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TO ADAPT? FLUID CONJUNCTURES AND REGIME
TRANSFORMATIONS IN PERSPECTIVE

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*Egypt in 2011: a regime that no longer knows how to adapt?
Fluid Conjunctures and Regime Transformations in Perspective.*

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Abstract

The popular uprising that took place in Egypt in January and February 2011 may eventually lead to regime change. Whatever the end result of the ongoing process, however, the theories of *authoritarian consolidation* – which view the capacity of a political regime to adapt to a changing environment as key to its durability – provide an interesting framework to analyze the process of crisis of early 2011. The work conducted by Michel Camau on Tunisia's authoritarian regime and its transformations in the 1980s, in particular, is worth being considered and put in perspective with the recent developments in Egypt. It underlines how factors of a different nature can combine and create a *fluid conjuncture* to which political actors – regime leaders included – may find it difficult to adapt.

The Egyptian context of January 2011 can be viewed as one of these critical moments of political fluidity in which transformation or rupture are at stake for the regime, depending on the capacity of its leadership to adapt. The prospect of the presidential succession is seen as a window of opportunity for changing the balance of power within the political system. The social effects of liberal economic policies and the growing political awareness of youth have led to major social transformations. Growing tensions within and between the main institutions of the regime have progressively undermined the ruling elite's cohesion.

Because it takes place in such a critical conjuncture, the *multisectorial mobilization* of early 2011 contributes to the blurring of the leadership's calculations and capacity to adapt. The regime undergoes a process of fracture and disintegration whose eventual result remains unclear.

Keywords

consolidation of authoritarian regimes, political crisis, fluid conjunctures, succession, social mobilization, regime transformation

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Despite the change in power that took place in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011¹, the Arab Spring has not rendered theories of *authoritarian consolidation* irrelevant. That concept, developed by French political scientist Michel Camau throughout his work on Tunisia under Bourguiba and Ben Ali², has been particularly useful to understand the dynamics of authoritarian regimes that, when confronted by a risk of breakdown, manage to consolidate themselves through a series of transformations, enabling them to adapt to changing circumstances and to increase the efficiency of their control over their societies. Camau's analysis came as an illustration of one basic principle of political anthropology according to which "particular political structures live or die according to whether they can remain compatible with their cultural and natural environment, either by making themselves suitable to it or by modifying it to suit them."³ In the 2000s, building upon this assumption, political scientists working on the Arab world have tried to identify the various means that have allowed Arab regimes to adapt to their environment and subsequently ensure their durability.⁴

When demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt resulted in the toppling of Ben Ali and Mubarak, some analysts were very quick to challenge the validity of *consolidation theories*, arguing that both regimes had indeed been gradually weakening, and that it was only a matter of time before they would collapse. Yet the two arguments are not contradictory, nor irreconcilable, as illustrated by the Egyptian case.⁵ First, because it's still too early to judge whether the former regime has completely collapsed under the blows of the protest movement – the "revolution" eventually giving rise to a new regime – or whether, despite the beheading of the former regime, what analysts call the *deep state*⁶ has

¹ The case of Yemen, where President Saleh was eventually forced to cede power to his vice-President following an agreement for political transition concluded under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council, doesn't wholly lend itself to the comparison.

² See in particular CAMAU, Michel and GEISSER, Vincent, *Le syndrome autoritaire. Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2003. On the concept of *authoritarian consolidation*, see also BOUTALEB, Assia, FERRIE, Jean-Noël and REY, Benjamin (coord.), *L'autoritarisme dans le monde arabe. Autour de Michel Camau et Luis Martinez*, Le Caire, CEDEJ, 2005. The work of Jason Brownlee is also particularly interesting in this regard. He notably insists on the importance of political *institutions* in processes of consolidation. His analysis (which includes comparisons with Malaysia, the Philippines and Iran) and the role of the Egyptian ruling party in maintaining the cohesion of the ruling elite is particularly valuable. See BROWNLEE, Jason, *Authoritarianism in an age of democratization*, Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007; BROWNLEE, "Ruling parties and regime persistence: explaining durable authoritarianism in the third wave era", The University of Texas at Austin, 2005, available at <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/pjwoods/brownleebrownbag.pdf>.

³ BAILEY, Frederick George, *Stratagems and Spoils: A Social Anthropology of Politics*, Boulder, Colo., Westview Press, 2001, p. 10.

