice Party) and independent candidates⁶ had strong grounds for claiming the revolutionary mantle. As a matter of fact, even the adversaries of the revolutionary coalition tried to dispute their position in this regard.

The Hierarchization of Social Cleavages and Political Issues

During the eighteen-month period of the SCAF-led transition, the opposition between the proponents of the revolution and the supporters of the old regime became one of the most defining issues facing the nascent Egyptian political party system, its importance only being overshadowed by the debate surrounding the religious identity of the state. If one of the main slogans of the eighteen-day uprising was “Bread, freedom and social justice”, such notions were soon eclipsed within the political arena. Instead, following the various conflicts between the young activists and the military, the main criteria determining the position of each political player in relation to the scale of their support for the revolution became the stance taken by these players regarding the eviction of the military from the heart of the political system. This was followed by other issues relating to the security apparatus, such as the reform of the police, and also by the recycling of ex-NDP members. Even if most of the leftist forces supported the social demands of the revolution, the revolutionary camp accepted within its ranks many advocates of neo-liberal policies. The common denominator among the revolutionaries was their wish to “civilianize” the Egyptian state.

Indeed, at the heart of these debates was the notion of the “civil state” (*dawla madaniya*), loosely defined as being the opposite of both competing counter-models: i.e. the military state and the religious state. Due to the vagueness of its definition, the term was of course used by the supporters of the third way, i.e. between the army and the Islamists, but also by the latter in order to denounce military power and privileges, and by the partisans of the old regime themselves in order to emphasize their own role as the supreme guarantor of the neutrality of the state against the Islamist threat (Blouët & Steuer, 2015). It is no surprise that the two most pressing issues (military/civil and secular/Islamist) during this period of transition were related to the very nature of the state itself, considering that this is the most important problem to solve during times of revolutionary crisis. Economic and social issues are generally perceived to be mainly a matter of public policies, with institutional issues being related to the setting of the game rules and to the writing of the Constitution. Consequently, the place of religion and the role of the army in the institutions were forcefully discussed after the ousting of Hosni Mubarak. This was especially so in the political field during the elections, and also in the different constituent committees which have been trying to draft a new Constitution for the country since that time.

Nevertheless, the 2011–12 elections showed that of these two issues, the Egyptian electorate had more concerns about the religious issue, with the most powerful political parties and coalitions positioning themselves mainly in relation to this division, while maintaining a certain ambiguity when it came to the issue of the role of the military within the institutions (Steuer, 2016). On the other hand, “the Revolution Continues” coalition was born out of a split among the ranks of the Egyptian Bloc. While the latter positioned itself first and foremost as the champion of the secular camp in the face of the Islamist forces, and considered revolution-related issues as secondary, “the Revolution Continues” coalition left this alliance because of a conflict related uniquely to the revolutionary concerns: the Egyptian Bloc agreed to endorse some ex-NDP members as candidates

⁶ For example, the TV anchor Gamila Ismail in Cairo Central. Some of these independent revolutionary candidates had been elected to Parliament: such as Amru El-Chobaki in Dokki, and Amr Hamzawi in Heliopolis (Sabaseviciute, 2013).

for the coalition. The revolutionary coalition was thus created around the unique criterion of the refusal to endorse the *felul*, which is not related to the Islamist/secularist cleavage, but only to the revolution/old regime divide. Furthermore, the electoral programme of the revolutionary coalition⁷ reveals the priorities of its redactors when it came to the hierarchization of political issues. The first three chapters deal with the reform of the state apparatus, the purge of the supporters of the old regime from the institutions, and guarantees of rights and freedoms. Only the fourth chapter is dedicated to the notion of citizenship, and indicates that the coalition belongs to the secular side of the religious cleavage. Social and economic issues appear in the three following chapters, and the final ones deal with the problems of corruption and foreign policy. This document shows how the revolutionary coalition sought to present itself: firstly as democratic, secondly as secular, and lastly as leftist. Positioning itself first and foremost on the secondary cleavage, the revolutionary coalition only managed to gain a marginal share of the seats.

