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Egypt between 2 Boxes: Elections and ammunition

Khaled Fouad

While Egypt's 2018 presidential elections are approaching, there is a key question that needs to be answered before going into any details related to the upcoming elections, namely: To what extent can the ballot boxes win the ammunition boxes? In other words, Is it possible to remove the army from power through elections and move to an elected civilian government that enjoys sufficient authority for legislating policies; not just a transition to a government that is only a civilian front of the army in power, which would not be considered a significant change from the current reality that the army is directly in power. (The military are dominating the country since the coup led by Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi against Egypt's first democratically president, Mohamed Morsi, in 2013)

Chile Experiment

The experiments of peoples in overthrowing dictatorships and resisting tyranny are a rich source of experience for those who are still under the authoritarian rule. Benefiting from these experiments is extremely important, taking into account not to deal with them as fixed rules, because each experiment has its temporal and spatial context, its different circumstances, and its special details. In this regard, we should also take into account not to deal with specific experiments without referring to others in the same context, which may sometimes lead to adopting or introducing unidimensional visions or solutions.

The Chilean experiment comes on top of the democratic transformation experiments in South America in the 1980s. Perhaps, this experiment is distinguished from others in its resorting to the ballot boxes for overthrowing the head of the dictatorial authority, General Augusto Pinochet. However, the Chilean experiment gave a glimmer of hope regarding the usefulness of the political action in overthrowing dictatorships. However, we should understand the circumstances and steps that



preceded the overthrow of General Pinochet through the ballot box, so that we should find out whether we can apply the same experiment in the case of Egypt or not.

Before resorting to the ballot boxes in the Chilean experiment, there were important steps that were taken to reach the moment of participation in the referendum on General Pinochet's rule. The two most important of these steps were:

- a) Unification of the opposition forces in two major fronts, and
- b) Organizing major protests and practicing pressure for political reforms.

These two steps were accompanied by external pressures and global outrage over Pinochet's abuses. In light of these circumstances, the opposition's efforts reached its peak and people started to call for a referendum on the renewal of Pinochet's reign, which resulted in Pinochet's defeat and removal from power.

In light of these two steps, it seems that there are two important things that should be taken into account when talking about the Chilean experiment and trying to apply it on the current Egyptian situation:

- 1) The Chilean opposition did not resort to the ballot box until it took a series of steps and activities, including making alliances, strengthening its ability to act politically, and staging protests, calling for reforms.
- 2) The real pressure practiced by the international community and the United States on Pinochet during the last years of his rule, as well as the domestic pressures, which forced the dictator to make reforms, including a referendum on his remaining in power.

The circumstances in which the ballot boxes in Chile were used, were very different from the current conditions in Egypt; there is no unified opposition, no major protests, no real international pressure on the government (despite the regime's violations and anti-rights practices), which makes it difficult to imagine application of the Chilean experiment in the Egyptian case, at least currently.

Betting on unity of opposition and revolutionary forces

In fact, our talk about the opposition and revolutionary forces does not necessarily include those political and cultural elites who have been drawn to the support of



tyranny and authoritarianism, as the bet on them is no longer a great value, in light of reality and time as well. On the other hand, a sector of political and cultural elites that represent the Egyptian revolution and opposition are still resisting tyranny and authoritarianism – although through criticism only as they do not have a resistance project with clear features for confronting the authoritarian regime, nor do they provide an integrated vision for the period following the overthrow of the current regime. Also, the unification of the opposition from right to left under one umbrella seems to be far away from reality in light of the post-revolution failures and wounds. At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that this sector has lost much of its abilities and potentials due to the escape of a large part of it outside the country.

It seems that the bet on the unification of opposition and revolutionary forces under the current situation seems very difficult. However, the hypothesis that seems convincing to me (and more practical) is working to strengthen the opposition and revolutionary forces and make them more effective and more capable of attracting popular sectors around them to put more pressure on the regime

Time as part of the solution

Perhaps some people are betting on the time factor to pave the way for a surprise change in Egypt though we do not exactly know what the features of such a change might be, especially in light of the absence of solutions or even proper conditions for change at present. Their belief in the time factor may be based on the fact that many models of authoritarian regimes have collapsed and fallen because of surprising events that appear to be very simple but later become the fuel of great anger that undermines those regimes. But, owners of this perception have forgotten that these tyrannical regimes usually remain in power for decades, during which they make severe distortions in the country's institutions. Also, a state of "societal" disorder deeply hits its roots in the societies controlled by such regimes.

Indeed, time is not part of solving this problem, but on the contrary, the factor of time appears to be in favor of reinforcing the foundations of authoritarian regimes. Although the failures of these regimes are more clearly manifested at the political and



economic levels over time, the strength of the security grip, which becomes wilder over time, hinders any possible change and makes things more difficult. This leads us to believe that the cost of overthrowing these regimes is directly proportional to the period of time they spend in power which allows the consolidation of its repressive apparatuses and media outlets; in other words, the cost increases the longer these regimes remain in power.

Where to start?

Should we give priority to searching for partial solutions or concentrate on handling the origin of the crisis? This is a key question before dealing with the Egyptian crisis realistically. And before indulging in introducing approaches to partial solutions, it would be useful to understand that these solutions will not change the reality of the current crisis as long as there is an authoritarian authority that does not respect the rule of law and constitution – only depending on repression and security measures amid a state of corruption pervading its internal and external relations. It seems that the best and most effective action here is to concentrate efforts on addressing the origin of the crisis, namely the removal of the regime and the army from power.

The removal of an authoritarian force that possesses all tools of repression for its opponents will only come through a force that is capable of confronting it. Such force may differ in form and size depending on the temporal and spatial context of each experiment. It may be in the form of: mass mobilization, use of arms, the ballot box, pressure lobbies, civil society organizations, or perhaps some of these forces combined regardless of their relative weight. The most important thing is that there must be a force that stands against the power of tyranny, impedes its continuation, and removes it from power at the proper time.

Outside the box

Perhaps the most appropriate form of resistance against Egypt's tyrannical regime at present is the emergence of a societal struggle movement that should not take a certain political or partisan form; it has to be different from the traditional image of



societal movements. Such a movement should concentrate on the consolidation of principles and values as well as the crystallization of different types of protest. The approaching 2018 presidential elections could represent an opportunity for taking the advantage of the freedoms margins that the regime will be forced to allow amid the regional and international concern over elections. In order to be more effective, this proposed movement has to adopt a clear issue, and determine the opponent it will be facing without ambiguity or appeasement. It should seek, through its rhetoric, to attract the largest number of participants from various social background and different ideologies. Also, its discourse should present a vision for the future void of electoral and partisan rivalry. The proposed movement should explain how it will run the country after the removal of the current regime. Finally, it must take into account that this road is long and painstaking, and does not achieve quick results before it (the proposed movement) becomes a real force capable of facing the tyrannical regime.⁽¹⁾

(1) The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of EIPSS.