CONTEMPORARY ARAB AFFAIRS, 2017
VOL. 10, NO. 1, 32–50
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2017.1279386

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Regime-change agenda: the Egyptian experience from 2011 to 2015

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the role of the United States of America in the failure of the democratic revolution in Egypt during the Arab Spring. While appreciating the role of internal actors and the domestic dynamics, it demonstrates that regime change in Egypt was largely a consequence and a reflection of the US's interests in Egypt and the region in general. It argues that the seemingly successful removal of the Hosni Mubarak regime by popular uprisings and the rise of Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood signalled the success of democracy. However, Morsi's controversial overthrow and imprisonment, notwithstanding his weaknesses, led to the backfiring of the regime-change strategy. The subsequent rise to power of a former military man, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and his administration has, thus far, demonstrated a contradiction to all the promises of the Egyptian revolution. It concludes that the drivers of regime change should re-examine the merits of their strategy in an effort to establish lasting peace in the country.

KEYWORDS

Regime change in Egypt; Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; Hosni Mubarak regime; after Mubarak

Introduction

The overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt was expected to usher in a new era by ending his authoritarian practices, ameliorating the socio-economic and political conditions of the Egyptian people. Reality on the ground demonstrates a revolution that was hijacked by the United States, its Egyptian military allies and some regional actors in a drive to accomplish their regime-change agenda. Egypt since then has witnessed instability evident in the increasing socio-economic meltdown and political insecurity.

This article argues that the regime-change agenda carried out by the United States and its allies supporting anti-government protesters in Egypt failed dismally judging by the instability that prevailed following the fall of both Mubarak and the democratically elected Mohamed Morsi. While this article clearly indicates that regime change in Egypt was largely a consequence and a reflection of the US's interests in Egypt and the region in general, including its work with the Egyptian military and some regional actors (with much evidence supporting the idea that the United States has been an

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active actor with a continuous record of interference and intervention), it also appreciates the role of internal actors and the domestic dynamics. It is, therefore, imperative to the drivers of the regime-change agenda to reflect on the short- and long-term benefits of their strategy given the challenges it has caused in Egypt and even beyond. It concludes that the Egyptian people have the capacity to address the challenges that confront them with limited foreign interference. Accordingly, the socio-economic and political challenges in Egypt should be addressed as a precursor to democratic reforms in the security sector in the country because it has been the major setback to any realistic transformation. The article provides a background and context of the Arab Spring in Egypt, examines the repercussions of regime change and provides a road to sustainable peace in the country.

Background and context of the Arab Spring in Egypt

The popular revolt in Tunisia that saw the overthrow of its dictator, President Ben Ali, inspired Egyptian citizens like others in the region who also embraced anti-government demonstrations demanding regime change and the need for democracy (Owen 2012). President Mubarak's overthrow in February 2011 finally came following demonstrations accompanied with popular calls for stability, dignity and prosperity which directly expressed the Egyptian people's socio-economic and political grievances (Aziz 2012). Arab public opinion towards democracy immediately before the Arab Spring showed that the Arabs were yearning for democracy (Sawani 2014).

As Nagarajan (2013) concluded, the political dimensions of the Arab Spring and protests in Egypt were a result of a combination of multifaceted issues at play including political and economic forces at both the domestic and international stages. El Nour (2015) asserts that giving the Egyptian revolution a historical analysis shows that even small farmers played a significant role. Both political institutions and economic policies prior to the uprisings had failed to fulfil the aspirations of the citizens of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Corm 2012, 2015). To this end, the Arab Spring in Egypt, as elsewhere, was the outcome of an interaction between external and internal factors, namely between the fluctuating structure of the global politico-military order and domestic economic and social stimuli (Ardic 2012). The latter comprise the direct factors and encompassed the people's quest for social and economic fairness. This embodied their call for social and political rights, desire for dignity and esteem grounded on their frustration with the prevailing despotic regimes. Similarly, Salamey (2015) asserts that the Arab Spring was the outcome of the economic and social liberalization instigated by globalization which led to corruption and discriminatory development that resulted in public resentment. Additionally, despite economic circumstances being crucial for causing the Arab Spring, the role of 'the discordance between the claims made by regimes as part of the process of seeking to legitimise themselves and the reality of regime repression and contempt' (Joffé 2011, 508) should not be ignored. Consequently, domestic dynamics and the role played by internal actors should not be granted a cold shoulder when dealing with regime change in Egypt. However, this article emphasizes the fact that it was largely a result and a reflection of the US's interests in Egypt and the region in general as it worked with the Egyptian military and some regional actors.

The end of the Mubarak regime and other authoritarian regimes in the MENA were arguably engineered by the United States and its allies. As Hawthorne (2014) notes,

from the outset the United States faced challenges to strike a balance between enduring security interests in Egypt and the specified goal to back Egyptians' ambitions for democracy. The US government made significant blunders that include but were not limited to:

> an overabundance of soaring rhetoric about US support for Egyptian democracy, followed by a failure to act decisively at times when democracy was under severe threat; unrealistic expectations about how long a democratic transition would take; and too much focus on securing ties with Egypt's rulers (Islamist or military) at the expense of relations with its people. (Hawthorne 2014, 1)

The United States through its programmes like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute and Freedom House working hand in glove with other local NGO stables it funded, prepared for the opportune time through funding, training and seminars (Tony 2011).[1] It is this article's assertion and assumption that certain shared objectives and goals exist on the part of US programmes and NGOs and that they were effective in implanting their goals in Egypt. Glassman and Glickman (2011, 9) even concluded that the US-financed programmes played 'an important, if not easily perceptible role, in laying the structural groundwork for Egypt's revolution'. Moreover, Gilley (2013) asserts that the Arab Spring was the conceivable outcome of US policies because the uprisings occurred during and soon after the enactment of President George W. Bush's policies between 2001 and 2008 working to bring about such alterations. A similar case has been witnessed in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, despite Western media largely describing the revolutions (which some view as coups) as unprompted, home-grown and widely held ('people power') insurrections (Sussman and Krader 2008).