⁴ See for instance SCHLUMBERGER, Olivier (ed.), *Debating Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007; GUAZZONE, Laura et PLOPPI, Daniela, *The Arab State and Neo-liberal Globalization: the Restructuring of State Power in the Middle East*, Reading, Ithaca Press, 2009. On Egypt, see FERRIE, Jean-Noël, *L'Égypte entre démocratie et islamisme. Le système Moubarak à l'heure de la succession*, Paris, Autrement, 2008.

⁵ This article will focus on Egypt, where the new political arrangements – still under construction – have raised the most questions about whether the former regime has really collapsed.

⁶ This notion, invented in Turkey, refers to a secret parallel government that is said to be organized by the military and intelligence apparatuses, funded by drug trafficking, and that undertakes violent and illegal operations in view of preserving the status and the interests of the army against the threat supposedly constituted by the intellectuals, the religious or even the constitutional government. It has been used very often to comment on the situation in Egypt since February 2011. See for instance EL-SHERIF, Ashraf, "The 'secret group' ruling Egypt, the deep state and its collapse", in *Egypt Independent*, 25 January 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/617826>, or CHOUKRI-FISHERE,

remained mostly untouched. Second, and perhaps more importantly, because even if we consider that Egypt has completed its revolution, the processes and mechanisms described by Camau remain relevant for understanding what happened during the political crisis of early 2011.

The *mutations of authoritarianism* that Camau analyzed in Tunisia – in particular those which opened the way for Ben Ali to succeed Bourguiba in 1987 – came in a context characterized by political *fluidity*, to borrow Michel Dobry's concept of *fluid conjunctures*.⁷ They proceeded from the combination of two sets of variables, the social and the political – divisions in the leadership, social transformations and *multisectorial mobilizations*⁸ – that led to a process of decomposition and recomposition of the power system, with a new distribution of roles among actors. At the end of the process, however, despite a discontinuity of forms, the permanence of the system has to be acknowledged, and hence the structuring of a *new authoritarianism*.

If the endgame of the events that shook Egypt between December 2010 and February 2011 seems to be quite different from the Tunisian experience of mobilizations in the 1980s, a closer look at the process enables us to identify some interesting similarities between the two. In both cases the prospect of the leader's succession, social transformation, divisions within the ruling coalition and multisectorial mobilizations were the main ingredients of crises that could lead to a transformation in the system, but not inevitably to rupture. In Egypt however, in the *critical conjuncture* of the beginning of 2011, the regime may have proven incapable to adapt. While it is certainly too early to reach a definitive opinion on this point, Camau's analysis of the process of regime consolidation in Tunisia is valuable; it helps us identify the main factors of a major crisis, and how those various factors might combine and lead to the destructuring and restructuring of the system. Considering that the durability and survival of a regime depend on its capacity to adapt in moments of *fluidity*, it is in our interest to try to understand in which particular context(s) and because of which actors' behavior, slippage can occur and cause the regime's failure.

* * *

At the beginning of 2011, the situation in Egypt had much in common with the situation described by Camau in Tunisia in the mid-1980s. This was structured around four main elements: 1) the prospect of the succession of the leader, 2) the increasingly sensitive effects of the major social transformations that had taken place over the previous years, 3) the growing divisions within the ruling elite, 4) mobilization that affected different spheres of society, becoming "multisectorial".⁹ Those four factors are to combine, creating a *fluid conjuncture* likely to lead to political crisis and, eventually, to a transformation of the system.

The prospect of the succession of the leader

The presidential succession constituted a critical moment in itself. It is certainly one crucial structural element of the crisis which was about to unfold in that it offered an opportunity for a new distribution of roles within the political system. Within the regime, throughout the previous years, competing groups and factions had started to emerge – more or less openly – and competing strategies had been developed with a view to take the best possible advantage of the future change at the top of the state: some wanted to ensure that they would be in the right camp when the battle for the succession ended; some tried to act in order to prevent realization of what they considered the most unacceptable scenario. Within the opposition, the prospect of the succession was seen as a major challenge and an

(Contd.)

Ezzedine, "Wadâ'ân li-hukm al-'askar" ("Goodbye to military rule"), in *Al-Tahrir*, 20 December 2011, <http://tahrirnews.com/اعادو/تالاقم/ركسعل-امكحل/>.

⁷ DOBRY, Michel, *Sociologie des Crises Politiques: la Dynamique des Mobilisations Multisectorielles*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences politiques, 1992.

⁸ This concept (translated from the French "mobilisations multisectorielles") is borrowed from Michel Dobry's work. See Dobry, op. cit.

