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Egypt's Revolutionary Youth

From Street Politics to Party Politics

Nadine Abdalla

The youth movement that led Egypt's 25 January 2011 revolution is far from being demobilized today. It is currently undergoing an institutionalization process as several new political parties representing the youth are being founded. Indeed, political empowerment and inclusion of the youth in the democratic process are important for the success of the current transitional process. No less important would be for them to find a balance between street politics and conventional politics. Only then could the youth present a viable political force that is strong enough to effectively participate in and influence the formal political process. The new youth-dominated parties, however, face an array of challenges. The internal cohesion of some is threatened by differences of political opinion. Structural weaknesses and lack of organizational capacities hinders the ability of others to perform effectively. Capacity-building, political education and leadership skills will be crucial for these parties to become effective players in Egypt's transition.

A few days after President Hosni Mubarak's resignation in 2011, the youth that had triggered and led the events of the January 25 revolution coalesced into different kinds of political organizations. Those associated with the religious movements joined the Freedom and Justice Party (affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood) and the Nour Party (for the Salafists). Others attempted to safeguard the aims of the revolution by joining new non-religious parties that were participating in the formal political process, or by becoming part of networks that continued to engage in street politics.

Coalition of Revolutionary Youth

The first organization formed by the youth was the Coalition of Revolutionary Youth. It comprised a broad range of parties and movements from diverse political orientations. The Coalition was composed of the main activists who had organized the protests that began on January 25. In the post-revolutionary period, it focused on street politics to pressure the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces into meeting the youth's "revolutionary" demands, such as the dismissal of the Mubarak-appointed Prime Minister, Ahmed Shafiq. Mobilizing people and organizing demonstrations was their primary approach for nearly a year and a

half. The Coalition helped several of its members to acquire political capital relevant for leadership in future political organizations. Nevertheless, its exclusive focus on street politics was a missed opportunity in terms of building the social base necessary to fare well in elections. On 7 July 2012, the Coalition was officially dissolved, given that the transitional period was considered to be coming to an end with the election of President Mohamed Morsi in late June 2012. A large number of its leaders acknowledged that the time had come to participate in the formal political process.

The youth's new political parties

The second kind of organization in which the youth have been regrouped is political youth parties such as El-Adl (centrist), El-Tayar El-Masry (post-Islamist), Masr El-Horeya and El-Waa'y (both socially and economically liberal). The youth form the majority of the membership base for all of them. However, they fared poorly in the January 2012 parliamentary elections (El-Adl and Masr El-Horeya won only one seat each). Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, whose history stretches back 80 years and which commands a strong social base, those newly established parties were unable to build sufficient grassroots in order to mobilize electoral support. Lack of organizational experience, of resources, of prominent leaders who could attract donations, and an age composition that restricted their appeal to older generations, were among the structural shortcomings that prevented them from performing effectively and reaching out to a broader segment of society. In addition, the cohesion of these parties was threatened – albeit in different degrees – by a lack of internal discipline, and by the inexperience of their leaders in the management of internal struggles. This was especially the case with the El-Adl party, in which the revolutionary, idealistic youth who formed the base were unable to submit to hierarchical decisions derived

from more politically compromising positions. On the one hand, they were not inclined to be convinced by less idealistic positions in order to achieve political gains. On the other hand, their leaders were unable to communicate the political compromises they had to make in order to generate support.

New parties of the older generation

The youth who did not join these “youth parties” entered other political parties established in the post-revolutionary period, such as El-Masryin El-Ahrar (socially and economically liberal), El-Hizb El-Masry El-Dimoqrati (social democrat), El-Tahalof El-Shaa'by (leftist). In the January 2012 elections, those parties performed better than the youth parties, but they still remained far behind the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists, achieving 13, 16, and 7 seats, respectively (out of a total of 508 seats). However, in all three parties, albeit to different degrees, generational conflicts quickly came to the fore – the youth complained about being shut out of decision-making processes and opposed the positions of the older generations. In consequence, a large number of youths either defected from these parties or withdrew into inactivity.

The difficulties witnessed during the transitional process as well as the experience during the 2012 parliamentary elections prompted many youth to make revisions as they realized that electoral success depended on at least three factors: 1) a stronger emphasis on the formal political process in addition to street politics, which requires the construction of structurally strong political parties that can perform more effectively; 2) gathering all revolutionary forces and uniting smaller entities through coalition-building, namely because one of the reasons for the failure of non-Islamist parties in the parliamentary elections had been the lack of coordination among them; 3) forming multi-generational parties that are representative of a larger segment of society.

