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2-8 June 2011

## In Focus:



# The Arab Spring and the crisis of the elite

After so much failure, the old Arab elite has been washed away with the times, the youth taking over, writes [Galal Nassar](#)

Four months ago no one would have thought that this year would turn out to be a turning point for the region. We knew all about the pent-up tensions, the discontent and the poverty. We knew that our hopes for revival were falling apart and that our region was being dismembered and washed down the river. But neither scholars nor analysts saw this coming.

A storm has swept over the region, and it hit us without warning. It is hard to attribute it solely to poverty or repression, to the lack of democracy or justice. It's much more than that.

We've known discontent in this region for six decades or so. Since the 1948 war, which we like to call the catastrophe, or Nakba, things have never been the same. The 1948 war is where it all started. You may recall the scandal of the faulty weapons of that war, the rifles that backfired and the cannons that jammed. The backfiring could have been a metaphor for our state of affairs. It told a young officer named Gamal Abdel-Nasser that the problem is not on the battlefield but back at home. Nasser and an entire generation of young Arabs started revolutions that spread like wildfire across the Arab world in the 50s and 60s. The revolutions brought new blood and new ideas to our political scene, but eventually they ran out

of steam. And the 1967 defeat, another defeat that got a nickname, the Naksa or the setback, was the closing chapter in our revolutionary times.

Then came the 1970s, and we were told that it was time to mend fences with the usurping entity next door. We were told that peace would bring prosperity, for we would no longer need to spend so much time on the war effort. The money we'd save would go to development, Anwar El-Sadat told us, promising us a better future in a "country of science and faith". So we signed the Camp David Accords, and the rest is history. Many people were delighted to see the war come to an end, for we were told that democracy was to be restored. Alas, this wasn't to happen. The tyranny didn't go away, and the prosperity failed to materialise as well.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the end of the middle class. The country's social and political momentum was lost and the emerging opposition failed to live up to expectations. In many cases, the opposition mirrored the same patriarchal make-up of the arthritic regime. Decay set in as the regime seemed incapable of defending itself against foreign domination. Baghdad fell, and everywhere else countries seemed to fall apart -- Somalia, Sudan and Yemen included. In Lebanon, sectarianism got worse, and in Egypt churches were torched.

The picture was becoming clear. Our regimes were falling behind the times. Our political and intellectual elite failed to predict the coming hurricane. The gatekeepers of the regime, and the sycophants who kept it alive, were running out of ideas. Our opposition was merely for show, a useless accessory in a farcical play.

Discontent started out in Palestine, with children throwing rocks at tanks. Having lost faith in the Palestine Liberation Organisation, in the Oslo Accords, and in the Palestinian Authority, they decided to risk their lives in an unequal fight. Elsewhere in the Arab world, the youth felt the same. They were out of college and jobless and yet they still dreamt of a better future.

The youth found a way to express themselves, a way that modern media has presented them. Through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, they stayed in touch, and they decided to challenge the barriers of fear. They organised protests to put an end to their marginalisation and to demand the rotation of power. They demanded democracy, accountability, human rights, and above all the right to assemble and organise.

A new spirit was born. Out of frustration with the horrors of sectarianism and corruption, a new political reality is taking shape. The elites may have failed, but

from their failure something unexpected has happened. The youth has taken over, their dreams bringing hope, their revolution scented with jasmine.

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## **New constitution needed**

Without writing a constitution now that guarantees civic freedoms and advances the spirit of the Egyptian uprising, parliamentary elections will quash the legitimacy of the revolution, writes **Azmi Ashour\***

It is only natural that this transitional period in the Egyptian revolution should be characterised by confusion and lack of unity over priorities and aims with respect to many issues. One of the most pressing issues is the need to draft a new constitution, which, according to the logic of revolutions, should have taken priority over holding parliamentary elections. It is little wonder, therefore, that this question has stirred considerable controversy and, over time, no small amount of anxiety and growing adamance among the coalition of the revolutionary youth, its forces and movements. The sense of frustration and urgency was epitomised in the second "Friday of Anger", held on 27 May in response to the political interplay and indicators that give the impression of a drive to re-entrench many of the features of the pre-revolutionary period through the dictatorship of those who would come to power if elections are held before the promulgation of a new constitution.