⁹ The scope of the mobilization in Egypt in 2011 is not comparable to that of 1987 in Tunisia, however.

opportunity for weak and isolated movements to gain legitimacy and support among citizens, and to change the balance of power within the system.

The presidential succession had been prepared for almost a decade by Hosni Mubarak and part of his entourage, mostly by using the presidential party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), and attempting to transform it into a coherent and efficient organization that could be used by Gamal Mubarak, the President's younger son, as the main instrument of his strategy for gaining power.¹⁰ Here it is interesting to note the emphasis put by the leaders of a state of exception to the rule of law: throughout the 2000s everything had been done to develop a succession process that would take place in compliance with clear constitutional and legal rules, previously put forward and thus not to be challenged on the grounds that they were set up to achieve any particular purpose. The constitutional amendments of 2005 and 2007, as well as the changes introduced in the NDP internal regulations also in 2007, could notably be read in that perspective.¹¹ That strategy undoubtedly had its gaps and faults, but it would be wrong to say that it was inevitably due to fail. It had largely been conceived and implemented by a group of very capable and clever people – mostly businessmen, experts in international finance and academics – and since it focused on winning elections through a restructured and re-legitimized party, it could well have been seen as meeting the “requirements” of foreign partners (essentially the United States, and to a lesser extent Europe) and international organizations, in terms of “democratization”.

Yet as the years passed, doubts continued to increase about the chances of success of such a strategy. First, because the very process of building a “real” political party that could serve as a support base for Gamal and enable him to do well in the elections was strewn with obstacles: notably a strong internal resistance on the part of a number of party leaders, especially at the local level; and the damaging effects on the citizens of the economic policies promoted by the party and implemented by its strong men in government. Second, because the – almost exclusive – focus put on acting through the party proved clumsy when the latter, in spite of its reinforced role within the political system, remained a relatively weak institution compared to others, such as the Presidency or the Armed forces, which were, incidentally, seen as increasingly opposed to the idea of Gamal Mubarak becoming President. Third, because the idea of the presidential succession being arranged by the father for his son had stirred anger and opposition on the part of a growing number of citizens. Already in 2005, hundreds had gathered in central Cairo to protest against the “heritage” (“*tawrih*”) scenario. The opposition obviously gained ground and momentum from then. Yet, while the presidential election was scheduled for the autumn of 2011, it remained unclear earlier in the year whether Hosni Mubarak would run once more time for president or whether his son Gamal would eventually be the one to run. The scenario remained unclear, as though the regime's top leaders were willing to keep all options open to them.

On 1 February 2011, almost one week after huge protests began in Cairo and Alexandria, Hosni Mubarak demonstrated the central character of the succession issue in his first address to the nation. One of the first decisions he announced was that he would not be a candidate in the next

¹⁰ For an in-depth analysis of this strategy, see COLLOMBIER, Virginie, “*Le Parti sera-t-il la solution? Le Parti National démocratique égyptien, instrument de conquête du pouvoir dans un régime en transition*”, PhD dissertation, 2010, University of Grenoble.

¹¹ The constitution amendments of 2005 opened the way for the first direct presidential election in which several candidates would compete. Officially, the constitutional amendments of 2007 aimed at fulfilling four main objectives: 1) to make citizenship the basis for political participation; 2) to ensure a more balanced re-partition of powers within the executive, by limiting some of the presidential prerogatives; 3) to ensure a more balanced re-partition of powers between the executive and the legislative; 4) to reinforce the role of parties in political life. In particular, the amended version of article 76 made it easier for parties to field a candidate for the presidential election. In reality, the main objective of the reform for the Egyptian leaders was less to “democratize” the system than to ensure that they would keep control over it. Through the amendments, they expected: 1) to restore their control over the elections (by putting an end to the full judicial supervision of the vote); 2) to eliminate the threat constituted by the Muslim Brotherhood (the ban on political activities based on religion was widened); 3) to help legitimize the “legal” opposition parties. The internal regulations of the NDP were amended the same year so as to clarify the process for selecting the party's presidential candidate, while stating that the potential candidates should come from specific instances of the party.

election: “My primary responsibility now is security and independence of the nation to ensure a peaceful transfer of power in circumstances that protect Egypt and the Egyptians and allow handing over responsibility to whoever the people choose in the coming presidential election. I say in all honesty and regardless of the current situation that I did not intend to nominate myself for a new presidential term. I have spent enough years of my life in the service of Egypt and its people.”¹² The violence that occurred the day after, orchestrated by some of his supporters, removed any faith in his declarations and fueled new demonstrations.¹³