After the June 2012 presidential elections, the third- and fourth-place contenders Hamdeen Sabahy (leader of the Nasserist Karama Party) and Abdel Moneim Abul Futuh (a dissident former leader of the Muslim Brotherhood who is popular among the rebellious youth of the organization), formed the Popular Current (El-Tayar El-Sha'aby) and the Strong Egypt (Masr El-Kaweya) parties. Mohamed El-Baradei, the former Secretary-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency who had withdrawn his presidential candidacy in January 2012, established the Constitution Party (Dustour) Party. Both the Constitution Party and the Popular Current are members of the National Salvation Front (NSF), a coalition assembling the majority of the oppositional leftist and liberal parties and movements. It was established in reaction to the constitutional declaration issued by President Morsi on 22 November 2012, with the main purpose of uniting the opposition's activities.

Still, some of the weaknesses identified earlier also exist in the new parties and movements. Although all of them are committed to non-violent protest, achieving a balance between conventional politics and street politics remains a major challenge. To date, a decision has not been taken on whether to work from within the formal system or to remain outside. The NSF's February 2013 decision to boycott the parliamentary elections – in protest against the refusal of the current rulers to amend the constitution, guarantee the full independence of the judiciary, and form a new government that is more representative than the current one – is a case in point here. The elections were originally scheduled for April 2013 but postponed by a ruling of the Administrative Court in early March 2013 because of procedural questions. A new date has not been set as of yet. Moreover, the three political organizations face several structural and programmatic challenges that are preventing them, for the time being, from fully reaching out to society.

The second wave of youth parties

The Constitution Party: The main motivation to establish the Constitution Party was to regroup all the revolutionary youth forces under one umbrella. The party claims to be a social liberal or social democratic party. Its political program is based on three main stances clarifying its socio-political and socio-economic agenda:

- 1) Rebalancing the relations between the state and the citizens: This balance should occur by guaranteeing the separation between the state and the government, and therefore the neutrality of the state's institutions. Guaranteeing public and individual freedoms are considered equally important.
- 2) Rebuilding Egyptian culture in a way that guarantees the acceptance of others and promotes a culture of diversity: This should be implemented through education and by guaranteeing the right to creativity and expression, reflecting the socially liberal orientation of the party.
- 3) Establishing an economic order that guarantees a minimum of social justice, with progressive taxation to be used as a major tool for achieving this objective.

In contrast to the first wave of political parties that emerged after the revolution, the Constitution Party has the potential to mobilize considerable political, social, and moral capital. In particular, the leadership of Mohamed El-Baradei, considered by many youths to be the “godfather” of the revolution, has attracted many defectors from the parties that were established during the first post-revolutionary phase and led them to join the Constitution Party. The dynamism of these youths provides the party with a considerable potential for building grassroots and has already proved effective during the demonstrations against the November 2012 constitutional declaration. The party also regroups many public figures that possess political capital, such as Hossam Eissa, a well-known law professor who chairs its executive committee. This presence of political figures drawn from different generations helps to attract media attention and guarantees continuous

visibility. Finally, the party has the significant advantage of a pre-existing infrastructure represented by “The Campaign for Supporting El-Baradei and the Demands for Change” movement, which was formed in early 2011 with significant participation by formerly non-politicized youth around Mohamed El-Baradei, whom many saw as a credible alternative to the Mubarak regime. This movement already has many offices spread out across Cairo and other governorates. These resources facilitated the official establishment of the party in September 2012 with around 20,000 founding members. Up to now, the door to general membership has not yet been opened, and the party is still in the first phase of its founding.

The Strong Egypt party: This party, officially founded in November 2012, is an institutionalization of sorts of Abul Futuh’s electoral campaign. It has 8,500 founding members, mostly coming from members of the campaign. As in the case of the Constitution Party, the door for general membership has not yet been opened. Founding members comprise ex-members of the Muslim Brotherhood who left the organization in response to its lack of internal democracy and lack of possibilities for participation, as well as revolutionary youth who participated in Abul Futuh’s campaign and see him as representing the objectives of the revolution.