The result of the parliamentary elections –confirmed in this regard by the presidential elections of 2012– established that the hierarchization of the most pressing issues by the Egyptian electorate was different from that advocated by the revolutionaries. Indeed, the five political parties and coalitions that gained a higher share of the MP’s seats had made the religious issue their priority: the MB’s “Democratic Coalition” (42.5 per cent of the seats), the Salafists’ “Islamic Alliance” (25 per cent), the secular Wafd (7.5 per cent), the Egyptian Bloc (6.9 per cent), and even the Wasat party, which positioned itself at the centre of this main axis (2 per cent of the seats, with 3.7 per cent of the vote). With 2.8 per cent of the vote, and only 8 MPs (1.6 per cent of the seats)⁸, the revolutionary coalition ranked 6th, followed by the moderately pro-military Reform and Development Party (2.2 per cent of the vote, and 9 MPs) and the NDP offshoots (altogether: 6.4 per cent of the vote, but only 3.4 per cent of the seats due to their lack of unity). If we add the results of the Justice Party (0.7 per cent of the vote, and only 1 MP), we obtain a result that indicates that just 12.1 per cent of the electorate positioned themselves on the revolutionary/counter-revolutionary axis, with only 3.5 per cent voting for revolutionary candidates. By contrast, 87.1 per cent of the vote went to parties and coalitions positioning themselves on the Islamist/secularist axis (among them, 65.3 per cent choosing the Islamist political forces).

In addition, the intransigence of the revolutionary coalition regarding the candidacy issue of ex-NDP members led to some difficulties when it came to the formation of the candidate lists. The refusal to accept any *felul* among their ranks constitutes the origin of the creation of “the Revolution Continues” coalition, since it represented a core feature of this alliance. Consequently, there was no leeway for creating an exception. There was at least one case in which this intransigence impeded the coalition’s efforts to compete effectively in a PR district: in Suez, the prospective head of the revolutionary coalition list was a worker trade-unionist, and a member of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party. But it appeared that in the past, her responsibilities within the workers’ trade-union federation had led her to become for a while a member of the NDP. For this reason, the other candidates decided to withdraw from the list, which was consequently canceled. This resulted in the absence of “the Revolution Continues” in the PR district of this governorate⁹.

But the most crucial consequence of this positioning was that the revolutionaries were not forced to

7 The electoral programme of the revolutionary coalition (in Arabic) can be downloaded from the following link: <https://thawramostamera.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/program1.pdf> (Retrieved on 9 June 2016).

8 But one should add the leader of the Freedom Egypt Party, Amr Hamzawi, who registered as an independent and was elected to an individual seat in Heliopolis (Sabaseviciute, 2013). Among the elected members of the revolutionary coalition, most of them (7) were members of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party. This is probably a side effect of the constitutional disposition stipulating that at least half of the MPs should be workers or peasants. As was the case with the other parties and coalitions, the Revolutionary Coalition lists were usually headed up by a member emanating from the other social categories. But, when eligible, the revolutionary lists were ranked last, and then, in order to fill the quota, the second member of the list (who has to be a worker or peasant if none of them had taken up the first position) was elected to Parliament instead of the head of the list.

9 Nevertheless, the ex-NDP trade-unionist became a candidate of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party for a single-member seat.

face the same enemies in the street as in the polling booth. While the military and the security apparatus were the main adversaries of the revolution when it took the form of demonstrations, strikes and sit-ins, the proponents of the old regime represented a harmless threat in these elections, which would, in all likelihood, be dominated by Islamist organizations. Many voters felt that the pressing priority was to defend the secular nature of the state, to the detriment of the objectives of the revolution, which enemies (the former NDP members) were about to be defeated by the MB and the Salafists at the ballot box. Under such circumstances, many electors who were sympathetic towards the ideas and goals of “the Revolution Continues” coalition preferred to fight the main threat, and decided to vote strategically for the Egyptian Bloc in order to try and limit the scale of the Islamist electoral surge.