According to Hawthorne (2004), consolidating civil society had developed into a typical part of the US democracy-promotion instrument across the globe. The presence of 'vibrant' civil societies was well thought out to be indispensable to democracy and to democratization. Their rise in the Arab world, especially in the form of NGOs manned by dormant pro-American elements, meant they could, with external funding, develop into sources of benevolent democratic change 'from below'. Accordingly, these motivations saw the United States and other donors providing civil society groups in the Middle East, as elsewhere, with huge sums of funding, training and methodological assistance. This witnessed the Egyptian April 6 Movement (one of the major participants during the anti-Mubarak demonstrations) attending the inaugural summit of the Alliance of Youth Movements (AYM) in New York in 2008 where 'they received training, networking opportunities and support from AYM's various corporate and US governmental sponsors, including the US State Department itself' (Tony 2011). Girdner (2005) reveals that the Greater Middle East Initiative launched by Bush in 2003 saw the work of the NED and its associated establishments working covertly through US private transnational corporations as channels for the imperialist control of domestic political parties and elections. The aim was solely to permit the neoliberal control of the region by the United States and Israel, aiding to contain China and Europe through controlling oil, and strengthening US capitalist build-up.

Nonetheless, the lack of immediate effectiveness of democracy-promotion efforts by the United States in the MENA should be viewed from the standpoint that the region was

ruled by dictatorial regimes that were of strategic significance to the United States, and hence could not allow external players to promote democracy (Hudson 2014). Consequently, Mubarak was notorious among other things for banning and imprisoning NGO activists, outlawing and instituting rigid legislation governing the operations of NGOs with the intention to stop them from receiving foreign funding. These efforts were part of what has been termed 'authoritarian upgrading' (Heydemann 2007). Furthermore, there was the setting up of government NGOs in order to discredit the independent NGOs, and these were handy in producing ostensibly independent research legitimizing government programmes and positively portraying the Mubarak regime. The reports of government NGOs also substantiated the conspiracy theories concerning mischievous interfering in the internal affairs of Egypt by the NGOs and all human rights NGOs – such as the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (2002), the New Woman Foundation (2004), the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (2006) and the Egyptian Democracy Academy – were discredited and portrayed as representing elite Egyptians at the expense of the ordinary people (Aziz 2012).

Without acknowledging its external links and overestimating its agency, El Medni (2013) applaud the April 6 Movement. Among other things, it brought the Egyptian youth into the political scene and public life since 2008, changing the scene of political activism which has hitherto been an activity typically led by adults. The April 6 Movement achieved more than its predecessors such as the adult-led *Kifaya*[2] (enough) which had failed to appeal to younger age groups and used cyberspace commendably to orate and mobilize. Thus, April 6 is truly attributed to connecting youth groups who ultimately became the mainstay of the January 25 Revolution. Besides, the April 6 Movement conscripted and mobilized youth in all Egypt's governorates and took political activism beyond greater Cairo where other civic groups had failed to reach. The April 6 Movement was also guided by the Otpor! movement from Serbia and the Qatari Academy of Change which equipped the Egyptian youths with non-violent strategies and resistance and mass organization through new technology (El Difraoui 2012). Despite its crucial role, social media was not the cause or the catalyst of the Egyptian revolution but a mere tool of communication (Barrons 2012). Apparently, the Egyptian revolutionaries called for an end to the 'deteriorating economic conditions, police brutality, corruption and political repression' (Nepstad 2011, 487).

Nagarajan (2013) notes that the Kifaya movement was the beginning of the wave of opposition to the Mubarak regime. It was a combination of people coming from a varied range of socio-political standpoints united by their disapproval of the government. The movement widely defied the Mubarak regime by demanding a stoppage to its misuse of authority. It also called for Mubarak to abdicate and cease to pass on the throne to his son, Gamal (El Difraoui 2012). The issue of Gamal succeeding his father was also resented by the military and that was one, if not the chief, reason why they opted for the ouster of Mubarak (Aziz 2014). However, given the sordid condition of Egypt, even Mubarak himself is believed to have become increasingly hesitant to allow his son to inherit a ruined country (Interview 2014b). In reality, the resentment emanated from the fact that Gamal rivalled the military's interests as he led a group of the so-called 'state entrepreneurs' who, like him, were devoted to abusing his family's standing and his ruling-party post in a bid to profit from the generous economic reforms of the earlier decade (Barany 2011). Besides, the top echelons were increasingly anxious about youth disaffection,

growing Islamist radicalism, and economic dissatisfaction and unproductivity. Additionally, Egypt's armed forces were not content to see the regime increasingly disposed to flushing privileges to the large police force which was thought to employ around 1.4 million people. Again, the Egyptian army's rank and file has various ties to society in general that could have possibly made the generals' willingness to shoot demonstrators perhaps impossible. According to Hinnebusch (2015), the military's reliance on Western support, especially the United States, also persuaded it to be reluctant to risk its financing as a result of mass repression enforced on behalf of the president. Although it failed to achieve its objectives and never became a mass political crusade and eventually misplaced its stimulus, the Kifaya movement is believed to have created a lasting and compelling legacy for the protest movement in Egypt (Nagarajan 2013).