Suspensions of a drive to undermine the revolution were first raised by the rush to hold a referendum in March over the amendment of several articles of the constitution. The amendment idea was originally proposed by the ex-president in the course of the concessions he offered while the revolution was still in full force. In fact, it was Mubarak who created the constitutional amendments committee, even if its membership was changed after his departure. From the outset, then, the referendum process appeared illegitimate, associated as it was with the fallen regime and given the murkiness surrounding the options available to voters who were restricted to a yes or no vote on the amendments, rather than on the constitution itself. The choice was deceptive. Regardless of which way they voted, they implicitly had to accept the old constitution. A "No" vote simply implied that they rejected the amendments and agreed to the old constitution as it stood.

Likewise, a "Yes" vote implied that they agreed to the modification of a few articles, but otherwise approved of the old constitution. In both cases, the old constitution prevailed regardless of how voters actually felt about it.

But it was not just the form of the referendum that confused and misled voters. Other factors intervened to steer them in a particular direction, the most salient being that certain political forces suddenly found that their own interests would be best served by a "Yes" vote and then exploited religious sentiments to sway voters in that direction. Leading this campaign was the powerful and politically canny Muslim Brotherhood, which most likely feels that the old constitution, with the vast powers it confers on the president, is best suited to this organisation's creed and hierarchical structure, which is headed by a supreme guide. Also, this organisation was thrown off guard by the suddenness and forcefulness of the revolution, in which it initially played no part. Alarmed by the efficacy the secularist middle class displayed in the revolution, by its ability to identify with and respond to the demands of the youth in ways that were consistent with modern civilisation and culture, and that shunned traditional approaches and religious exploitation favoured by Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood had to move quickly in order to position itself to reap the fruits by means of the weapon it uses so well, and by dominating representational assemblies and councils.

Prompted by such misgivings, this middle class gathered again in Tahrir Square in the same spirit that characterised the 18 days that preceded the ouster of Mubarak. As was the case then, there was unity of purpose, the aim this time being a new constitution.

The revival of the spirit of the Egyptian revolution for this end on the second "Friday of Anger" is fully justifiable. Above all, a legislative authority, in and of itself, does not embody the concept of the nation. Parliament is only one of the institutions that were conceived to exist alongside one another towards the realisation of sound governance. Its members are elected democratically for the purpose of enacting legislation, but within the framework of a constitution that binds all citizens in a state and that is not solely representative of the majority that happens to win the parliamentary elections and place a president in power. The constitution must express the spirit of the entire Egyptian state, with its history, culture and current renaissance, and its principles must be formulated in light of the experiences of the past, circumstances of the present and aspirations for the future. A constitutional committee selected by an elected assembly dominated by a majority representative of a single political force with an ideological or religious agenda is a formula for usurping the will of the Egyptian people and the two-centuries old history of the evolution of their civil state. At the very least, in view

of the current political interplay in Egypt, a constitution emerging from such a committee would be regarded by many as unconstitutional and likely give rise to a situation in which the constitution is changed with every new electoral round. That, of course, is if democratic processes are kept alive and no individual or group claims legitimacy for themselves on religious grounds, envelops the constitution in a religious fold and demands its alteration on the grounds of what they regard as heresies.

Clearly, then, priority should be given to drawing up a constitution in a consensual manner and in accordance with considerations based on the evolution of the Egyptian political experience over the past two hundred years and aspirations for the future. The constitution must strive to be a unifying framework that embraces all Egyptians, Muslim and Christian alike, and it must seek to be a vessel capable of assimilating the full spectrum of political opinion, from the progressive and liberal left to the conservative, in all their diverse shades. Accordingly, it must close off any avenues that would give a particular religious or ideological camp a mandate over the rest of society.