Difficulties in Articulating the Two Fronts in the Battle for Representation

It is clear that when social and political divisions began to take precedence over the moment of unity which had characterized the existence of the people in the streets, the various competing groups were all tempted to speak in the name of the revolutionary people, even though the latter concept was fading away, precisely because of competition between the groups which it had once comprised. Weak at the ballot box, the revolutionary youth organizations were still able to mobilize in the streets during the whole of the electoral process and, indeed, thereafter. Nevertheless, this ability constituted a handicap in the electoral competition because of differences in the timing of electoral and revolutionary work. In addition, competitors from the revolutionary organizations tried to contest their claim to be the representatives of the people, not only at the ballot box, but also in the streets, as part of an attempt to appropriate their most important –and almost only– resource, i.e. revolutionary legitimacy.

First and foremost, one should note that the electoral campaign of the revolutionary coalition had been jeopardized by differences in timing and issues existing between the political and the revolutionary activities, many of its candidates being involved in the latter during the electoral campaign and the election (Wessel, 2013). Indeed, ten days prior to the beginning of the election, deadly clashes occurred in Tahrir Square between the police and the demonstrators. These events are known as the “battle of Muhammad Mahmud”, stemming from the name of one of the streets leading from the square to the Ministry of the Interior, where most of the clashes occurred, with many demonstrators wanting to attack this symbol of the police apparatus. Dozens of people were killed during these fights, while tens of thousands of demonstrators occupied Tahrir Square, calling for the resignation of the SCAF, the transfer of powers to a Committee of Public Salvation and the reporting of the elections. This crisis was the most important since the ousting of Hosni Mubarak, and resulted in the dismissal of the government and the solemn promise from the SCAF to transfer all powers to regularly elected civilians prior to 30 June 2012. For ten days, Tahrir Square once again became the focus of media attention, as well as the centre of the battle between the revolutionaries and the military, outshining the lure of the elections. For a few days, it became almost inconceivable that the vote could take place under such circumstances, and the cancellation of the electoral process was a strong possibility.

Certain of being the most powerful political force at the ballot box, the MB refused to join the demonstration, and called for a quick resolution to the crisis in order not to jeopardize or even postpone their long-awaited victory. This attitude was considered by many revolutionary forces as being the ultimate betrayal, because they believed that the MB had ruined the chance of removing the SCAF from the scene and of having the transition managed by civilian power. Indeed, this episode contributed to the radicalization of many revolutionaries, who started to claim that elections organized under a military regime would be illegitimate. They also began to contest the whole transition process. This situation led many revolutionary candidates to freeze their electoral campaigns, or even to withdraw their candidacy, and resulted in many of their supporters boycotting the elections. From this point forwards, the narrative of a secret agreement between the military and the Islamist political forces began to impose itself within the revolutionary milieu. The elections

thus began to be interpreted as merely a tool in the hands of these two counter-revolutionary forces, whose function would be to impede the progress of the revolutionary process and to preserve both the political order and social structures. Under such circumstances, it was difficult for the revolutionary candidates to participate in the electoral process; neither could they denounce it. They also faced many problems in mobilizing their supporters, who condemned the elections and chose to fully participate in the demonstrations against the SCAF. Most of them believed that the real battle was occurring in the streets, with the elections being at best a distraction, and more probably a lethal trap. Many of those who refused to vote did so in the name of the people, understood as being an “emotional community”. This was the case for instance with a 6 April activist in Suez, who told me he had nullified his ballot paper by writing on it: “damm al-shuhadâ” (“the blood of the martyrs”).

Eventually, the demonstrations ceased a few days before the beginning of the electoral process, which started on time. Cairo was one of the governorates to vote during the first phase (of three) of the elections, and electors went to the polling stations during a precarious truce between the military power and the revolutionary youth. A few weeks later, while other parts of the country were still in the process of voting, new clashes erupted in the capital city, involving on this occasion young demonstrators and the military police, not the forces of the Ministry of the Interior. These events tarnished the image of the SCAF in the eyes of most Egyptians, especially after the release of a video showing members of the military police beating up a young woman and tearing her clothes off while she was on the ground. By that time, the first results of the election were known, and the protesters were directing their anger not only at the military power, but also at the anticipated electoral victory of the Islamists. In Suez, for instance, which voted during the second phase, the first post-vote projections gave almost 75 per cent of the vote to the Salafists in the governorate. The revolutionary organizations of this city then organized a protest, officially in solidarity with the demonstrators in Cairo, but at the same time in order to show they were still present in the streets and the Salafists were not in control of their city.