Observing the peculiar feature of the complementarity between civic movements instead of competition with each other, El Medni (2013) notes that the National Association for Change (NAC) built on the efforts began by Kifaya and the April 6 Movement. Accordingly, the NAC invited the Egyptians living out of the country to participate in the political process in their home country and employ their economic power as clout to call for political change. The NAC also employed the 1 million-signature crusade as a battle to create some uproar with the intention of shaking the static political situation. The campaign was done online and through hard copies with NAC's activists getting to towns and villages across Egypt. Beyond the April 6, the NAC also attracted a charismatic figure, Mohamed ElBaradei, making it appeal to people from various social backgrounds including, but not limited to, youth and elites. As a resultant, there was democracy, human rights and freedom; principles the United States purports to champion for in the world 'are merely being leveraged to co-opt well-meaning people across the world to carry out their own self-serving agenda' (Tony 2011). Indeed, Charles Dunne, Director of Freedom House's MENA programmes, revealed before the US House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the MENA that in Egypt:

> Freedom House played but a small part in bringing about political change. We helped citizens monitor elections free of government minders. We worked to teach a new generation of civic activists how to use tactics birthed in Eastern Europe to work toward peaceful political reform. We fought against torture and helped educate Egyptians about their rights as citizens. We worked with a completely Egyptian staff and with a wide range of Egyptian partner organizations. (Dunne 2014)

Critically, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Egypt between 2011 and 2014 complained about its frustration brought by a number of the US's entities. Predominant was the State Department's bigger role culminating in sidetracking USAID programming from intended development priorities and objectives merely favouring political needs (Charlifue 2015). This vindicates the increased role of the United States both covertly and overtly to influence the work of NGOs and its outcomes in Egypt.

According to El Medni (2013), civil society organizations in Egypt increasingly became the sites of resistance, making available platforms to contest the state supremacy and generating spaces for unrestricted involvement. Slackly structured civic movements were mainly effective in making social capital and converting it into political mobilization, while the NGOs' role was restricted to uncovering human rights abuses. Professional associations changed public protests from extemporaneity into well-thought-out political

actions. Although the Federation of Egyptian Workers – an amalgamation of all trade unions in Egypt – was recognized as being paralyzed due to co-optation, the different trade unions played momentous roles in political organization and dissension. While during Mubarak's reign civil society organizations fought to generate civil liberties, individual freedoms and human rights, some observers have argued that features of liberalization seen in Mubarak's Egypt were mere instruments of manipulation instead of a genuine reaction to domestic pressure to democratize (Nagarajan 2013). However, giving credence to domestic agency, El Medni (2013) affirms that since the international community sustained the regime despite it being absolutely dictatorial, it is unthinkable that the international pressure could solely explain the developments in Egypt. Therefore, without refuting the role of local demands and human agency for democracy, to a greater magnitude the external hand was present in the long-term and resultant ouster of Mubarak and later the democratically elected Morsi.

While the United States cautiously supported regime change in Egypt, hoping to replace Mubarak with another pro-US president, a smooth transition did not take place. For Smith (2013) there was no direct connection but an indirect one confirming the United States was complicit in the military coup of Morsi. He further noted that in examining several US federal government's official papers one finds that Washington clandestinely financed high-ranking Egyptian opposition persons who demanded the overthrow of the Morsi government. The United States directed funding through a State Department programme to encourage democracy in the Middle East region. This programme dynamically buttressed activists and politicians who provoked discontent in Egypt, following the ouster of Mubarak. The State Department's programme, called by US officials 'democracy assistance' ingenuity, forms part of a broader Barack Obama government determination to try to break the withdrawal of pro-Washington secularists. It was also meant to regain power in Arab Spring countries that witnessed the rise of Islamists, who principally clash with US interests in the Middle East. Activists funded by the programme include an expatriate Egyptian police officer who strategized the forceful rebellion against the Morsi administration. The advocate was an anti-Islamist political figure who encouraged the closing of mosques and, using violence, the removal of preachers and several opposition political figures who called for the ejection of the country's only democratically elected leader (Smith 2013).

With Islamist parties winning elections, a dilemma existed in Washington concerning their coming to power which provoked fears that policies of an increasingly religious and self-determining Egypt were not going to be compliant with the democratic process (Thimm 2012). Obviously, this compelled the United States to condone the military's abuse of power until a suitable leader was put in place. This eventually encouraged the ouster of Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) to pave the way for the current leader, al-Sisi, who also has a military background, as had Mubarak among other Egyptian leaders before the Arab Spring. In the process, the United States negated both its short-term goal of stability and the long-term goal of democratization, as the next section illustrates.