Major social transformations

The economy had been the main focus of the strategy of reform implemented by the Mubaraks from 2002 onwards. When he introduced his son and some of his closest associates to the highest echelons of the ruling NDP in the early 2000s, President Mubarak had one major objective in mind; the economy was in urgent need for reform and new people with new ideas had therefore to be given responsibility in that field. Gamal Mubarak and a number of successful businessmen, as well as experts in international finance, were therefore invited to join the party’s General Secretariat and, soon after, they were offered ministerial positions in the fields of economy, trade and finance.¹⁴ The entry of these men into politics was reflected in the rapid implementation of liberal policies that aimed at promoting growth; Gamal Mubarak and his associates expected that positive results would be credited to them, their popularity would increase, and this would translate into electoral gains. Yet, if the growth rate reached 7 % in 2006-2007 and if Egypt’s macroeconomic results were lauded by international institutions, most Egyptian citizens did not feel any positive impact from those results on their daily lives. On the contrary, the “trickle-down effect” on which the NDP experts had based their whole economic strategy was yet to come. Since no significant social measure had been implemented to accompany liberal reforms, the NDP-promoted policies instead had a devastating impact on a major part of the population. Already in 2007, a local leader of the NDP argued: “the people don’t feel the difference in their daily lives; all the economic indicators are better, but they don’t feel it.”¹⁵ Official reports published in 2011 confirmed that situation. These show that from 2005 onwards, only 10 % of the population benefited from economic growth. Most Egyptians (notably peasants, workers from the industrial sector, office workers, employees in the informal sector) were left out of growth, while the gap between the rich and the poor widened. The same report indicates that the percentage of “poor people” (i.e. persons living on less than 2 \$ per day) increased from 19.6 % of the population in 2004-2005 to 21.6 % in 2008-2009.¹⁶ In such a context, protest movements were on the increase from the

¹² Hosni Mubarak’s address to the nation, 1 February 2011. Full transcript available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/02/president-hosni-mubarak-egypt-speech>.

¹³ On February 2, thugs using horses and camels attacked protesters gathered on Tahrir Square. Some NDP officials were immediately accused of being behind those events, known as the “Battle of the camel”. Investigations later confirmed that suspicion.

¹⁴ In July 2004, for instance, Yûsuf Butros Ghâlî (Finance), Mahmûd Muhyî al-Dîn (Investment) and Rashîd Muhammad Rashîd (Foreign Trade and Industry) joined the first Cabinet headed by Prime Minister Ahmad Nazîf. Born in 1952, Butros Ghâlî holds a PhD in Economics from MIT. He worked for the IMF until 1986. Back in Egypt, he became economic adviser to the Prime minister and the governor of the Central Bank. From 1993 onwards, he occupied several ministerial positions in the field of the economy. Born in 1965, Mahmûd Muhyî al-Dîn studied Economics at Cairo University before getting his PhD from Warwick University in 1995. Back in Egypt, he started working as an adviser to the Minister of the Economy. He joined the NDP General Secretariat in December 2001. Rashîd Muhammad Rashîd belongs to an influential business family from Alexandria. He studied management in the United States and was a member of the board of several big companies, such as Unilever Egypt.

¹⁵ Interview with the author, 30 August 2007.

¹⁶ According to a report published by the Egyptian National Agency for Statistics (CAPMAS) in September 2011. See www.capmas.gov.eg/pepo%5C65_e.doc.

mid-2000s; the strike of the al-Mahalla¹⁷ workers in December 2006 played the role of catalyst, the phenomenon extended significantly in 2007-2008 and continued until the events of January and February 2011.¹⁸

Social transformation in the 2000s was not only the result of the economic policies implemented by the government. It was also shown in a growing awareness on the part of young people, especially from the upper and middle classes, that they would have to take their destiny into their own hands and become active politically if there was to be any chance of preventing the President's son coming to power. Considering that one in five Egyptians is between the age of 15 and 24 and that half of the population is below the age of 25,¹⁹ the phenomenon was significant. As a matter of fact, at the end of the 2000s, a new generation of activists was in the process of being born. In 2008, a group of activists created the April 6 Youth Movement. A coalition of opposition groups, the movement came to life in the form of a Facebook group calling for a national strike in support of al-Mahalla workers. In 2010, it also played an important role in supporting Muhammad al-Baradei's campaign "Together we will change".²⁰ Yet the youth engaged in organized political groups or parties were a minority; most of them did not belong to any organization, they were simply realizing step by step that they should make their voices heard if they wanted things to change.

