The Egyptian Case:
Can Subjects become Citizens?

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"Game Over. We win. Go out". These were among the slogans shouted by protestors in Tahrir Square in Egypt in the beginning of 2011. The protests spread across the country from January 25th till February 11th are referred to in Egypt as the "25th of January Revolution." These events culminated in a revolutionary ongoing process of transformation of collective subjugation into 'citizenship' in Egypt. What was unprecedented was not breaking the wall of fear or protesting, but the fact that solidarity became mobilized and a sincere belief in the power of the will to change was born in millions across the country. The fall of Mubarak marked the turning point when subjects of the state calling for dignity were transformed into citizens. Although the awareness of rights and obligations as a citizen is still blurred and not yet fully crystallized, the concept of 'citizen' itself ceased to be actively present in Egypt since the 1950s. This paper will look at the difference of conceptualizing and expressing the meanings of citizenship pre- and post-January 25th, 2011.

This paper would be divided into two parts. The first deals with a description of pre-January 25th events of state-society relationships. The second looks at the presumed transition from the state of subjugation into a state of citizenship. For the first part I will present edited excerpts of my graduation project in political science at Cairo University in 2006. I thought that it is a feasible way of comprehending the limits of what could be said under a despotic system. Freedom of expression was dealt with in a rather haphazard way. There was no permanent green light to it, but towards the past ten years, the boundaries of what could be said were drastically dismantling. However, the regime did not give serious attention to expressions of discontent and demands of political change. As long as the barrier to the critique of the person of the President remained untouched, journalists were free to write in oppositional newspapers. In the meantime, the state utilized its security forces to the maximum and torture became of the 'normal' everyday events we hear of whenever someone ventured her political critique out of the private space to the public one.

Pre January 25th, 2011

In 2003, an Egyptian writer named Sonallah Ibrahim publicly denounced the state award for literature. The event was not limited to a public rejection of the award, but it extended to a sudden public attack on the ruling system in front of the media and live symbols of the regime. This ushered in a new stage of the Egyptian political system; the rigid environment of authoritarianism that hegemonized the social Egyptian stage started cracking in the direction of change. One of the most interesting innovations of authoritarian systems is the idea of national security both philosophically and instrumentally. Security forces appeared sometimes to replace the party system,

civil society and the government by monopolizing both legitimate and illegitimate violence.

A dual operation has been set to action: the failure of the modernizing state and the abortion of social change. Neo-fascism in Egypt meant Security-cracy (Ali 2005) or Security-kratos. This symbolized a new system based on dedicating the state to serve narrow interests and isolating the majority from any field of political, social or economic collective action. Security-cracy led to the atomization of masses, as Hannah Arendt argued. Atomization meant depriving these masses from the opportunity of collective action and busying it with individual and personal issues. The police force's mission was no longer capturing criminals, but staying on alert waiting for the governmental commands to capture any group of people it points out.

The image of the state became one of intelligence service, based on power, violence and authoritarianism. It drew the reasons for its continuity from fear, and not from legitimacy. This consolidated in the minds of people that violence is the master, and it is the sole path for any political activity between the authorities and the opposition. This is actually what happened after the revolution. The discussion of the atomized demands on personal agendas, often led to the usage of violence in a mass scale. The events at the Israeli and Saudi Embassies, Imbaba churches, and Abassiya Square are some examples of the clashes happening right after the demise of the regime.

To borrow Migdal's (1988) model of differentiating between strong and weak states, the Egyptian case is a complicated one, where state power preserved social control as "the society shapes the state even as the state deeply influences the society" (p. 181). This is a case in which state and society relations are based on mutual politics of oppression, hegemony, negation and containment.

Citizenship of subjugation was the direct result of the physical humiliation and contempt of the Egyptian mind by state authorities. The political official discourse of the ruling elite constantly reflected this. Nasser's speeches are full of such examples. In addition to his famous phrase, "we give and you do not have the right to ask," he uttered a famous statement after an alleged assassination attempt, in which he proclaimed that he was the one who implanted dignity in Egyptians. By this, Nasser had distorted the relation between the ruler and the subjects. A conception of rights and obligations got so blurred that a coherent theory of citizenship became impossible to conceive of. Nasser was portrayed as the tyrant who despised his people, in its sections; the aware and the unaware, the silent, and the expressive, the moving and the patient; the first section would be treated with political prisons, torture and other means of oppression, and the other faction would undergo violent brainwashing processes (Ali 2005: 190).

The oppressed and those belonging to the same base of solidarity await any opportunity so that their solidarity would crystallize into a strong and unified collective action. It is here that the role of middle class appears as the most suitable class to take on its shoulders this endeavor. This new middle class comprised usually the forces of discontent due to the formation of a new Habitus through education, an idea of citizenship and capitalist economy. Thus new social groups with influential socio-political pressures emerged (professional classes, youth, public women). These new social groups are often the container of moral outrage that erupted due to the awareness of what is available and the inability to acquire it, hence a constant feeling of exclusion.