Repercussions of regime change in Egypt

The immediate impact of the fall of the Mubarak regime was the proliferation of political parties due to substantial radical changes to the legal conditions governing the registration

of new parties. This saw the formerly partially co-opted, once banned and new political parties emerging. Resultantly, post-Mubarak Egypt, instead of ushering in a democratic solution, witnessed a struggle for power between four centres, namely moderate MB Islamists, radical Salafist Islamists, the army and secular liberal factions (Gaub and El Aziz 2014). Despite the opening up of the political landscape being a positive development, the rapid move to hold elections meant that those political parties, such as the Justice and Freedom Party (FJP) of the MB, which already had substantial political and financial capital, gained an absolute advantage (Al-Awadi 2013; Farag 2012). New parties were handicapped in terms of resources and had challenges in articulating party programmes that were convincing to the electorate (Smith 2013). Moreover, two axis, namely the Islamist/secular divide and the classical left/right spectrum, divided the Egyptian political landscape as in other Arab countries after the Arab Spring (Gaub and El Aziz 2014).

Furthermore, whilst the United States sought to encourage political reforms, protecting human rights and fostering economic growth in the MENA, the Egyptian case demonstrates that these US goals are largely secondary. They are sometimes sacrificed to preserve cooperation with autocratic allies. The United States and the former Mubarak regime cooperated in a strategic partnership meant to safeguard the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty and combating terrorism, regardless of the regime's record of stifling internal dissent (Sharp 2014). Moreover, prior to 2010, stable but undemocratic regimes in North Africa even cooperated with the European Union in commerce, counterterrorism and energy supply, among others. Democracy and human rights issues were not seriously considered and the European Union did not even call for regime change (Gaub and El Aziz 2014). As a result, there were fears that the changes brought by the Arab Spring in the MENA were going to frustrate US core goals in the region, namely: 'regional security, global energy supplies, US military access, bilateral trade and investment, counter-proliferation, counterterrorism, and the promotion of human rights' (Blanchard et al. 2012, i). Consequently, any US and Western attempts to promote democracy in the region, given its political history coupled with restrictions on civil society, were bound to fail. The fears held by many that the introduction of democratic reforms in the MENA could lead to anti-Western factions and Islamists winning elections were confirmed. The confirmation took place when formerly suppressed Islamist organizations following regime change in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya won elections, both locally and nationally (Darwisheh 2014).

Post-Mubarak regime developments further confirm that the United States and its allies are not primarily concerned with assisting Egypt to move towards democracy. Unlike in other countries, the West and the United States were hesitant to slap Egypt with a strict conditionality (aid for reforms). Instead, the United States, even amid anti-Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) protests in Cairo in July 2011, was determined to publicize the 11th instalment of the US$1.3 billion M1A1 tank co-production programme. In normal cases, this was supposed to have not been paid given the sustained violence against hundreds of thousands of demonstrators (Marshall 2015). This is reinforced by the fact that while the popular uprising against the Mubarak regime overthrew him and a few of his associates, it did not dismantle and curb the power of the military among other state institutions (Darwisheh 2014). Battera (2014) argues that in Egypt (relatively similar to Syria) where there was no common dearth of independence between the state, the party and the military; it was a key factor in blocking change, while where

there was a clear separation of the tasks of these institutions (Tunisia) political change materialized. According to Aziz (2012), the former regime remained ingrained in the economic and political system of the country and the military's de facto control of the executive and legislative branch dating back to 1952. This culminated in the persistence of political instability, uprisings and violence with the military playing a significant role in determining who will land the presidency in the country. This is so because the Egyptian military temporarily supported the 2011 January 'Revolution' forming the SCAF, and took over the executive authority from the presidency under the pretext of protecting and leading the revolution (which they again did when they turned against Morsi) (Darwisheh 2014).

In essence, SCAF's role was mainly to act as the interim administration of the country during the period when the country was amending the national constitution in preparation to hold parliamentary elections. This was to be followed by formulating a new constitution and then holding a presidential election which was to be followed by a transition to civilian rule (Roll 2012). However, the SCAF, having enjoyed several privileges from the previous presidents, was determined to maintain the status quo. The army ensured its absolute control of military-related matters that included the defence budget and military assistance from the United States pegged at US$1.3 billion annually on the basis of the 1979 peace accord with Israel (Marshall 2015). Thus, the US's double standards on human rights have been exposed in Egypt where the country's military has remained the US's number one domestic collaborator evident in its continued funding despite its flagrant abuse of human rights.

As events proved, SCAF was largely a Mubarak holdover awaiting the old regime's to reinvent itself under a new semblance. This saw the military resisting unfavourable electoral outcomes that appeared to threaten its autonomy. This was first evident in June 2012 when the military grabbed legislative authority following a dubious decision by the highly pro-military Supreme Constitutional Court (by extension the judiciary) to dissolve parliament, although the election process of the same parliament was legitimate. The sole reason for such a decision was because parliament had become dominated by the FJP and Nour Party of the Salafists and, therefore, was perceived as a threat to the status quo, hence the takeover (Aziz 2012).