Our constitution must fully reflect the principle of the equality of all citizens under its umbrella and the laws generated within its framework. Such a goal is not out of reach. The Egyptian state has a lengthy constitutional heritage and a storehouse of constitutional ideas that can be drawn on to ensure that the principles of the new constitution we produce are commensurate with the lofty aspirations and civilised spirit of the Egyptian revolution. The efforts of Egyptian jurists and constitutional experts, from the law that established the Assembly of Deputies in 1866 through the 1923 Constitution, which, for its time, marked a qualitative leap forward in terms of the liberal democratic values and principles of equal citizenship and political plurality that it enshrined, offer inspirational landmarks that have left their imprint on all aspects of Egyptian life, from the realms of political thought and culture to artistic and architectural production. Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in 1928, owes its very existence to the liberal principles and spirit that were inherent in the 1923 constitution.

At present, therefore, the foremost challenge of the 25 January Revolution is to succeed in its drive for the creation of a new constitution before any elections are held. If legislative elections are held first and in the framework of the amendments to the old constitution, they will deliver the first debilitating blow to the legitimacy of the 25 January Revolution, which is based to a considerable extent on its success in overthrowing the former regime. The principles and aspirations of the revolution will only be fulfilled through the creation of a constitutional, institutional and political framework for a civil Egyptian state that precludes the culture of

sectarianism and quota systems, for if elements of this culture worm their way into the constitution Egyptian national unity will crumble.

*\* The writer is a political analyst.*

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[A selection of comments by readers]

## **Need to know**

**Sir--** It is beyond comprehension as to why, even as the election looms, the Egyptian media have not taken the opportunity to inform the public on politics, party development, or even inspire individuals on what they wish for their great country.

25 January was the start of the revolution but now is the turn of leadership, vision and expertise of the electorate to build the foundation of this great land and bring about social justice, economic development, improved education and healthcare, reduce pollution and poverty. A business, a community organisation, a party, or an individual(s) needs to take the leadership role(s) to explain the elements of grassroots politics to a population who have empowered themselves and yet haven't the resources nor information to motivate themselves.

**Lori Ann Comeau**  
**Dubai**  
**UAE**

## **Mubarakism**

**Sir--** In the mid-1950s, the world came to know Nasserism. In the early 1980s, Mubarakism was ushered in.

Mubarakism means favouritism; nepotism; rigging of elections; influence peddling; bribery; abuse of power; profiteering; money laundering; forced business partnerships; looting state-owned land; plundering foreign aid; manipulation of police and judges; abuse of human rights; repression of opposition parties; shooting, maiming and killing protesters; suppression of basic freedoms; and tampering with articles of the constitution to facilitate inheritance of the presidency.

The Mubaraks and their coterie let 30 years slip out of control without real development.

Sociologists tell us that a corrupt official at the helm corrupts over 100 subordinates. As such, Mubarakism subverted the morals of an entire generation and Egypt must now pay dearly for the chaos we have been suffering from since the inception of the revolution: ubiquitous demonstrations, sit-ins, unending sectarian sedition, security anarchy and hooliganism are to mention but a few.

It seems Mubarakism has plundered the country of its past, present, and maybe its near future.

**Mahmoud Elewa**  
**Cairo**  
**Egypt**

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## **America's coming Nakba**

Is the US reaping the effects of its military domination of the Middle East and unconditional support for Israel, asks **William Cook\***

"From the moment we took on a role that included the permanent military domination of the world, we were on our own -- feared, hated, corrupt and corrupting, maintaining 'order' through state terrorism and bribery, and given to megalomaniac rhetoric and sophistries that virtually invited the rest of the world to unite against us. We had mounted the Napoleonic tiger. The question was, would we -- and could we -- ever dismount?" -- US author Chalmers Johnson in *The Sorrows of Empire*.

Johnson's prescient observations, made years ago, erupted in full view of the world community recently as Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and US President Barack Obama attempted to control the tiger unleashed by the creation of the state of Israel in the midst of the Arab world -- by deceit, theft, terrorism and

military might -- faced now with the Arab Spring rising from the ashes of fallen dictators.

Coercion, bribery and military might created an illusion of peaceful stability as long as agreements providing billions of dollars for security police, military training by the US and technical and ordnance support secured these dictators in power. But with America forced to do the bidding of its adopted child by the "corpocracy" that governs the empire and its unending need for wars to sustain its economic growth, it finds itself woefully weak as its forces futilely attempt to contain terrorism throughout the Middle East.