These young people were to play a crucial role in triggering the demonstrations of January 2011; they were the main driving force behind the popular mobilization that began around the call to demonstrate on National Police Day, January 25.

Growing divisions within the ruling elite

By the beginning of 2011, the Egyptian regime had entered a process of internal crisis of which only some aspects were already visible. The most recent and obvious source of tension had been the organization – and the results – of the parliamentary elections of November/December 2010, which had affected the internal cohesion of the presidential party. The NDP won a landslide victory in those elections, obtaining 420 seats out of a total of 508. The legal opposition parties were not able to secure more than 15 seats, while the Muslim Brotherhood, which had won 88 seats in 2005, secured only one. The 70 remaining seats were officially won by "independent" candidates, and the majority of these re-joined the NDP immediately after the elections. Such results inevitably provoked an outcry in the opposition and within some segments of the population (especially among the middle classes). Yet criticism also came from the ranks of the presidential party itself, at all levels of the organization, including its highest echelons. As a matter of fact, before the elections, several members of the General Secretariat had raised concerns that a too large victory of the NDP might undermine the party's credibility at a decisive moment, and might therefore have serious consequences for the future. Their calls for caution were not taken into consideration, however. NDP General Secretary Safwat al-Shirif and Organization Secretary Ahmad 'Izz, a close associate of Gamal Mubarak, refused to refrain from fielding candidates in a number of constituencies – as suggested by other members of the General Secretariat – as a way to ensure fair representation for the legal opposition.²¹ On the contrary, they decided that several candidates would be officially allowed to run for the same seat in the name of the party. After the announcement of the election results, several party officials openly attacked Ahmad 'Izz, whom they accused of destroying the organization, while the latter attempted to justify

¹⁷ Al-Mahalla al-Kubra is a large industrial and agricultural city located in the middle of the Nile Delta. It is known for its dominant textile industry. It is in particular home to the largest public sector Egyptian textile company, the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company, employing 27,000 persons.

¹⁸ On this topic, see the work of Marie Duboc or Joel Beinin.

¹⁹ Source: United Nations Population Division, 2010. See <http://www.prb.org/Articles/2011/youth-egypt-revolt.aspx>.

²⁰ The campaign aimed at collecting 1 million signatures for a petition demanding, notably, the end of the state of emergency, enabling judicial oversight and independent monitoring of elections, giving expatriate Egyptians the right to vote, and putting a two-term limit on the presidency.

²¹ *Idem*.

himself by publishing a series of articles in daily newspapers.²² By the end of 2010, this episode only served to confirm the existence of increasing tensions within the ruling party. Analysts had spent much time, from 2005 onwards, commenting on what they initially saw as a conflict between the “old guard” and the “new guard” of the party.²³ Yet cleavages seem to have followed more subtle lines after 2007. The divide between “conservatives” and “reformers”, often used to describe the situation within the party, had gradually reduced, revealing several circles within the organization, each distinguishing itself from the others mainly according to its degree of proximity and/or allegiance to Gamal Mubarak, and by the methods they seemed ready to use in order to gain power.²⁴

The underlying conflicts within the ruling elite were not confined to the ruling party, however. The tensions perceptible in the organization may well have appeared to be minor problems when compared to the relative importance of that institution in the overall political system. By choosing the NDP as the main instrument of their strategy for ensuring a smooth presidential succession, the Mubaraks had certainly failed to take sufficiently into account the institutional balance within the regime (notably between the party, the presidency and the army), and that excluding the army from the decision-making process on important issues would be difficult. By entrusting to new NDP leaders close to Gamal Mubarak the responsibility to develop (within the NDP Policies Secretariat) and implement (in government) new economic policies heavily influenced by liberal theories and promoted by the international financial institutions, Hosni Mubarak had opened the door for possible conflict within the ruling coalition. As early as 2004, the new Prime Minister Nazif and his team had understood that they would be faced with a significant opposition, notably from the military, which continued to exert a strong influence on the President, because of its deep involvement in the economy and its role as the guarantor of national security. Even though the reforms implemented by the government from 2004 onwards had not really threatened the military’s interests,²⁵ it was reported by the media that, at least on two occasions in 2007, the government was called to order by Defense Ministry Field Marshal Tantawí, who opposed the privatization of public companies considered to be strategic, arguing that this would be contrary to the national interest.²⁶ From that time onwards, conflict continued to increase between Defense and Intelligence officials on the one side and Gamal Mubarak’s men on the other, but it remained mostly hidden to outside observers. Gradually, however, as was recently reflected in the diplomatic cables revealed by Wikileaks, significant signals suggested that the military was opposed to Gamal, and that in case Hosni Mubarak were to die before the end of his mandate, the military would seize power rather than let the son succeed his father.²⁷ Moreover, rumors about a possible coup had begun to circulate as early as 2007.²⁸

