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Egypt's Future: Yet Another Turkish Model?

Robert D. Springborg[a]
[a] Professor of National Security Affairs (ret), Naval Postgraduate School, and Senior Visiting Fellow, IAI
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Egypt's Future: Yet Another Turkish Model?

Robert D. Springborg

The Turkish model deemed most relevant to 2011-12 post-Mubarak Egypt was the Islamist-led transformation of the polity and economy that occurred following the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2002 general election. As it transpired, this version of the Turkish model lasted but one year before another took its place. That model was the political project of the Turkish military that seized power in September 1980. This thirty-one year old Turkish model of a constitutionally empowered executive body, controlled by the military appears to have trumped the contemporary, Islamist one in Egypt. But the Turkish military coup of 1980 unwittingly and unintentionally laid the groundwork for the transition that ultimately swept it from power and its leaders into jail. The pertinent question then is will Egypt's civilian political and economic actors be similarly and sufficiently astute to exploit the opportunities they inevitably will have even under military rule? Egyptian political forces will inevitably mount serious challenges as they did in Turkey. In Egypt, however, the domestic and regional political and economic contexts are so different from those in Turkey that the outcome of the struggle for power between civilians and the military are likely to deviate substantially from this Turkish model.

Keywords: Turkish model, military, Evren, al-Sisi, National Security Council, democratisation, constitution

The Islamist model

Much ink has been spilled on the relevance of the so-called 'Turkish model' for Egypt after the 2011 'revolution'.[1] For most analysts, that model was the Islamist-led transformation of the polity and economy that occurred following the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2002 general election. The appeal of that model to many Egyptians was its apparent socio-political inclusiveness combined with its economic dynamism. To the Obama administration, the AKP had demonstrated that moderate, democratising Islamism could provide an antidote to jihadi extremists. Wishful thinking in that administration led it to transpose this idealised version of the AKP uncritically onto the Muslim Brotherhood. As for the Turks themselves, the AKP leadership and especially Prime

Robert D. Springborg is Professor of National Security Affairs (ret), Naval Postgraduate School, and Senior Visiting Fellow, IAI. Email: rdspring@nps.edu

[1] For a recent piece on this in Italian, see Ozzano, "Dal modello turco al modello egiziano?", 165-70.

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Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan relished the legitimation and endorsement of their rule as implied by it serving as an explicit model for the leading Arab country. They quickly geared up their economic and diplomatic support for the Brotherhood when it took over the reins of government in Cairo.

As it transpired, this version of the Turkish model lasted but one year. Within six months of President Mohamed Mursi assuming power in July 2012, a substantial portion of Egyptians who had supported him and his Brothers had become disaffected. In the face of that disaffection Mursi's regime doubled down, becoming yet more authoritarian, arbitrary and exclusive, hence steadily more hated. Washington grimly hung on to its policy of support, but that was not enough to head off the inevitable collapse. As for the Turkish leaders, they, like their Brother friends, interpreted the negative public reaction and military's exploitation of it as part of a predictable conspiracy against Islam, and so lashed out at the alleged perpetrators of the plot. The exchange of insults between Ankara and Cairo steadily intensified until culminating in late November 2013 with the expulsion of ambassadors and downgrading of relations.

This Turkish model thus crashed and burned before becoming airborne, leaving unanswered the question of whether it was the model itself that was flawed, or the Brother's botched implementation of it. Events in Turkey, including the so-called Taksim demonstrations against the increasingly authoritarian AKP government, combined with the petulance and intolerance of Prime Minister Erdogan, seem to suggest that the model itself might be defective, or at least that the AKP is itself backsliding in its implementation of democratic Islamism. Subordination of the military to AKP rule, for example, including purges and trials of officers, had originally seemed to be part of a strategy of civilian control of the means of coercion, a vital step in any democratisation. But the Brother's crude and unsuccessful efforts to '*Ikhwanize*' ('Brotherize') the Egyptian military and security services cast doubts on both their and the AKP's intentions. Doubts heightened as a result of events in Turkey itself, most notably those surrounding trials for officers alleged to have participated in the 'Ergenekon conspiracy'. The increasingly precarious state of the Turkish economy, ever more dependent upon short-term foreign funding, has recently called into question the continuing viability of the Islamist economic project. So whether the Turkish model of democratic, inclusive and economically dynamic Islamism was a reality or a chimera remains a question. Egypt's decisive rejection of it, however, does not. Nor is Washington's reaction in doubt, as the Obama administration has now publicly abandoned the Brothers in favour of the officers.