Similarly, the overthrow of President Morsi in July 2013 after he had successfully won the presidency in 2012 laid bare the SCAF's intentions. With the role of the military in Egypt having been the subject of an extensive literature, especially after 2010 (Arafa 2014; Barany 2011; Battera 2014; Nassif 2016; Nepstad 2011; Smith 2013), this article diverges from those solely content with the view that condemns the role of the military just because it played a significant determinant role in unseating the government of Morsi and the MB (Aziz 2014; Housden 2013; Roll 2016; Stacher 2015; Wilmot 2015). This is because the disappointments of the Morsi government and the consequences of its policy of Ikhwanization of the state were equally important factors that led to the June 30 Revolution that lent the military an almost indefinite and open mandate to rule. Morsi's overthrow was largely due to a combination of his blatant failures that the military and the generality of the Egyptians were not prepared to tolerate. These included his failure to deliver tangible achievements such as social, economic and political reforms, an unrepresentative constitution, inexperience, and increased infiltration of state institutions by MB loyalists (Ikhwanization) (Al-Awadi 2013; Batchelor 2014; Laz 2014;

Sakbani 2015). It was this 'Brotherhoodisation' of Egyptian society among a host of other political blunders by Morsi that the military in cahoots with the judiciary, media and domestic security forces joined hands to thwart any significant changes in governance (Aziz 2014). Accordingly, there was justified anger and frustration among Egyptian citizens because the MB's rule also led to the division of society between Muslim and non-Muslims, with the former discriminating the latter, especially Christians (Kassem 2016). Again, Muslims were also divided into two, namely, the core category and the marginalized one where the former included members of the MB and the latter represented non-MB Muslims.

Among other alleged accusations levelled against Morsi was his support of the war against Syria's Bashar al-Assad in alliance with Turkey and Saudi Arabia based on a Sunni alliance against Shiites without the approval of the Egyptian military (Andromidas 2013; Abul-Magd 2013). However, Wilmot (2015) offers a divergent view arguing that the MB made an effort (including through political assertiveness) to defend Egypt's democratic transition in contrast to the intrusion of the military and the judiciary disproving worries that the MB was likely to use Egypt's political transformation to set up a dictatorial regime. It was the constant meddling by these non-elected institutions that brought Egypt's democratic experiment to an untimely end, regardless of the FJP's efforts. It brings us to the realization that political obligation without external help is inadequate to guarantee a fruitful transition to representative governance. Probably, the military moves were simply revenge. Linked to this, Kassem (2016, 4) notes that for the period of the rule of the SCAF (2011–12), the MB made attempts and manipulated every effort to misrepresent the image of SCAF and persuaded Egyptians to protest and fight against any of SCAF's decisions, verdicts and laws. As a result, the MB achieved its foremost goal of rising to power aided by regional neighbouring states and 'some terrorist and Jihadist gangs and groups to terrify Egyptians and make them lose confidence in the temporary ruling SCAF'. Consequently, following the MB's rise to power, it was the failure to cooperate between the existing political and cultural forces in Egypt that spelt the doom of the other (El-Beshry 2013).

Notwithstanding the above pitfalls raised against Morsi, since the 2011 revolution it appeared the only solution to Egypt's post-Mubarak chaos lay in appointing a leader who was amenable to the military. Commenting on this, Aziz (2014) notes that this was absolutely the doom of Morsi because he refused to continue being a puppet of the military. Accordingly, it can be argued that Morsi's temporary marriage of convenience with the military was as a result of his government's ability to comply with the military's demands and the fall out came when Morsi sidelined the military on megaprojects including the Suez Canal development plan and Toshka, a land reclamation project (Marshall 2015). Essentially, besides controlling a shadow economy that comprised roughly 40% of Egypt's whole economy, the military under Mubarak and previous governments 'ran a shadow economy free of taxes, duties, and accountability that rendered impossible any attempt to understand its operations, budgets, and profits' (Aziz 2012, 3). Therefore, it was these substantial financial stakes that accounted for much of the military's stubbornness in having Egypt governed by a truly civilian leader and even economic restructuring inclined to change their privileged status (Aziz 2014). Notwithstanding Morsi's failures, this points beyond doubt to the fact that the army, formerly the author of the revolution, later became its major enemy.

The unwritten rule that Egypt's leaders come from the military prevailed as the arguably military coup that ousted Morsi was finally legalized by the subsequent election of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in May 2014, who won with 97% of the votes (Masoud 2015). Before he came to power al-Sisi was influential in bringing into being the transitional government after Morsi, and held fundamental roles in writing the new constitution and shaping the resultant elections (Abul-Magd 2013). In fact, the removal of Morsi was a military coup aided by popular support (Smith 2013). As such, others conclude that it was not a coup in legal terms as the subsequent transitional government was in the hands of a civilian leader, Adly Mahmoud Mansour (Arafa 2014). This is despite the fact that genuine decision-making persisted in the hands of the SCAF (Nassif 2016).

Al-Sisi had robust links with US representatives at both diplomatic and army levels (Smith 2013). The US military was also kept abreast of plans to oust Morsi by early July by their Egyptian counterparts. Following a series of mass protests and rallies on 30 June calling for Morsi's abdication, the SCAF was resolute that it was its public responsibility to bring about the popular demands (Andromidas 2013). During the post-Morsi interim government, the military under the directives from al-Sisi orchestrated a brutal crackdown on the MB, killing, maiming and arresting many as well as labelling the MB a terrorist organization. Threats to ban the MB as a legitimate political movement in Egypt were also extensive, its media was closed and its assets frozen (Laz 2014; Sharp 2014). There are also growing revelations concerning the military's direct involvement in bankrolling anti-Morsi protests and the leadership's explicit manipulation of the legal structure and the media (Marshall 2015; Stacher 2015).

