



# The failure of democracy

**RECENT EVENTS** in Turkey and Egypt have highlighted anew the always contentious nature of civil-military relations in Middle Eastern states.

In Turkey, the six year-long “Ergenekon” trial of 275 senior military officers, politicians and journalists accused of plotting to overthrow the elected civilian government was concluded with dramatic, albeit predictable, results: All but 21 were found guilty and sentenced to long prison terms, including the country’s former chief of staff, Gen. Ilker Basbug, who received life imprisonment.

In Egypt, the security forces brought a brutal and bloody end to a six-week standoff between the military and Muslim Brotherhood, which had set up mass encampments in central Cairo to protest the deposing of civilian president Mohamed Morsi. As part of the effort to restore order and crush any dissent, the Egyptian authorities declared a temporary state of emergency and appointed 19 generals as provincial governors. All the while, the military insisted that it had popular legitimacy for its actions.

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, many analysts viewed the militaries of newly independent Arab states as the institutions best equipped to promote modernization and development, given the relatively high level of education of their officer corps and their need to adopt modern organizational methods and acquire technological prowess. Their ability to appeal to nationalist sentiment and articulate a reformist agenda seemed to be the most suitable formula for creating the necessary degree of national cohesion that would enable the building of durable and legitimate political institutions.

In this regard, the Turkish Republic established by Kemal Atatürk in 1923 seemed to provide an appropriate model of emulation, as the military stood guard over the Kemalist state, as per the constitution, and even forcefully intervened in times of crisis.

But by the 1970s, it was clear that Arab military and security elites had become a new praetorian ruling class, running roughshod over all opposing forces, and creating what became known as *dawlat al-mukhabarat* (the national security state). And by the turn of the century, the hopes for an Egypt gradually evolving into a more pluralist political order had dissipated.

Meanwhile, ironically, the Turkish Republic’s relative success, thanks in no small measure to the military elite’s cohesion and determination, laid the groundwork for the military’s loss of hegemony. The desire to meet European Union conditions for membership laid bare the Turkish Republic’s shortcomings with regard to the rule of law, human rights, the treatment of its Kurdish minority, and the military’s domination of the state, which eventually resulted in the election in 2003 of the Islamist AKP.

One obvious difference between the Turkish and Egyptian experiences was that Kemalism was an explicitly secular project, whereas the Egyptian Free Officers and their heirs, while opposing the Muslim Brotherhood, never promoted a secular agenda. Another difference was that Kemalism produced a sizeable Turkish middle-class genuinely committed to liberal democratic values, while no such comparable group emerged in Egypt, as proved by the dismal showing of liberal democratic forces in the post-Mubarak parliamentary elections.

More recently, Egypt’s “illiberal liberals” generally supported the military’s use of force against the Brotherhood, although Mohamed ElBaradei, their most well-known figure internationally, resigned from his post of vice-president following the crackdown.

So where are we now?

After a decade in power, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has succeeded in decisively tilting the civil-military balance in his favor, but has also seriously damaged the democratic fabric of the country through intimidation and imprisonment of dissenting voices. For Turkey’s secular liberals, particularly the educated youth among them, Erdogan’s effort to institutionalize his brand of Islamist populism heralds a

new authoritarianism every bit as repressive, if not more so, than the military’s earlier heavy-handed domination of the country’s institutions. The sustained Gezi Park protests against Erdogan have died down for now, but may be a harbinger of future confrontations. As for the Turkish military, time will tell whether it has been permanently subordinated.

As president, Morsi had sought to emulate Erdogan, retiring senior officers and appointing people he considered trustworthy, particularly his defense minister and armed forces head Abdel Fattah Sisi. But Sisi turned out to be non-compliant, and now sits at the nexus of power.

In the renewed euphoria of the Tamarud movement’s protests that led to Morsi’s overthrow, Sisi was hailed as the next Abdel Nasser, the symbol of Egyptian hope and nationalist pride, but hardly a democrat. Interestingly, respected US-based scholar Robert Springborg has suggested that Sisi’s vision of Egypt may be akin to that of former Pakistani military ruler, Zia al-Haq, i.e. in favor of Islamizing the public sphere, his antipathy to the Brotherhood notwithstanding.

Whether or not he can lead Egypt out of its morass is another matter. For the moment, the sequence of events is beginning to resemble the initial stages of Algeria’s slide into horrific civil strife during the 1990s. ■

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



A bulldozer clears the area after violent clashes in Cairo

MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY / REUTERS