Despite the lack of electoral process legitimacy in the eyes of many of their supporters, the leaders of “the Revolution Continues” coalition maintained support for their candidates and pursued their campaign. Crippled by the contradiction inherent to their participation in a process they considered illegitimate, these candidates and the activists campaigning for them were also busy with “revolutionary work”¹⁰, that is to say their involvement in the anti-SCAF demonstrations. Not only were the revolutionary candidates and activists not devoting their full efforts to the elections, but only a part of their electoral activities were directly related to their own campaign. A large proportion of their work consisted of defending the public interest by playing the role of “revolutionary watchdogs” (Meringolo, 2013). For instance, many of them were involved in a campaign against the “*felul*”, the former members of the NDP who were trying to recycle themselves as independents or candidates of different political parties. This campaign was aimed at establishing a list of all the *felul* competing for seats in Parliament, which would then be shared with the voters. In addition to, and despite of, their distrust of the electoral process as a whole, many young revolutionaries took part in the monitoring of the election process, either as members of registered NGOs or as delegates of political parties.

If the proximity of “the Revolution Continues” coalition with the actual demonstrators served to reinforce its claim to embody the people, it also constituted a handicap in the electoral competition because it deprived the coalition of available supporters and time, and also because it placed it in a contradictory position. Besides this, its pretensions to be the representative of the revolution and the people was contested by their competitors, not only through their rhetoric and their own claims to represent national unity, but also through their attempts to appropriate the revolutionary repertoire of action (Steuer, 2018)¹¹. Islamist and old regime forces sought to appropriate this revolutionary

10 “*Al-shughl al-thawri*”, to quote a responsible of “the Revolution Continues” campaign in Tanta.

11 The latter was born as a result of the merging of two previously existing repertoires: the “civil-democratic” (De Smet, 2014) repertoire and the “workers” repertoire. In this regard, it was participating in the construction of a

repertoire in order to claim some of the revolutionary legitimacy associated with it, and to compete with the revolutionary forces on their own ground, namely the representation of the people in the street. For instance, on 29 July 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Nour party occupied Tahrir Square, demanding the establishment of a religious state. These organizations also sometimes took part in demonstrations with the revolutionaries, as was the case on 18 November 2011, in order to remind the army leaders of their promise to hand over power to officially elected civilians. Nevertheless, these attempts were limited to the occupation of Tahrir Square and recourse to “revolutionary” rhetoric (social justice, human rights and democracy). One should also mention the attempts on the part of proponents of military power to appropriate some elements of the revolutionary repertoire, starting with the occupation of an alternative square (Abbaseya) during the Muhammad Mahmud battle in November 2011. At that time, however, representatives of the old regime were not claiming to be “the real revolutionaries”, but were merely trying to undermine the narrative of the unity of the people by underlining the existence of a division between the demonstrators and the supporters of the military. This division was made visible through the occupation of another square, the spatial divide representing at a symbolic level the underlying social division between opposing revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries.

Conclusion

If the staging of a people united in its own diversity proved itself a successful strategy during the eighteen days which resulted in the toppling of President Mubarak in 2011, the same strategy failed when used in an electoral campaign a few months later. Indeed, the gathering of men and women, middle-class youth and blue-collar workers, religious and secular individuals, provincials and urban citizens, liberal political parties and socialist organizations on Tahrir Square allowed the emotional fusion of an entity designing itself as “the people”, and claiming back its sovereignty confiscated by the state and the capitalist cronies.

But when “the Revolution Continues” coalition tried to embody this entity by bringing together liberal, socialist and Islamist parties, as well as a youth coalition, it had to compete in an unfavourable environment, where the institutional rules had been set up by its adversaries, which disposed of formidable resources and solid claims to represent themselves the national community. At the same time, their priorities, reflecting their world-view (“the people” v/s “the power”), revealed different from the most pressing issue in the eyes of the electorate: the growing division between the proponents of an Islamic state and the defenders of a secular state. Then, their failure helps us to understand the concrete differences opposing the various conceptions of the people which coexist and compete each other in the modern societies.

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