While the military was commendably largely neutral (only later to support the protesters that successfully permitted Mubarak's overthrow; Nepstad 2011) in the ouster of Mubarak but absolutely partial to one side during the ouster of Morsi, it made its role and that of the regime it created uncertain in the future because it created many foes for both the government and itself from the outset (International Crisis Group 2013). Hinnebusch (2015) sums it up concluding that in Egypt the military's maintenance of institutional independence of the top political authority aided with conflicts of interest it had with the presidential family and a large stake in safeguarding the establishment, plus substantial command of huge areas of the economy, it gave up the president for its preservation and the state's institutions and territorial integrity. Mubarak's departure left Egypt's politicized military labouring to maintain command of the transitional process and direct it, cognisant of the need to preserve its interests. In the face of resistance, it was not hesitant to contain protesters when they besieged its own interests. This was apparent in its assaults against the MB after al-Sisi's coup when it was clear that an entrenched US-funded military was more willing to unleash considerable violence to protect its vital interests. Masoud (2014) affirms that with al-Sisi's election only the names of the different office bearers changed and not the regime's make up. To this end, the Egyptian revolution did not change anything in light of the continuation of the same military entrenchment in both economic and political systems of the country in repudiation of the revolution's demands. Linked to this, Brown (2013) argues that prospects for future democratic development in Egypt were seriously dampened by the ouster of Morsi and that Egyptians were held at ransom by endlessly voting in elections that produced no relief for their political woes. Judging by the latest parliamentary elections held from October to December 2015 comprising contentious legislation, unusual

political coalitions, and an unstable and adverse political milieu for holding the elections (evidenced by the absence of the MB), far-reaching repercussions threaten Egypt's political future (Nafaa 2016).

Indeed, the Egyptian military achieved its primary goal of protecting a combination of both national and parochial interests. These include the belief that it is solely the military that can defend Egypt. Alternatively, the military preserved its privileged position and decisive influence in the country including but not limited to 'a secret budget sheltered from civilian oversight; de facto immunity from prosecution; and vast business ventures' (International Crisis Group 2012, i). Thus, Roll (2012) has described the Egyptian military as representing a state within a state. Others have seen a regression instead of a progression in fulfilling the demands of the Egyptian Revolution (representative democracy). This is so because al-Sisi's rise to power with military backing signified the failure to defend and secure democratically attained political power in the country without the military (Smith 2013). Among other things, the modified new constitution did nothing beyond emphasizing the secular instead of the religious nature of the Egyptian state, as it does not guarantee civilian oversight of the military. In this regard, the 2013 constitution failed to neutralize the authoritarian practices; instead, it methodically routinized them in Egypt's political life (Sharp 2014).

Furthermore, this exposes the US's double standards on human rights because it took a lenient approach instead of censuring al-Sisi's government's excesses. As Fabbrini and Yossef (2015) observe, Obama's wavering in the face of the Egyptian crisis was due to domestic politics (comprising the internally US political elite at odds with each other and an external policy team with diverse views). They further noted that it was not solely Obama's individual physiognomies (dearth of a global understanding, penchant to lecture instead of strategizing) and the impact of the weakening of the United States as a universal world power (incapability to sway foreign actors and situations). Further evidence lies in the US's continuous supply of military assistance to the Egyptian military. Since the military-backed interim government in 2011 to the present al-Sisi government, the US has demonstrated a half-hearted response to Egyptian regime violence (Marshall 2015). Two months after the coup, nearly US$300 million new contracts to deliver or co-produce military gear with Egypt were signed by the US Department of Defence. Among the contracts, one was signed on 6 September 2013 at the peak of violent clashes between backers of the army and Morsi's supporters and involved cooperation between BAE Systems and Egyptian military factories to make radar systems for military cargo aircraft. More so, in merely two weeks following al-Sisi's swearing in, the United States publicized the issue of US$575 million in alleged formerly frozen military aid, before the release of another US$1.3 billion in December 2014 (Marshall 2015).

Furthermore, whereas the overthrow of the Mubarak regime was achieved, economic improvements demanded by the public, such as employment and wage increases, were not fulfilled by Morsi. While this may have been caused by a number of factors, it was largely because of the role of the military in the economy. Despite controlling a huge part of the country's economy accounting for 15% in gross domestic product (GDP), the military enterprises are barely efficient (Roll 2012). Therefore, the military's continued supremacy hinders socio-economic development and engenders the unsustainability of the new political order over time (Roll 2016). According to Marshall (2015), the coming to power of President al-Sisi saw the Egyptian military earnestly resuming its

obsolete industrial operations, control over substantial infrastructure projects and implanting generals at virtually all levels of government replicating the Mubarak era. Indeed, as of 2014 unemployment rates generally stood at over 13% for the general populace and 25% for the youth, bigger than 2010 rates. Moreover, wages for unskilled workers were pegged at 1990s' earnings levels, while yearly inflation continued hovering at approximately 10%. The country's GDP had fallen to 2.3% in comparison with 5.1% in 2010 just prior to the Arab Spring. Shortages of electricity and fuel reached unprecedented levels (Aziz 2014). Egypt's poverty levels increased from 25% of the population living below the poverty line in 2012 to 40% in 2014 (Sakbani 2015). Thus, the door for both democracy and economic prosperity called for by the protesters since 2011 was eluded.