The military model

Paradoxically, as the Islamist version of a Turkish model was first rising, then quickly falling along the Nile, another Turkish model was taking root. That model was the political project of the Turkish military that seized power in September

1980. Its most salient structural feature was the creation of a National Security Council (NSC), dominated by the officer corps and constitutionally empowered as the supreme executive authority. Through the NSC, the Turkish high command sought to run the country via remote control of a civilian government. Less than two years after the coup, General Kenan Evren was elected president, thereby further legitimising military control.

Implementation of military control of the polity was the core feature of the Turkish model that appealed to the Egyptian high command which seized power in the wake of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's overthrow. Field Marshal Muhammad Tantawi, leader of the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), ordered the 1982 Turkish constitution to be translated into Arabic, while himself testing the waters for a potential presidential candidacy. While the latter was a stretch too far, the adoption of constitutional articles resembling those of the Turkish military-influenced constitution was not. The vital features, most notably that of the NSC – although renamed the National Defence Council (NDC) as a civilian-dominated and weak NSC already existed in Egypt – were incorporated into the initial draft constitutional proposal issued under the SCAF. Those provisions, including autonomy of the military from civilian oversight, jurisdiction of military courts over civilians, control of the Ministry of Defence and its minister by the SCAF, and domination of national security policy by the military through the NDC, were then incorporated into the constitution drafted under the Brothers' tutelage. These key articles, albeit with an eight-year time limit on the SCAF's right to appoint the Minister of Defence, have survived the rewriting of that constitution, which is to be put to a referendum in January 2014.

So this thirty-one-year old Turkish model of a constitutionally empowered executive body, controlled by the military and holding sway over national security policy, coupled with the economic and organisational independence of the armed forces, appears to have trumped the contemporary, Islamist one. Indeed, as if aping General Evren, Minister of Defence General Abd al Fattah al Sisi is considering a run for the presidency. Whether he chooses to or not is a moot point, for whether as president or as minister of defence in effective control of the NDC and the military itself, he will be the man running the country. The parliament to be elected in the spring will be too fragmented to challenge his and the military's rule, or even to provide an alternative base for the cabinet undoubtedly to be comprised mainly of technocrats who will owe their primary allegiance to General al Sisi and his officer colleagues. The 1980 Turkish model of military rule was thus being resurrected in Egypt while attention was focused primarily on the post-2002 Islamist model and, paradoxically, as General Evren himself was being tried and convicted for his role in the 1980 coup.

As the ultimate demise of General Evren suggests, the story did not end for him and the Turkish officer corps with its assumption of power in 1980 and apparent

consolidation of it in 1982. If the model does indeed have its analogue in Egypt, the final word for General al Sisi and his comrades will also not be their triumphal moment of enshrining their power in a new constitution. The narrow political space provided to civilians from 1982 by the Turkish military, both in order to administer the country more effectively as well as to provide democratic window dressing, ultimately provided sufficient room for Turgut Özal and other civilian politicians to lay the economic and political foundations for the 2002 electoral triumph of the Islamists. The Turkish military thus unwittingly and unintentionally laid the groundwork for the transition that ultimately swept it from power and its leaders into jail. The pertinent question then is will Egypt's civilian political and economic actors be similarly and sufficiently astute to exploit the opportunities they inevitably will have even under heavy, if indirect military rule?

The transition model

The signs thus far are not encouraging. President Adly Mansour and Prime Minister Hazem Beblawy, as well as all other cabinet members, have failed to create any discernible distinction between themselves and the military that chose them. Secular opposition forces remain weak and fragmented. The parliamentary electoral system now agreed by the drafters of the constitution specifies that two thirds of the members will be elected in single member districts and only one third by party lists, a system that will inevitably favour those with connections to the administrative apparatus, thus further reinforcing the power of the military and its allies in the state. It is further anticipated that the size of districts will be reduced from the 2012 election, thereby enhancing the electoral prospects of local notables tied to the state apparatus. Moreover, whereas the Turkish military granted political space to Islamists in order to counter leftists, the Egyptian military faces no similar, organised challenge from that quarter. So General al Sisi has chosen to simply close all political space to the Brothers and their fellow travelers, at least until they accept the new constitution and the government produced by it. He will presumably add injury to that insult by positioning himself and even the military as a whole in the role of defender of the conservative, devout faithful. The increasingly severe and indiscriminate crackdown on demonstrations and political expression more generally suggests that instead of seeking to counterbalance political forces as in Turkey, the Egyptian military wants to extirpate them.