²² On 24 December 2011, ‘Izz notably began writing a series of articles in the English-language daily Ahram Online in which he aimed to justify the NDP’s overwhelming victory in the elections. See for instance <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/2550.aspx> for the first article of that series.

²³ On the situation within the party in 2005, see COLLOMBIER, Virginie, “The internal stakes of 2005 elections: struggle for influence and transactions within the National Democratic Party”, in *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 61, no. 1, Winter 2007, pp. 95-111.

²⁴ For details on the NDP at the eve of the revolution, see COLLOMBIER, Virginie, “Gamal Moubarak et le Parti national démocratique, ou la stratégie du désastre”, in *Outre-Terre. Revue européenne de géopolitique*, Paris, 2011/3, n° 29, http://www.cairn.info/resume.php?ID_ARTICLE=OUTE_029_0333.

²⁵ The former generals still enjoy wide access to the highest echelons of the administration and to the public sector – notably in transport and public works companies – when they retire; they are still in charge of the ministerial positions related to their fields of intervention; their economic activities are mainly concentrated in sectors that have not been really affected by the reforms implemented (the most important evolution took place in sectors such as telecommunications and finance).

²⁶ At the time, the two companies at stake were the Eastern Company for Tobacco and the Bank of Cairo. More recently, other examples, even more significant, have come to the fore. For more details on this issue, see ACLIMANDOS, Tewfik, “L’armée égyptienne, ultime garant de la pérennité du régime”, in BOURRAT, Flavien (dir.), *La place et le rôle des armées dans le monde arabe contemporain*, Paris, La Documentation Française, coll. “Les Champs de Mars”, n°23, April 2012.

²⁷ See cable 08CAIRO2091 of 23 September 2008.

²⁸ See cable 07CAIRO974 of 4 April 2007.

In such a context, conflict between the armed forces and the president could be expected if the latter were seen to give too much importance to Gamal's inheritance of power. According to a senior NDP leader, "Hosni Mubarak and his entourage were convinced that the army would protect the regime, that they would keep order". Yet it was obvious that they would not, because the army "is attached to legitimacy", but in the sense of "border security" and "preservation of the Republic". Now, "in the eyes of his former brothers in arms, by insisting so much on transmitting power to his son, Hosni Mubarak had betrayed the Republic he was supposed to defend. Hence he was not entitled to protection".²⁹

Multisectorial mobilizations

The 2000s were marked by a rise and a multiplication of protest movements in Egypt. Initially focused on foreign-policy issues (notably support to Palestine and opposition to the war in Iraq in 2003), demonstrations gradually moved to the field of domestic politics and to a direct expression of opposition to the regime.³⁰ The organization of the first direct presidential election between several candidates in 2005 provided an opportunity for the Egyptian opposition to build a platform for protest against Hosni Mubarak's presidency and the possibility that he might transfer power to his son Gamal. Born in the summer of 2004, the Egyptian Movement for Change ("*Kefaya*") attracted much attraction in the course of the following year, organizing protests and demonstrations that were often brutally suppressed by the security forces. Yet the movement never managed to extend significantly beyond the limited segment of the Cairo middle-classes out of which it was born. Focusing on particular political demands (notably constitutional change) that didn't really make sense to ordinary citizens, it remained very weak and isolated. As a result, by 2006, the security forces had managed to repress the movement, using force against the demonstrators and arresting many of the movement's leaders. A second wave of protests began during the winter of 2006, this time taking the form of a series of labor strikes, with thousands of workers from various sectors demonstrating for their rights and for better wages. The movement gained momentum and never really stopped from that moment; the regime was cautious about dealing with social protests in a way that would trigger further agitation, and thus was generally more inclined to negotiate with the workers than to repress them.