In addition, Egypt, like other Arab countries after the Arab Spring, faced increased problems of public order that have even worsened beyond the levels of the previous regime. The situation was also aggravated by the lack of a clear understanding of the concepts of freedom and democracy and the granting of many freedoms led to a situation of chaos and disorder (Gaub and El Aziz 2014). These include the freedom to carry out political activities following the sudden collapse of the Mubarak regime which led to lawlessness and that was misconstrued as freedom. This was evident in the frequent violence and attacks by majority Muslims on minority Christians (this did not take place during Mubarak's reign) mainly due to the weakening of the police force and the acquisition of unfamiliar freedoms by the people (Political Change in the Middle East 2012). Again, after the ouster of Morsi, rampant violence, destruction and lawlessness were witnessed across Egypt with MB and other anti-Morsi coup elements being the major targets. This prompted them to respond by attacking Christian and secular institutions and people (Saad and El Fegiery 2014). Consequently, Egypt was plagued by social tensions as a result of polarization between political Islamists and secularists. Social tensions remain a major problem for the Egyptian government and people (Gaub and El Aziz 2014). Again, Egypt has continued to witness violent repression of opposition activists, and the United States, among other international players, did not censure the new political leadership on its excesses (Marshall 2015). In fact, the repression of the MB has triggered and worsened the rise of Islamic elements in mainland Egypt and the enduring Islamic insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula which risks undermining the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty (Batchelor 2014; Sharp 2014).

Despite the post-Mubarak regime developments, the opening up of media space among other freedoms in Egypt, censorship and self-censorship continued to exist. Politicization of the media was widespread with the pro-military or pro-Muslim media organs reflecting the political tensions in the country (Gaub and El Aziz 2014). The SCAF's resistance in 2011 to allow the expansion of US democracy-support programmes exacerbated by police raids in early 2012 on several US, European and even domestic NGOs dealing with the promotion of democracy were among other cases (Archick and Mix 2013). The raids were executed as a protest against foreigners who exploited the country's political and economic turmoil which the United States and its Western allies brought about through their NGOs (Archick and Mix 2013). As a result, human rights violations were even worse than those perpetrated during the Mubarak era. Al-Sisi also adopted the use of a combination of both aggressive and savvier tactics targeting rights-focused NGOs in order to ensure unfettered repression of any other dissenting voices across the board and thus clinging on to power unperturbed (Ruffner 2015). The identical social, political and economic factors that contributed towards

the ouster of Mubarak and Morsi were worsening, prompting a possibility of another revolution (Aziz 2014; Batchelor 2014). This could be the reason why al-Sisi was cracking down on civil society and any opposition to his rule. By mid-2016 events were fast proving wrong the touting of al-Sisi as the 'candidate of necessity' (Interview 2014b). Evidently, since al-Sisi became president, 1000 people have been killed and 40,000 people have been jailed while state-sanctioned violence and forced disappearances became a vital tool of state policy (Stacher 2015; BBC News 2016).

Furthermore, post-Mubarak Egypt experienced momentary shifts in the regional diplomatic front. The SCAF's early policies appeared to be moving towards provoking Israel, hence inconsistent and contradictory to the military's interests of receiving financial and material support and assistance from the United States. Evidently, the opening of the Suez Canal to allow two Iranian military warships to pass through immediately following the overthrow of Mubarak was against the long-broken diplomatic ties between Egypt and Iran. Moreover, the SCAF's opening of the border between Egypt and the Gaza Strip, one of the Palestinian Territories in May 2011 which liberated the Palestinians living there from a blockade situation they had been experiencing since Hamas's electoral victory in Gaza had the danger of facilitating the flow of arms to Hamas – an Islamist organization – which has, since 2007, effectively ruled the territory (Political Change in the Middle East 2012). These acts were understandably not favourable to the United States because the former pointed to possible reinstatement of the ties between Egypt and Iran, which would have weakened Iran's isolation, while the latter provoked Israel because both Hamas and Iran are hostile to Israel and, by extension, to the United States. Similarly, Hezbollah's active support for the Syrian regime was motivated by opposition to Israel more than by sectarianism and anything else (Interview 2014a). However, the Egyptian–Iranian relations are nuanced and they date from many years ago. According to Posch (2012), conciliatory gestures by Egypt to Iran were only permissible inasmuch as the actions served Egypt's interests. Practically, the Egyptian military and its leadership remained key assets for the US's interests in ensuring that Egypt was not turning into another Iran (Pouya 2012).