Strong Egypt positions itself as a party that adheres to the center left and the moderate Islamic stance. Moderate Islam is considered an essential component of the Egyptian identity – respecting the later forms the party’s main philosophical foundation. Therefore, the party commits to the principles and broader aims of Islamic Sharia. Three main positions distinguish the party’s orientation: 1) guaranteeing a participatory democracy through a stronger decentralization of power; 2) social justice and inclusiveness through measures of wealth redistribution such as a minimum wage and the restructuring of

the state’s system of subsidies; 3) independence of Egyptian foreign policy from the influence of hegemonic powers, in a way that enables Egypt to reclaim its regional role.

Although guarantees for personal liberties are mentioned in the program, this subject does not figure prominently in the party’s agenda. While the Constitution Party explicitly named the lack of protection of individual liberties as one of the reasons why it campaigned to vote against the new constitution in the December 2012 referendum, Strong Egypt omitted any such reference, mobilizing instead against the prerogatives that the constitution accords to the armed forces through the National Security Council. Opposing any interference by the military in the political sphere is a clear stance for Strong Egypt. Moreover, the party has refused to position itself within the current polarized political scene and has refrained from taking sides with the liberal/leftist opposition against the ruling power, represented by the Muslim Brothers and the Freedom and Justice Party. Therefore, an alliance between the party and liberal/leftist forces that are clearly opposed to the current rule, such as the Constitution Party and the Popular Current, is not likely to occur. In fact, Strong Egypt has consistently refused to join the NSF.

The party employs an innovative, bottom-up approach for building grassroots support through the construction of organizations that represent the main sectors of society, linking them to the party in a decentralized way. Two main bodies have already been formed to that end: the Egyptian women’s organization devoted to reaching women and empowering them, and the Strong Egypt student movement devoted to reaching university students. This structure is part of the strategy of the party to form youth leaders that are able to run in student union elections as well as in local elections (which have not been scheduled yet). Similarly, the party is planning to establish other organizations for middle-class professionals (such as teachers, engineers, and doctors) and workers. These

organizations should help the party achieve success in elections within professional unions and syndicates.

The Popular Current: This movement was established by third-place presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabahy at a conference in downtown Abdin Square in September 2012. During the inauguration of the movement, Sabahy announced that it will work with the people on the ground in the fields of development, economy, culture, and sports, unlike a traditional political party. Adopting flexible structures should facilitate its spread by using a more decentralized way of building grassroots in cities and villages. The movement is open to leaders and members of other parties that were encouraged to join and support it, while remaining organized in their parties.

The movement is conceived as an institutionalization of Sabahy's presidential campaign. The latter was formed essentially by nationalists, leftists, and revolutionary youth who believed in his discourse, which is centered on social justice. The main positions of the movement are a direct carry-over from the platform of Sabahy's presidential campaign: guaranteeing individual and political liberties through the consolidation of a genuinely democratic system; achieving social justice through the setting of a maximum and minimum wage for workers in the public sector; and, similarly to the Strong Egypt party and reflecting its leftist/nationalist orientation, the movement argues against interferences by hegemonic powers and for an independent foreign policy to reclaim Egypt's regional position.

Whether the campaign should be transformed into a party or a movement was an issue of discussion between its leaders, who ultimately preferred the movement option. It is constituted by two bodies. First, there is the executive bureau, which was formed by 17 leaders, all of them youths, as an explicit way to empower them. Some of these youth leaders had been leading activists in Sabahy's campaign; the others are leaders in other leftist movements or parties such

as the "Youth for Freedom and Justice" movement and the Social Democratic Party. The executive bureau is considered to be the central administrative body of the movement and supposed to run all management and coordination tasks. Second, there is the council of trustees, which was formed by 60 to 70 members who are mainly experts in different fields, many of whom had already contributed to Sabahy's electoral platform. The council is an advisory body tasked with offering advice about specific dossiers when needed.

Main challenges and obstacles

Continuous political instability has made it difficult for all the new parties to build structures. Frequently, members have been busier coordinating protest activities and demonstrations than organizing the party internally. Given the lack of human and financial resources, they have been unable to manage both activities at the same time. Also, all of the new parties that have been absorbing the revolutionary youth are facing a number of structural and programmatic challenges, although to different degrees.

