Effects of the Religious Factor on Socio-Political and Economic Processes in Egypt

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Abstract: This article analyzes influence of the religious factor in the political processes in Egypt, new approaches in Egypt's policy on religion, social and economic factors that caused revolutions and outcomes of the "Arab Spring".

Keywords: religious factor, political factor, revolution, the "Arab Spring", political processes, domestic and foreign policy, social problems, "Muslim Brotherhood".

African Arab countries claim that the fundamental basis of the political changes that have occurred and are still ongoing is related to the critical socio-economic life. International press, as usual, emphasizes that the 2011 Egyptian revolution was caused by economic stagnation, inequality, poverty, corruption, unemployment, food shortages and other factors.

However, the official data shows the completely different lay of the land. For example, GDP increased 4.5 times between 1981 and 2011, especially after the economic reforms that began in 2004, the growth was high. Unemployment rate was around 8%, and started to decline further from 2010. Egypt ranked 98 out of 178 countries in the world in terms of the extent of corruption in the country. Also, with an unemployment rate of 9% in the country Egypt had the advantage over other countries like the United States and France, where the rates were at 9.6 percent and 9.3 percent respectively, while it was 20 percent in Spain and 15.4 percent in Pakistan. In this context Egypt was somewhere in the average rate, in any case, and had better figures than the former soviet countries including Russia. If corruption was the only reason for revolution, then it would have happened in all countries of Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe. Out of 145 countries in the inequality rate, Egypt ranked 120, that is, in 119 states, including France, Spain, the United States, China, and Russia, the figure was higher and only 23 countries had better results. Of course, Egypt could not challenge the Scandinavian countries in this regard. In terms of poverty, admittedly, 40 percent of Egyptians lived on less than two US dollars a day. But by the international standards people who live on 1.25 US dollars a day are regarded as poorest part of population. In this regard, the Egyptian indicator is very high. One can argue that Hosni Mubarak was the one who solved this problem [1].

It has also been proven that some positive achievements in the social sphere can also play a negative role. For Example, during Hosni Mubarak's rule, mortality, especially child mortality in Egypt fell sharply. It should be noted that since 1990 the unemployment rate had not changed, but the ratio of young people among them had doubled, in particular, 20-24-year-olds comprised one million out of 2.5 million in total. Another fact is that 43 percent of unemployed young people had higher education [2]. So, the main power of revolution was the unemployed young people with higher education.

From the above points, it can be clearly argued that Egypt was an active participant in international relations, a state that maintained a stable situation within the country, whose economic indicators were persistently growing. There are direct (obvious) and hidden (latent) reasons that led to the transformation of the Egyptian political system.

The first group includes, of course, open or direct reasons that led to the instability of the country. In the Arab East, it is also true for Egypt that revolutions are organized by young people with radical views through social networks and the Internet. The youth of Egypt, who observed the processes of democratization and liberalization ongoing in the world, had been dissatisfied with the environment in their country. As using new information and communication technologies by the public becoming more popular in the country, it made the network out of control. For example, by 2005, there were 180,000 active blogs in Egypt, which means that these networks accounted for 40 percent of all blogs in Arabic [3]. Young bloggers used social media to attract the public to the involvement in protests. On YouTube and Facebook, Egyptian youth called for not being indifferent to the political

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future of the country and actively participate in the power transformation. The increase in birth rates in the Middle East and North Africa, including Egypt between 1985 and 1990, and the increase in the proportion of young people in the demographic structure of the population by the period of revolutions ensured the widespread involvement of young people in these mass protests.

Mass demonstrations in Egypt did not take place from different corners but through organized arrangements of the youth wing of "Muslim Brotherhood". From the first days of the revolution in Egypt, its political perspective in the near future began to become clear, that is, there were direct claims of "Muslim Brotherhood" to power. In other Arab states that experienced revolutions after the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak regime, there was no organization like "Muslim Brotherhood", which was so close to achieving power and with strong support among the public.

Another obvious reason is a state of emergency which Hosni Mubarak introduced in the country in 1981. Egyptians had been living in a state of semi-war for more than 30 years. In addition to that, by amending the Constitution in 2007, the government prohibited the involvement of religious parties in the politics, leading to depression and the public's distrust of the ruling class. Bureaucratic control over the ideological and political environment in the country created stagnation not only in political but also in cultural life[4]. The continuous pressure in the country also negatively affected voter turnout in elections, with only 28 percent of voters participating in the 2005 Parliamentary elections and 24 percent in the Presidential elections[5]. These indicators showed that not only passive participation of the country's population in political life was taking shape, but also protest against the current regime in almost all social classes of the population, and this protest would arise one day.