Now, America finds itself bereft of power, bereft of resources and bereft of friends, manipulated by Zionists like Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert and Netanyahu who disdain America's weakness, holding its Congress prisoner by coercion, bribery and deceit -- the very strategies that Israel has used against the people of the Middle East to create the illusion of peace.

Ironically, as Obama lectured AIPAC and Netanyahu in recent weeks, he drew a demographic map that forces both Israel and the world community to take notice of what the Israeli Likud Party really stands for, even as it declares that "peace is a primary objective of the state of Israel."

The Palestinian population in historic Palestine will equal the Jewish population before 2014 (Palestine Bureau of Statistics). That "fact on the ground" makes the land west of the Jordan River have a Palestinian majority, and the irony rests in a little-noticed Likud statement that "the government of Israel flatly rejects the establishment of a Palestinian Arab state west of the Jordan River."

Not only is this declaration a total rejection of a Palestinian state by the Israeli government (comparable, indeed, to that of Hamas in the latter's denial of the Israeli state), it does so even when confronted by the inevitable reality that Jews will be a minority in Palestine. Denial of a Palestinian state will result in Israel becoming a minority-controlled apartheid, non-democratic state like South Africa was decades ago.

But Obama's lecture went beyond population figures. He attempted to teach the Israelis that walls and chain-link fences cannot contain the projected 6.1 million population even with rolled-up barbed wire, watchtowers and sophisticated technology. How can Israel manage to contain a population greater than its own on approximately 15 per cent of historic Palestine, while its own population occupies 85 per cent? How can the world community grapple with the injustice of such a

situation, especially since these figures do not include the 5.6 million refugees living in various Arab lands?

Under international law, these people have a right to return, and many of them would have a right to return to land now claimed by Israel. Obama is suggesting that it would behoove Israel to accept a settlement that would provide adequate land and resources for the Palestinians, or face the inevitable dissolution of the Jewish state as a one-state solution becomes a *de facto* reality. In 2002, Saudi Arabia proffered a peace plan based on the 1967 borders and carrying with it full recognition of the state of Israel by all Arab countries. Israel and the US rejected it out of hand.

While Obama did not spell out what the Israeli government must do, he did note that "the times they are a changin'". No longer will it be possible, Obama implied, to cull out of an elite few those who can be bribed into a pseudo-peace agreement with Israel, like those that existed in Egypt and Jordan, or force into play oil deals with Muammar Gaddafi look-alikes, or invade illegally a nation that has done nothing against the US, as happened in Iraq and Afghanistan, installing thereby a complacent leader who will do the US's will.

No, the times have changed. Today, Arabs are aware of America's depleted resources, understand its economic crisis and towering debt, realise the vice being turned by Palestinian population growth on the Israelis, realise that justice demands equality for themselves and the Palestinians, and have the knowledge to force this awareness on the international community through the United Nations General Assembly.

Obama knows all too well how little power he possesses as president of the United States. He knows that the representatives of the American people are owned by corporate power and the Israeli lobbies. This means that Obama cannot pass any legislation, foreign or domestic, if he confronts the Zionists that control the US government, nor can he expect re-election. He is a shackled man, subservient to his overseers. But he also knows that America is threatened by this subservience, that its soldiers are being used by a foreign power, and that hatred of Americans festers in those occupied by Israeli troops.

Journalist Mark Perry has described an unprecedented bombshell briefing with US Admiral Mike Mullen, in which the views of senior Arab leaders that the US administration was ineffectual and incapable of standing up to Israel were conveyed, as were those of US General Petraeus, who sees the so-called "special relationship" with Israel as putting American lives and interests at risk.

This January 2010 briefing was unprecedented. No previous CENTCOM commander had ever expressed himself on what is essentially a political issue, which is why the briefers were careful to tell Mullen that their conclusions followed from a December 2009 tour of the region where, on Petraeus's instructions, they had spoken to senior Arab leaders.