For a time, the regime's strategy proved successful in that it managed to keep political and social demands isolated from one another, preventing the two from merging and having a possible spiral effect. In this, it was further served by the traditional mistrust between workers and political parties, a mistrust that meant that political and social demands were always carried out by different groups of actors. Only on one occasion, in April 2008, did the "politicians" try to make a connection between the two, when the activists of the 6 April Youth Movement, through their Facebook page, called on Egyptian citizens to strike in support of al-Mahalla workers. Far from being successful, this initiative resulted in the security forces raiding al-Mahalla factories and repressing the workers' movement, thus reinforcing the workers' fears of manipulation by political groups.

In early 2011, the situation changed, however, as a result of the perception that there might be a "window of opportunity"³¹ for action. The self-immolation of Muhammad Buazizi in Tunisia in December 2010, followed by huge popular protests that led to the departure of Tunisian President Ben Ali, were seen in Egypt as a sign that things could change. As a result, protests began again and took unprecedented forms and scale. While only 500 persons had attended a demonstration organized in September 2010, on January 25 there were between 50,00 and 70,000 demonstrators in Cairo and 20,000 to 30,000 in most of the major cities in the country, and mobilization continued over the

²⁹ Interview with the author, cited.

³⁰ This shift was particularly visible during the March 2003 demonstrations against the war in Iraq. On this topic, see COLLOMBIER, Virginie, "Les élites égyptiennes, l'Amérique et le pouvoir: de l'antiaméricanisme à l'opposition au régime", Master's thesis, Sciences Po Paris, 2003.

³¹ On this concept, see in particular TILLY, Charles, GIUGNI, Marco and McADAM, Doug, *From Contention to Democracy*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 1998; TARROW, Sidney, *Power in movement – Social Movements and contentious politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 1998.

following days. In Suez, the security forces were faced with a large-scale workers' movement. This was a turning point: the entry of the workers into the movement was crucial; the merging of political and social demands had been realized. Contrary to its usual way of dealing with social protests, the regime chose to brutally repress the demonstrators gathered in Suez, thus revealing its fear of such a combination. From January 27 onwards, the Muslim brotherhood became involved in the movement, and this was decisive. Workers, employees, youth from the middle class, peasants, political activists of all generations, etc... people from all backgrounds and ideas united in order to reach the same goal: removing Hosni Mubarak and his regime. This was exactly the type of coming together that the latter had feared the most.

Here, using Dobry's concept of *multisectorial mobilizations* certainly makes sense, and the strategic dimension of such phenomena must be acknowledged. In a system characterized by social spheres that are autonomous, highly institutionalized and endowed with specific social rationalities – to borrow Dobry's definition of complex social systems – *multisectorial mobilizations* are mobilizations that are located in several of those particular social spheres at the same time. The arrangement of the various sectors relative to one another is transformed: the autonomy of the sectors affected by mobilizations is reduced, while the spaces of confrontation associated with them are opened up.³² As a consequence, the benchmarks and calculations of the main protagonists are blurred: their expectations with regard to the behavior of the other actors are affected, as well as the relationships between those actors and their environment. In January 2011, as a matter of fact, the Egyptian elite found it difficult to analyze and react to the events in a proper – and efficient – way, destabilized as it is by this new context. An important member of the NDP General Secretariat reported for instance that in January 2011, while he was trying to draw the attention of his colleagues to the dangers of the social situation, the latter replied “let them bark, they will eventually get bored and stop.” Obviously, the Secretariat had not realized that “the elastic was increasingly tense”³³, and that the mobilization was to cause their fall.

By introducing *structural uncertainty* into their environment, the opening up of the mobilization affected the routine appreciations and calculations of the Egyptian actors – the political leadership included –, thus recalling the Tunisian “Black Thursday” of 1978 described by Camau. According to the latter, that event took place in “a situation where the benchmarks and constraints according to which the various actors operate[d] their calculations and adapt[ed] their behaviors g[ot] blurred. (...) For the first time since independence, Tunisia was the scene of a ‘multisectorial mobilization’”.³⁴ In January 2011, time had come for Egyptians to lead and experience such a process. The context in which this took place happened to be crucial.