Lack of sustainable funding

Scarcity of funds has especially harmed the performance of both the Constitution Party and the Popular Current and has limited their capacity to spread out geographically as well. Both formations have yet to develop a fundraising strategy that would allow them to finance their activities in a sustainable way. The presence of prominent public figures helps the Constitution Party to attract funds and funders. This funding is, however, still erratic and dependent on political seasons and events. During the founding phase, some funds were offered by supportive liberal businessmen, and donations by sympathizers were used to pay for the tents during the sit-ins against the constitutional declaration. However, the absence of reliable sources for funds

that would cover, at least, the fixed costs of the party – such as office rents and the salaries of the administrative staff – has a negative impact on the political performance, since the leaders are preoccupied with administrative tasks and unable to focus on the political ones. The same applies to the Popular Current and prevents it from following through on its main approach that is, gaining support through developmental work with people on the ground. Since its establishment, the Popular Current's main focus has turned to political activities and street protests, above all, thereby reducing the Popular Current to a protest movement.

Furthermore, the lack of funds prevents both organizations from establishing new offices, especially in the south of Egypt. The Constitution Party has currently around 30 offices, and whereas a number of the party's founders in northern Egypt inaugurated new offices on their own initiative and paid the costs out of their own pockets, those in the south cannot afford this. According to the party's youth leaders, establishing an office in a certain area is crucial for building the party's support in that area. Given the limited funding, the party has not yet been able to create offices outside the main cities.

Geographical penetration also remains a challenge for the Strong Egypt party, whose 30 to 35 offices are centered in cities, with a higher density in the north. Contrary to the Muslim Brothers and Salafists, who have managed to gain support in villages, all the newly established parties are mostly present in the cities and have still not managed to reach the countryside. The referendum on the constitution, in which the opposition obtained significantly less support in the south than in Cairo and northern Egypt, was a good indicator of this lack of penetration.

Structural weaknesses

Coordination between headquarters in Cairo and party chapters in the gover-

norates is weak in both the Constitution Party and the Popular Current. By opening new offices in Cairo and many of the northern governorates on their own initiative, the highly mobilized youth of the Constitution Party has created a decentralized structure that further challenges the party's already limited coordination mechanisms. Finding a proper balance between decentralization and internal cohesion through structured patterns of communication is directly required. In addition, these structural weaknesses render the integration of other opposition parties into the framework of the Constitution Party impossible, at least in the short and medium term. To realize its declared objective of becoming an umbrella for the revolutionary forces, the party will have to get a grip on its internal structures first.

This problem is even more pronounced in the case of the Popular Current. Although decentralized activities were very much encouraged by the Sabahy campaign, no effective structure of communication was established. The transformation of the campaign into a flexible movement structure even amplified the organizational weaknesses and lack of cohesion. In contrast, the Abul Futuh campaign was characterized by efficient organization structures, owing, at least partially, to the experience that many of its members had gained in the Muslim Brotherhood. The Strong Egypt party therefore has the opportunity of having an infrastructure to build upon. A higher degree of internal coordination and cohesion is apparent – as compared with the other two parties – and makes the party appear a sustainable alternative in the long term.

Generational rifts and obstacles for participation

This problem is especially obvious in the case of the Constitution Party. On the one hand, the party suffers from a lack of horizontal coordination between its committees and a lack of vertical coordination between those committees and the deci-

sion-making body inside the party, represented by its president and the executive committee. The lack of structured communication and mechanisms for participation has led to generational conflicts between older leaders at the top and the youth in the ranks. Rather than enriching the party, generational pluralism is thus threatening to become a liability that is harming its cohesion. In early January 2013, a considerable number of youth members staged a sit-in inside the main party office in Cairo to request changes in the party leadership. Holding early elections for youth leaders in local party chapters, thereby guaranteeing a higher degree of youth participation at the base of the party structure was another major demand.

On the other hand, the revolutionary and sometimes individualistic attitudes of some of the youth have contributed to this rift. They still refuse to accept adherence to formal structures and hierarchical decision-making. Political education of the youth would help to establish a balance between internal democracy and discipline within new parties. It would also help to form future youth leaders with progressive and realistic political views rather than merely revolutionary and sometimes utopian visions.

