



Two constitutions, two directions

While Tunisia is taking steps toward the vision of a democratic system, Egypt's Sisi is reasserting the primacy of the military

IN JANUARY, Egypt and Tunisia marked the third anniversary of their respective revolutions against long-serving autocratic rulers by adopting new constitutions and scheduling presidential and parliamentary elections for later in the year.

More than 92 percent of the deputies to Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly voted in favor of the text, while 98.1 percent of 20 million Egyptian voters approved their new constitution in a referendum.

However, any similarity between the political trajectories of the two countries is purely coincidental. The adoption of the new constitution in Tunisia marked a major, even historic, step forward towards the vision of a democratic political system, underpinned by the agreement of opposing social forces on rules of the political game in which there would be no victor and no vanquished.

By contrast, the Egyptian vote, the third such referendum in three years of political turmoil, was the latest move in the military's concerted efforts to crush the Muslim Brotherhood, the leader of which, Mohamed Morsi, was elected president of Egypt in the spring of 2012, only to be deposed one year later by a military coup backed by massive street demonstrations.

The truth is that the deck was stacked against Egypt from the outset, while Tunisia was the one Arab country that had a reasonable chance to translate the Arab Spring upheavals into a workable and legitimate political order. Although Egypt and Tunisia have the highest degree of "stateness" in the Arab world – measured by well-defined territories, common historical memories and experiences, centralized administrations and high degrees of cultural, linguistic and religious homogeneity – the scale of Egypt's socioeconomic problems and political polarization dwarfed Tunisia's, placing insurmountable obstacles to the successful building of legitimate governing institutions.

Newly promoted Field Marshal and Defense Minister Abdel Fatah al-Sisi stands at the pinnacle of Egyptian life. Ironically, it was Morsi who appointed Sisi to the post in the summer of 2012, as part of an effort to remove the army's old guard and consolidate his power over the country's most powerful institution. But Egypt is not Turkey, and Sisi had different ideas. Riding a broad wave of discontent with Morsi's failure to put Egypt on the right track, and the Brotherhood's clear attempt to monopolize power according to its Islamist vision, Sisi reasserted the primacy of the military, and allied economic and administrative elite – Egypt's "deep state."

History never repeats itself exactly, but the current crackdown evokes the early years after the 1952 Egyptian revolution, when the ruling military junta, led by the popular young Abdel Nasser, impris-

oned, tortured and even eventually executed some of the Brotherhood's leading figures.

Riding a wave of nostalgia for Nasser, Sisi has been trumpeted as Nasser's heir, representing Egyptian pride, dignity and self-assertion against both radical Islamists and meddling Western powers, particularly the US. There is also a cyclical feel to Egyptian

events. Two years ago, it was Hosni Mubarak and his sons and cohorts who were in the defendants' cage in an Egyptian courtroom; now it's the turn of Morsi and his associates.

Egypt's current situation is somewhat reminiscent of what happened in Algeria in the 1990s. There, following an ill-prepared and poorly designed democratic opening, and resulting electoral successes for opposition Islamists, the military leadership intervened. While thousands of Islamists were

imprisoned, others took up the gun, resulting in years of bloody strife and an estimated 150,000 fatalities. In Egypt, some Islamists have drawn the same conclusions.

Moreover, just as young Algerians returned from the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan with military training and a will to fight their own "infidel" regime, so too Egyptians are returning from the new jihadi battlefield, Syria, with the kind of prowess that promises more bloodshed in the future. Sinai has been a comfortable operating zone for these jihadis for some time, but now they are apparently expanding their reach into the Nile heartland as well, targeting senior officials and security personnel.

To be sure, Sisi currently possesses the kind of popular legitimacy and unified support within the ruling elite that the Algerian junta never had. So far, jihadi terrorism in Egypt has only reinforced his standing, enabling the state media to successfully tar the Brotherhood with the "terrorist" label. He seems all but certain to run in the presidential elections in April, and his victory is assured. He is then likely to emulate his predecessors in making the presidency, backed by the military, the dominant institution in Egyptian political life.

Generous aid from the Sunni Gulf monarchs will certainly give him some breathing room. But whether or not Sisi will be able to start building a more consensus-based model of government, the way the Tunisians are trying to do, remains to be seen. ■

The author is a Principal Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University



MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY / REUTERS

Supporters of Abdel Fatah al-Sisi in Tahrir square in Cairo, on the third anniversary of Egypt's uprising, January 25