A critical and fluid conjuncture

In his work, Dobry focuses on processes of political crisis, and more specifically on a particular type of crises: those that are associated with mobilizations affecting several social spheres of a society (which he calls *multisectorial mobilizations*). His objective is to reconstruct the dynamics of such crises, notably by paying particular attention to the relationships that mobilizations have with their ‘structural’ contexts. He analyzes the contexts in which mobilizations emerge, distinguishing between what he calls *routine conjunctures* and *critical conjunctures*. Now, like the Tunisian mobilizations of 1978 and 1984 referred to by Camau, the protests that started in Egypt at the beginning of 2011 rapidly developed into a multisectorial mobilization. The structural context in which this happened and the conjunction between the two – the mobilization, the context, but also the mutual impact they had had on each other – combined to create a *critical conjuncture*. As a consequence of the multisectorial character of the mobilization, the conditions of the “normal” political process found themselves

³² DOBRY, cited.

³³ Interview with the author, 16 May 2011.

³⁴ See CAMAU and GEISSER, op. cit., pp. 185-186.

suspended. Because it unfolded in a moment of *political fluidity*, the crisis was likely to lead to a transformation of the system.

Analyzing the mobilizations of 1978 and 1984 in Tunisia, Camau describes very well how they highlighted the interrelation between the crisis of what he calls “autarkic capitalism” and the crisis of leadership. According to him, “the exacerbation of social tensions on a background of economic and financial decline has deepened a process of political decomposition and recomposition driven by the deregulation of conflicts within the ruling elite.”³⁵ In those two cases, however, the disintegration of the leadership opened the way for the sectorial elites on which the regime had already been relying – through networks of *collusive transactions*³⁶ – to assume responsibilities directly, while the army, which had restored order, was entrusted with an increased and crucial role in the system. A new power arrangement – a *neo-authoritarianism* – was therefore created, whose main elements were already present in the system, even though in different positions and roles. The events of early 2011 in Egypt undoubtedly resembled the Tunisian crisis in that the multisectorial mobilization took place in a particular structural context and affected it in such a way that the overall political conjuncture – already *critical* – became *fluid*. The actors’ calculations and behaviors blurred, becoming unpredictable and affecting the routine organization of the society. While the “old order” fractured and disintegrated, new coalitions emerged – the army and the demonstrators against Hosni Mubarak and his clan, Islamists and liberals against the police, etc... – which signaled the beginning of a process of restructuring whose depth and length are impossible to predict, as is its result.

In the general confusion that has characterized the evolution of the Egyptian political system since February 2011, it is difficult to identify and decipher the meaning of the various actors’ strategies and alliances, and therefore to make sense of them. Has the old regime embodied by the security apparatus – mainly the military and intelligence – and the cadres of the state administration managed to deal with the crisis? Is it about to manage the crisis, adapt to a new context and, therefore, find ways to consolidate itself through a redistribution of roles within the overall system, as happened in Tunisia in 1987? Or has the process of crisis provoked not only a *transformation*, but a genuine *rupture* of the system?

In brief, is the Egyptian regime of early 2012 mainly a transformed – updated – version of that of 2010, or has the old regime really collapsed in the course of a revolutionary process, giving rise to a new one? These are questions that are currently being raised in Egypt, and that can still be answered in the two opposing ways. On the one hand, major changes have taken place, of which the crucial ones seem to be there to last: 1) the uprising of January and February was multi-class, and it managed to decapitate the regime; 2) even if it was led by groups which only represent a minority of the Egyptian population – which is most often the case in revolutions – there has been an overall revolution in the way Egyptian citizens think about themselves, the society they belong to and the relationships of authority within it; 3) a fundamental redefinition of the political contract has been at stake. Free elections have been organized that resulted in the emergence of one major political actor, the Muslim Brotherhood, which enjoys genuine political legitimacy as a result of its electoral success (it notably managed to secure more than 45 % of the seats in the People’s Assembly). Moreover, the pursuit of the protest movement – in the form of demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins, etc... – has demonstrated both the intention and the capacity of Egyptian citizens to maintain the pressure over those in power (the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces – SCAF –, as well as the SCAF-nominated government or the elected Parliament). On the other hand, however, the old regime has obviously not been fully dismantled: 1) power has remained in the hands of the military, one of the main pillars of the old regime; 2) most of the higher and intermediary cadres of the state (in the fields of administration, justice, security, the media, etc...) are still in place, and there has been no visible change in their practices and methods of action (there has been no restructuring of the police, for instance). Such a mixed picture clearly reflects the fact that Egypt is still in the midst of a process of crisis that has not come to its end and whose definitive outcome cannot yet be defined.

³⁵ CAMAU, op. cit., p. 188.

³⁶ On the concept of *collusive transactions*, see Dobry, op. cit.

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