In contrast, there are no visible signs of a generational rift within Strong Egypt. This is due to the party's more solid organizational structures, which guarantee the presence of internal mechanisms for participation. This is done, for example, by holding workshops for the party's members in almost all the governorates to listen and interact before taking major decisions. This was the case before the party announced its decision in early March 2013 to participate in the next parliamentary elections. Furthermore, the absence of political figures from the older generation – other than Abul Futuh – facilitated the presentation of youth in leadership positions. They are thus present in large numbers in all decision-making bodies, such as the party's political bureau.

Internal struggles and currents

Strong Egypt in particular has been struggling with internal differences caused by the presence of two distinct currents within the party. The first current is constituted by the revolutionary youth, who have politically progressive views and clearly oppose the current rulers. The other current is politically more conservative and therefore less willing to take positions against the current rule. This second current can be differentiated into three categories: former members of the Muslim Brotherhood who still have social ties to the organization and are inclined to adopt its positions; those who were never part of the Brotherhood but who have familial or social ties with the organization; and, finally, people who just prefer to adopt politically conservative positions in the hope that they lead to more stability in the country. These differences endanger the cohesion of the party, something that became obvious in the crisis over the constitutional declaration and the constitutional referendum. Two-thirds of the party rejected the constitution, causing weeks of infighting and several defections. Achieving that percentage was the result of the youth leaders' huge efforts at persuasion among party members in Cairo and the governorates. Their main arguments were that this constitution would not guarantee social and economic rights and would institutionalize the army's interference in politics.

Certainly, the party's good organizational mechanisms and structure of internal democracy has helped to decrease internal tensions. However, the party needs to work out a strategy for a political education program for its members. Such a program will help them to reformulate their ideas and express clearer visions – and to form a more coherent membership.

The problem of opposing political and ideological orientations is liable to occur within the Popular Current as well. Since the movement accepts members of other political parties and movements, conflicts regarding loyalties are certain to arise once

that party adopts a line or positions that the Popular Current opposes. In the long term, this problem may harm the sustainability of the movement. Moreover, double membership makes it difficult to estimate the real strength of the movement, because there is no definite way to assess where primary loyalties lie.

The challenge of age composition

The lack of middle-age cadres is in itself a challenge. For one, this compromises the organizations' capacities to field a sufficient amount of candidates in parliamentary elections who have viable chances to win seats, which requires a certain amount of social capital and experience. To remedy this problem, one of the strategies that the Strong Egypt party might possibly adopt in the next parliamentary elections is the co-optation of public figures who share the same stances as the party to compete in its name.

Finally, it is important to mention that if the decision of the Constitution Party and the Popular Current to boycott the upcoming elections remains unchanged, it will influence the future shape of those organizations. The Popular Current would probably remain a protest movement that lacks leverage in terms of participation in formal politics. Boycotting the elections would be a missed opportunity for the Constitution Party, in particular in terms of forming and developing the potential of its youth to perform in future elections. The decision to participate in local elections or not will determine whether the party moves further into formal politics, or moves toward becoming a protest movement. In contrast, Strong Egypt's participation in the elections will help it to integrate itself further into the formal political process. Its use of street politics will therefore be subject to different calculations. Certainly, this decision will help it to develop future candidates from the youth.

Conclusion and recommendations

The dynamism of highly mobilized youth offers an opportunity for the creation of new leadership and alternatives to Egypt's old parties and movements. However, in order to consolidate themselves, the new youth-dominated political parties need to develop their internal structures and their cadres alike. European policy-makers and civil society institutions can facilitate this task through several measures.

Technical knowledge and capacity-building: European civil society organizations should offer Egyptian youth leaders technical knowledge regarding the structuring and management of democratic parties. Organizational skills are urgently needed to build efficient structures. Also, support related to the know-how of reaching out to society and building grassroots is of great importance. Training related to the most-efficient way for holding election campaigns is no less important.

Political education and programmatic support: Training courses reserved for politically educating youth leaders and forming political cadres with clear programmatic visions would be very helpful. In particular, exchanges between political parties in Europe (as well as their European umbrella organizations) and their Egyptian counterparts should be encouraged.

Electoral environment: Egypt has asked the EU to monitor its upcoming parliamentary elections. Dialogue and consultation with the Egyptian government, while the preparations for parliamentary elections are ongoing, would be opportune. Above all, such talks should encourage the Egyptian leadership to initiate a dialogue with the opposition in order to generate a minimum of consensus concerning the democratic process. In a polarized society such as in today's Egypt, such a consensus would be crucial for holding elections in a healthy environment.

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