"Everywhere they went, the message was pretty humbling," a Pentagon officer familiar with the briefing said. "America was not only viewed as weak, but its military posture in the region was eroding."

The following is taken from Petraeus's statement before the US Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2010: "the enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbours present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests in the AOR [area of responsibility]. Israeli-Palestinian tensions often flare into violence and large-scale armed confrontations. The conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of US favouritism for Israel."

"Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of US partnerships with governments and peoples in the AOR and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world. Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilise support. The conflict also gives Iran influence in the Arab world through its clients, Lebanese Hizbullah and Hamas."

Obama understood the implications of the rebirth of desires for political change on the part of the peoples of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, Iran and even Palestine, most especially Palestine, as the latter desires overflowed onto the desks of the United Nations representatives demanding recognition of the besieged and occupied citizens of Palestine.

With action expected in September, when the countries of South America, Asia, most of Europe and the whole of the Arab world are likely to accept into membership of the UN the state of Palestine on the 1967 borders, the long ordeal of the Palestinian people, 63 years of aborted peace initiatives by the state of Israel, will be ended.

The vote will cast Israel into an untenable position, since it will require of the United States that it abandon its position as protector of this state that has defied the UN for all these years, making the very intention of the UN irrelevant and the desires of the world community moot. Obama's speeches before the US Congress and AIPAC will either force Netanyahu to capitulate to peace negotiations that establish a viable Palestinian state, or have the United Nations and not the US serve as broker to make the Palestinian state a reality, something Israel fears.

Yet, the truth is that the state of Israel itself was accepted into the United Nations by a vote of the General Assembly in 1949, thereby making moot a similar vote on behalf of the Palestinians. Only by having the UN intervene in establishing legitimate borders for both countries, thus creating equality at the outset, can the potential for a true and just peace be made possible.

Netanyahu, by contrast, has ignored these implications and attempted to defend the megalomaniac rhetoric of the Israeli state. This is a rhetoric that decries the threat inherent in the Hamas Charter not to recognise the Israeli state, but fails to tell the world of its own Likud Platform that flatly rejects the existence of a Palestinian state. It is a rhetoric that bemoans the 1967 borders as indefensible for Israel, while remaining silent on the massacres inflicted on the Palestinians before and after the implementation of the UN partition plan that resulted in the confiscation of 21,000 *dunams* of land in Galilee, Al-Muthalath and Negev.

This is a rhetoric that declares the settlements must remain in the West Bank together with the apartheid highways that only Jews may use, despite the fact that there are upwards of 517,774 Jews spotted throughout the West Bank, making a viable Palestine state impossible, while an additional 1,496 *dunams* of land have been confiscated to construct the Expansion and Annexation Wall for the expanded settlements.

It is a rhetoric that demands that the Palestinians recognise Israel as a democratic and Jewish state, even though that by definition is an oxymoron and in practice makes Arab-Israelis second-class citizens, while Israel rejects the idea that a Palestinian state can exist west of the Jordan River. It is a rhetoric that demands that the Palestinians reject violence, even though it is Israel that occupies their land illegally, together with Syrian and Lebanese land, and has exercised the unrestrained slaughter of Palestinians since its inception, a fact recorded in countless UN resolutions.

In this season of remembrances, it is incumbent upon the people of the United States to reflect on the role they played in the birth of the state of Israel and the catastrophe inflicted upon the people of Palestine. Ironically, most Americans can recall neither the Israeli declaration of independence nor the Palestinian Nakba, yet in 2011, the Israelis' existence economically, politically and internationally grows from the decades of unconditional support the US government has provided to the terrorist state of Israel.

Ironically, as Obama has implied in his reactions to the changing conditions in the Middle East, America's "unshaken support" for the state of Israel has brought upon

it the world's condemnation as a nation that has lost any semblance of justice for the humiliated and defenseless, becoming thereby a nation that is distrusted, dishonoured and dismissed.

Perhaps this is the catastrophe of American power policy that seeks the domination of the world for the American corporate elite.

*\* The writer is professor of English at the University of La Verne in southern California. The Plight of the Palestinians was published last year by Macmillan.*