The difficult situation mentioned above was worsened by the global financial and economic crisis that occurred between 2008 and 2009. Egypt's diversified economy also suffered from a decline in economic performance. For example, a decrease in demand for grain products in the world (the region occupies a leading position in the production of grains), a sharp decrease in tourist flows, an increase in the number of illegal workers and immigrants inside and outside the country, and low records of national and foreign investments into the economy aggravated the situation. The controversies also caused the disputes between the ruling class and economically interested groups, not just between the society and the government.

The hidden reasons, which gave impetus to the obvious reasons and led to mass protests and the collapse of the regime, were a continuation of the latter and provoking them. For example, those who challenged Egyptian youth to mass demonstrations against the incumbent regime on the Internet and social media were not the only Egyptian youth themselves. Wael Ghonim, top manager of Google's Middle East Division, said in his interview with Western media that he ran a Facebook page "against the Mubarak regime" and the main goal was the overthrow of the Mubarak regime [6].

We can conditionally divide the population in the Arab states of North Africa into 4 social groups. The first group includes representatives of political power, means the president and those around him, the second group is the military forces which maintain the order and peace in the country. The third one is a group of people highly influenced by European culture and the fourth one is the lower class with conservative views. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria, where color revolutions took place, the most important class that ensured political power and the security of the president was, of course, the second layer – the military. This was a structure that should suppress any public uprising or mass unrest, and the role of the military in politics had been critically crucial in the modern history of Arab states. But as a result of the corruption in most Arab countries, the external influence on the military was easy to impose, which means that the income from corruption had to be kept and hidden outside the country in offshore companies. Considering that all offshore companies and international banks are located in the West, it can be argued that the data is easily used against the owners. The opposition in the countries of the region also sought help from overseas structures in the military resistance [7]. Instead of defending the reigning regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, and fighting against the opposition, the military joined the riots against the ruling authorities. It indicates that the above-mentioned open reasons are associated with hidden ones.

Similar connection can be observed in the actions of the "Muslim Brotherhood". Through the Internet and social networks, Egyptian people were mobilized mostly. But it was difficult for such modern technologies to influence the conservative class of the country and it was time for other mechanisms to be used. The "Muslim Brotherhood" began to call on the most conservative people against the Mubarak regime. The

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demonstrations followed by the overthrow of the Mubarak regime and the fundamentalist-minded "Muslim Brotherhood" came to power replacing the secular government.

The hidden reasons that transformed the political regimes of African Arab countries, in particular Tunisia and Egypt, are associated with the ideas of democratization of the region. The issues of democratization in North Africa were prioritized by foreign powers such as NATO, the European Union, and the United Stated as one of the main directions of their foreign policy. Hence the democratization of the region became difficult due to the resistance in the countries controlled by strong authoritarian regimes. The US proposed "Greater Middle East Initiative" also faced opposition from the leaders of almost all Arab states. Also, the global financial and economic crisis has reduced the regular financing of democratization processes in the region. In particular, the political power and the organized military of Egypt did not let the external powers bring democracy from the outside. Waves of Arab democratization began in the lowest social class and were spread to the higher class. Therefore, the main demands in Arab demonstrations were the fight against authoritarianism, democracy, and human rights. It was time to pave the way for internal uprisings. The movement aimed at improving socio-political life after the events of April 6 became an act of mass political disobedience and the overthrow of the government. The processes of democratization in North Africa and the Middle East were a combination of both internal and external preparations and complex actions, these changes let the Egyptian political opposition come to power.

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi won the presidential election held on May 25, 2014. He also achieved reelection in the presidential elections on March 26-28, 2018, gaining 97.08 percent of the vote. Also, in the parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2015 political parties supported by President Sisi won most of the parliamentary seats in the two chambers of the Parliament. Thus, it can be argued that the presidential, parliamentary, and local elections were dominated by the absolute superiority of the military leadership.

President Sisi's domestic policy cannot be imagined without elements of authoritarianism [7]. The ruling military maintaining authoritarianism is seeking to incorporate the elements of democracy with authoritarian rule, such as formation of a less powerful opposition, ensuring freedom of press and releasing of political dissidents.

Today, the supreme military elite of Egypt has fully taken control of the situation within the country and is maintaining its control over politico-social life. Although the country's political situation today is much worse than it was at the time of the beginning of the revolutions, the military power is gaining a strong position, strengthening its power within the country [8].