Furthermore, any strengthening of Egypt as an Islamic country has actually turned to be at the expense of Iran in light of the Egyptian MB's good relations with Saudi Arabia and anti-Assad manoeuvres by Morsi before his ouster (Andromidas 2013). This is notwithstanding the fact that Iran had supported the anti-authoritarian uprisings in the Arab world and, except for the Syrian case, it had developed good working relations with Morsi in the optimistic belief that it was an Arab awakening where a restructuring of relations in the region favouring Iran was going to take place (Pradhan 2013). However, from the outset of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were determined to prevent the coming to power of the MB because they were afraid that their own regimes could be swept away by the winds of change which began in favour of the MB. The MB's success was viewed as a victory for Iran in light of the Shiite sect of Islam and the waning power of Saudi Arabia's Sunnis in their contest for regional dominance. This was even evident in the two countries' (Saudi Arabia and UAE) invasion of Bahrain to support that country's royal family to repress the popular rising there (Sailer 2016). While the Saudi regime, as in Jordan and Morocco, proved to be resilient because of both domestic and regional factors combined, unpredicted disturbances in future cannot be ruled out (Al-Rasheed 2016). Only Qatar tried to strike a balance

between an ambitious foreign policy role and imperatives of regional and global practicalities (Nuruzzaman 2015). Indeed, the overthrow of Morsi marked a reversal of the possibly good but shaky relations between Egypt and Iran to the preservation of Egypt's good relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Mason 2015). This is even more critical cognisant of the Palestine question in which Egypt plays a cautious role in line with Saudi Arabia in the hitherto regional hegemony (Posch 2012). Indeed, the Gulf States, to demonstrate their resentment of the MB, poured huge sums of money following the establishment of the interim government in Egypt in a drive to guarantee that the MB and other political dissenting voices would be silenced in the wake of Morsi's ouster (Monier and Ranko 2013). Thus, the Arab Spring totally failed to end the enduring vicious circle to bring about a virtuous one in the MENA where regional integration diffuses political tensions and encourage democracy and development (Sekkat 2014). Thus far, the temporary fluctuations and contradictions did not lead to changes in Iran–Egypt relations.

Road to sustainable peace in Egypt

The United States and its allies should acknowledge that as external actors they have limited influence on events in Egypt and other countries in the MENA. The ultimate and main determinants of the country's and region's future are their governments and people. This should not be perceived from a negative standpoint but as the realist perspective of enhancing the legitimacy of the socio-economic and political establishments emanating from a country coming from a period of unrest. Again, it should not be misconstrued as relieving the United States and its Western allies of their duty to follow closely the developments in one important country in the Arab world. In fact, incentivizing stability processes in the country should continue but be cognisant of developments on the ground.

Essential socio-economic and political reforms should be carried out as a foundation to democratic changes in Egypt, which is faced by a growing population, chronic energy shortages and widespread unemployment. In light of the huge rate of youth unemployment and the youth's role during the Arab Spring, the new government needs to examine critically the needs, opinions and aspirations of the youth with the intention of introducing programmes that intend to improve their well-being. This is because any failure to address the youth's concerns could continue to trigger demonstrations and protests, and risk further radicalizing the protests and the accompanying human rights violations. Moreover, the Egyptian military's role in the economy needs to be reformed to ensure transparency in its operations for the benefit of all citizens. This undoubtedly requires the military's businesses be placed under state and parliamentary oversight which will curb corruption tendencies and production inefficiency which are rampant in many of them.

Both secular and Islamist parties should be engaged and encouraged to accept the fact that they are all Egyptians regardless of religion, race, class, gender or region they affiliate and belong to. For Egypt to be fully democratized, all relevant societal stakeholders should be allowed to take part in all decision-making processes. Inclusion of both the hopes and needs of all sectors of Egyptian society will ensure that effective and long-term development projects take shape because social and religious rigidity will be reduced if not eradicated.

Transitional justice needs to be carefully carried out at the opportune time following institutional reform of the security sector, electoral law and judiciary among other state institutions to ensure that the political aspirations of the Egyptian people are fully fulfilled. Reconciling the MB, other Islamic factions and secular groups need to be taken seriously if Egypt is to avoid the perilous path it has traversed since 2013 (worsened by the forceful suppression of the MB provoking the Islamic elements hitherto confined to the Sinai Peninsula to operate in the whole of Egypt).

Conclusions

Mubarak's overthrow by the Arab Spring revolutionaries was designed to usher in a democratic era in Egypt by ending his authoritarian practices and socio-economic mismanagement. The path to democracy via Morsi was to the detriment of the United States, its Egyptian allies and regional actors' interests; thus, they overthrew the MB-dominated government for the furtherance of their regime-change agenda. Egypt is led by al-Sisi who is pro-United States and, given his military background and backing, has hitherto shown that he is not leading Egypt to democracy, stability and economic development. Egypt, since the fall of Mubarak, has witnessed unstable and violent socio-economic and political challenges. It risks experiencing continued socio-economic and political instabilities because there are no robust efforts to address the root causes of the Egyptian revolution. The regime-change agenda backfired to regrettable levels, evident in the instability it generated in the country. As discussed in this article, political and other freedoms that allow new political actors to emerge have been successively opened up and restricted to levels more or less similar to those of the Mubarak era, if not worse. The socio-economic conditions are even worse than before Mubarak's fall. Against this scenario, the regime-change agenda drivers should re-examine the merits of their strategy given the challenges it has ignited. For sustainable peace and democracy to develop in Egypt there is a strong need to restore the economy and public order. It is imperative for the United States to admit that its ability to influence events in Egypt and beyond is limited. As a result, the ultimate and main determinant of the country's stability and prosperity is the democratically elected government and its people.

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of the role of the National Democratic Institute in democracy promotion in Egypt and other countries in the MENA, see also Campbell (2010).
2. *Kifaya* was the catchphrase of the Egyptian Movement for Change, which was set up in 2004 just in advance to the run up to the 2005 election.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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