That Egypt will increasingly depart from the Turkish military model is also suggested by the impacts of the EU and the legacy of democratic practices in the latter. The lure of access to European markets, to say nothing of admission into the EU itself, constrained the Turkish military while stimulating the export-led growth that helped propel the AKP to power. The tradition of free and fair elections in Turkey coupled with sophisticated party organisation meant that political actors were prepared to exploit even the narrow political space granted them by the

military and the 1982 constitution. In Egypt, by contrast, there is no prospect of any external actor, let alone the EU, constraining arbitrary authoritarian rule or serving as a motor force for economic development by absorbing a dramatic increase of Egyptian exports while providing capital and technology to produce them. Egypt's modern political history is also markedly less democratic than Turkey's, as reflected in the failure thus far of all non-Islamist political actors to effectively organise and contest elections.

This comparison thus implies that Egypt will indeed steadily part company with the Turkish model as it developed after 1982. With the military granting little political space in Egypt, with so few political actors able to exploit that space, and with a weak economy, the future for Egypt seems to be yet more Arab authoritarianism, not a Turkish style transition from military to civilian rule coupled with rapid industrialisation.

This bleak outlook, however, overlooks one potential factor that could have a significant, positive impact. That factor is Egypt's business elite. Having played little if any role in the overthrow of Mubarak, many of its key figures did mobilise in opposition to the Brotherhood government, providing capital, media access and administrative support to opposition activists. The question now is whether the business elite that helped remove the Brothers will accept the military as their new patron, much as they accepted the Mubarak regime, or whether they will want to play a more independent, more directly profitable role.

The rather tawdry history of crony capitalism in Egypt suggests the former. Yet, several factors suggest that history might not repeat itself and that the business elite might in due course challenge the military rather than accepting to serve as its handmaiden. One possible factor is that this elite has now had the experience of flexing its political muscles. Although it was the military that ultimately acted 'on behalf of the people', it was the business elite who played the more important role in shaping the people's will to oppose the Brotherhood. Second, many of the country's leading capitalists are in economic competition with the military and its sprawling economic enterprises. They will find it more difficult to negotiate mutually beneficial patron-client relationships with it than they did with the Mubarak elite. Third, and maybe most importantly, the business elite does not have to fear either an empowered Brotherhood or a street mobilised by the left. The military took care of the former and the Nasserist left is but one of several secular political trends, another of which is a more classic liberalism with which the business community is itself identified. The business elite might therefore calculate that it has nothing to fear from the political street, and so does not need the military and the deep state over which it presides to protect it from that quarter. Indeed, it was precisely this loss of fear of the street that led to the transition from military rule in Brazil. The military there essentially eradicated the left, business' chief antagonist,

thereby enabling capitalists to opt for a democracy in which they would play a leading role rather than to continue to accept military tutelage.

Predicting a bourgeois revolution for Egypt is surely a risky bet, so if it is to be made at all it should be very well hedged. For the time being the military is calling the shots and opposition to it is scattered and ineffective. Presumably in 2014, it will succeed in stitching together something like the political order that the Turkish high command established within two years of its seizure of power. It was precisely at that point, however, that the real political competition began in Turkey that ultimately led to the military's defeat at the hands of civilians, albeit Islamists. In that competition, Turkish civilian capital played a key role, as it conceivably could do in Egypt. But Egypt's capitalists are not as economically powerful nor as politically organised as were Turkey's. Their prospects for lifting large numbers of their fellow countrymen out of absolute and near poverty, thereby earning their loyalty and support, are much less favourable.

Conclusion

In sum then, having sought to emulate two contradictory Turkish models almost simultaneously, Egypt clearly failed in its immediate attempt at an Islamist-led democratisation. The Brotherhood's incompetence in government has, moreover, put paid to the democratic Islamist alternative for years to come. The question then is whether democratisation can be led by other forces, or if the aspiration of the Turkish generals to hold on to at least indirect power indefinitely can be realised by their Egyptian counterparts. The business community could pose an obstacle, but it does not seem strong nor independent enough to emulate the Brazilian option. No other political force is sufficiently coherent and organised even to appear as an alternative government, although mobilised and disenchanted youths could constitute a significant disruptive force. So, for the foreseeable future, the Egyptian generals will be in control, dividing and ruling the various forces below them in a fashion not dissimilar to that of the Turkish generals after 1982, but probably facing more challenges from the street than their Turkish counterparts did. But Egyptian political forces will inevitably mount more serious challenges to this state of affairs, as they did in Turkey through the ballot box. In Egypt, however, the domestic and regional political and economic contexts are so different from those in Turkey that the outcome of the struggle for power between civilians and the military, as well as the manner in which the struggle is conducted, are likely to deviate substantially from the Turkish model.

Reference

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