Even today, the Egyptian army is ranked one of the strongest and well-organized armies in the Middle East. A factor that further reinforces the position of the Egyptian army is that the military had marginalized "Muslim Brotherhood", the only political power capable of resisting the existing government and had drastically reduced the external financial support for them. Today, the "Muslim Brotherhood" has neither objective nor subjective chance in the political struggle with the Egyptian army [9]. The negative impact of the "Muslim Brotherhood" on the internal stability of the country is not fairly assessed. A part of this organization has abandoned its political goals, another group is carrying out an illegal activity, while some of its other members are pursuing a compromise with the current ruling elite. Regarding the political future of the movement and its subsequent participation in the country's politics, it can be said that the "Muslim Brotherhood" will be operating as a secondary political force seeking for power [10]. According to Russian Orientalist E. Satanovsky, the "Muslim Brotherhood" is no longer using direct and open methods of struggle, but hidden ways. For example, to return the power, they can use the tactic of Islamizing the army, influencing the military through external forces (in particular the oil rich monarchies of the Persian Gulf) and organizing acts of protests and disobedience among citizens" [11].

Today, the main contender in the struggle for the power remains the military leadership. The exclusion of the "Muslim Brotherhood" from the its democratically obtained power, and the achievement of an agreement between the military and fundamentalist groups have revealed the real owners of power in the country. The Egyptian elite did not choose political compromises that satisfy all groups and social classes which was the objective of the revolution, but dissolved the democratically elected parliament and established Mubarak style regime. Liberal and Islamist forces in Egypt realized that the military would never give up power easily. This created uncertainties to determine not only internal political directions but also foreign policy objectives.

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When it comes to the Egyptian political future, the question of its internal stability and the integrity of society matter. One of the main elements of the integrity of society is the formation of civil government. But in Egypt, no group struggling for power is willing to raise this question. Free democratic elections could also be the first step towards Egyptian democratization. However, the real situation shows that only authoritarian or military leaders or both authoritarian and military leaders can be in power.

The map of modern North Africa shows that the military, coming to power in Egypt, gets always used to hold their power. E. Satanovsky noted that "in Egypt, the Algerian scenario can be repeated" [12]. According to him, the Islamist governments that came to power by overthrowing the military in the neighboring country can help Islamist groups in Egypt.

The economic situation of the country is also poor. Egypt is increasingly becoming dependent on external aid and intervention. Out of 36 billion USD gold and currency reserves of the country cumulated during Mubarak's reign, 21 billion USD have been wasted during revolutions. Without large financial investments in the Egyptian economy, it is impossible to solve the problem. But. Egypt's 80 million population can not be provided by either the United States or Saudi Arabia [13].

To date, the prospect of Egyptian-US relations remains unclear. But now it can be said that the military government does not maintain the status of the United States as the most important foreign partner of as before. It can be predicted that because the military remains in power, Egypt will implement a multi-vector and multi-actor policy. The loss of the US position in recent years in the region, in particular in Egypt, indicates a new formation of the balance of power in this region and the introduction of new rules.

Today in the Middle East, not only the United States but also the Russian Federation is involved in the division of new spheres of influence. While the situation that was formed in the region secured Russia's minimal participation in this region, however the change in the situation today, in particular, the multi-vector direction in which Egyptian foreign policy is being formed, creates opportunities for Russia to stay in the region. According to Russian scientists, "Russia can acquire a serious partner, even if it is not an ally in the example of Egypt" [14]. The military government in Egypt showed that it pursued a pragmatic policy. In order to maintain its power, the military realized that it was obliged to implement multilateral policies between global powers [15].

Egypt's regional policy in the near future is also one of the most important areas. The difficult situation in neighboring countries with Egypt may result in negative outcomes in different directions. For example, it is difficult for Egypt to establish a border as strong as before for illegal immigrants from Tunisia and Libya. Illegal immigrants from African countries can become a major problem for European and Persian Gulf monarchies with high standards of living. This situation can further entangle Egypt's difficult relations with European countries, as well as with the countries of the Persian Gulf.

Today, when determining the internal political directions of Egypt, the following special aspects should be taken into account:
• in internal political order, first of all, it is necessary to take into account the mood and interests of various groups within the country;
• the Islamic factor has become more actual than ever, and Islamization is becoming common in the political life of Egypt;
• groups within the country will be forced to come to a compromise with external forces and find a golden mean between their national interests and the interests of external forces;
• The weakening of the Egyptian economy during the revolution requires that the authorities make concessions to external forces and pursue a multilateral policy;
• introduction of democratic reforms and liberal values in order to eliminate the disappointment of those who opposed to the current regime;
• in domestic politics, the military remains the main power that maintains order and unites society.

The following factors are important to determine the foreign policy of Egypt:
• Based on the specific position Egypt holds in the region, disputes within the country will be more likely to spread to neighboring countries and neighboring regions as well;
• the main aspect of the country's foreign policy is determined by conducting a multi-vector policy between regional and international powers;

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• to use tactics and maintain regional balance within the Republic that are not fully inclined in any external force in foreign policy to stop the actions of lobbying their interests by external forces;

• to reduce the level of Islamic radicalization and to combat any help coming from abroad to reach that goal.

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