One truth governs the Egyptian reality; the society was living a state of complete rejection of its defeat, backwardness, confiscation of its liberty, awareness, and will. Circles of contentions increase with its spread over the societal scope. These politics of contention appear as a reaction to changes in political constraints and opportunities. Waves of political contention grow in the most centralized societies subject to police control after years of oppression and constrained participation because individuals respond to opportunities, as Tocqueville stated in *Ancien Regime*:

> Thus the social order overthrown by a revolution is almost always better than the
> one immediately preceding it, and experience teaches us that, generally speaking, the

> most perilous moment for a bad government is one when it seeks to mend its ways
> [...] Patiently endured for so long as it seemed beyond redress, a grievance comes to
> appear intolerable once the possibility of removing it crosses men's minds. (Quoted
> in Stone and Mennell 1980: 230)

In 2004, a socio-political rejection movement emerged and took the name "Kifaya". Its main objective was change. The element of symbolism and precision in the choice of place and time of protest were one of the most important impact factors of the movement. The slogan of *Kifaya* (Enough) was expressive and short, thus was easily circulated among different strata of the society. This slogan expressed the evolution of an unprecedented and an unofficial public discourse based on complete rejection of all political and economic settings that are linked to the current ruling regime. This was reflected in the slogans during protests: *enough corruption/ enough communalism/ enough despotism.* This was in addition to the slogans raised after president Mubarak was sworn in again: *Invalid/ We need a new constitution and not iron rule/ We need a constitution of principles and not rule by emergency laws.* As for the element of place, the first protest was situated in front of the High Court to epitomize the protective role of law. The following demonstration was in front of the Book Fair. Then in front of Cairo University, afterwards *Kifaya* organized silent candle marches at the mausoleum of the liberal freedom fighter *Saad Zaghlul, Sayeda Zainab Mosque,* and The Virgin Mary Church in *Zaitoun.* These are all places with strong symbolic capital and significance for any citizen. As for the timing, the first demonstration was scheduled to be on the annual day of the declaration of Human Rights on 10th December 2005. Other demonstrations were scheduled on other events, such as the day of the student.

Kifaya's achievements could be summarized in three points. The first is breaking the culture of fear. The second is breaching the barrier of criticizing the president and the God-king equation. The third is capturing the right to demonstrate. Contrary to the established custom, Kifaya never obtained a permission to demonstrate. Legal cases were filed against election fraud and violation of civil rights. The movement had gone in solidarity with political opinion prisoners. This is in addition to other achievements like organizing simultaneous demonstrations in 14 Egyptian governorates on April 26th, 2005, and the establishment of the Union of Egyptian Mothers as a form of protest against sexual harassment by police forces on the day of demonstrating against constitutional amendments. *Kifaya* recruited also journalists and lawyers to take on civil fights against violence committed against protestors and their detention and torture.

From the perspective of citizenship, the founders of *Kifaya* had realized that taking shelter in the legitimacy of the street or popular legitimacy to establish its public presence is what could give the moment its popularity. A second factor is to stress on the constitution as a safeguard since it guarantees every citizen the right to express his opinion by demonstration (in the case of *Kifaya*) with the condition of announcing the time and place. By this, *Kifaya* managed to adopt a policy of working outside the law but not against it and thus achieved popularity.

Kifaya became as a trend-setter when it started focusing on local and national demands (ending of emergency laws, torture and Mubarak's presidency and monarchic scheme) instead of the Islamist-led fascination with international concerns such as the ever-persisting Arab Israeli conflict and the "Free Jerusalem" campaign, or the popping up issues like the Danish Cartoons, 9/11 and anti-Bush campaigns. *Kifaya* was able, as a social force for the first time, to mobilize thousands of middle-class professionals, students, teachers, journalists and judges who belonged to different ideological spectra (Islamist, socialist, liberal and secular). It chose to work from the street instead of the headquarters of oppositional parties.

Post January 25th, 2011: The Transition from Subjugation to Citizenship

When I wrote the word 'subject' in the title of the paper, I did not intend to contribute to any distinction between the ideas of a sovereign rational Western citizen, and that of an irrational traditional Eastern subject. The word subject appeared to be the most convenient since it was not possible to identify nationals of the Egyptians state in the period of 1952-2011 as citizens due to theoretical predicament of defining a citizen. What has to be definitely done is to think beyond the standard affiliations of citizenship. By this I mean what Turner (1993) for example lists as the Enlightenment and Modernity, the secular state and the Universalistic norms of participation in civil society.

Citizenship is not a political decision from above but a societal process. The word citizenship itself in Arabic has been a modern invention, and carries the root of *watan* (meaning the patria or home). To speak of citizenship, one should directly link it to both modernity and democratic statehood. Modern citizenship is said to be the product of three political revolutions: the English civil war, the American war of independence, and the French revolution (Turner 2006). Its first denotations were of a dual nature; that is of belonging to a "national" community; and of inclusion in a self-governing political community (See: Brubacker 1992; Castles 2005; Benhabib 2005). Gradually and with the changes in the structure of European societies, new definitions pertaining to community and belonging have evolved and therefore have deeply transformed the meaning of citizenship (Turner 2006). These structural changes are mainly first, the developments happening in eastern Europe and the post-Soviet union order which led to the emergence of complicated relationships between nationalism, political identity, and citizen participation; second, the global refugee problem; and third, the European community/ Union where questions pertaining to minorities and migrant labor have arisen. These changes appear in a process of tightening citizenship while at the same time de-ethnicizing it by the inclusion of jus soli regulations on acquisition of citizenship, and the increasing tolerance of dual citizenship and minority rights in the European Union (Dobrowoslsky 2006).

Definitions of citizenship vary from being first a status "of people who are unable to discern the common good but who nevertheless possess an uncanny ability to elect people who will find it for them" (Alejandro 1998: 9); or a *right*, especially those democratic rights of participation in decision-making (as a form of positive freedom). Agency also appears to be one of the definitions, as Lister (1998) argues that citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents and therefore human agency is embedded in social relations. Citizenship is furthermore considered a legal and social *contract* as have emerged in several post-revolution debates and especially as have been declared through the Document of Alazhar. One of the contentious aspects is the *practice of civic virtue* (Kymlicka and Norman 2000). Liberal virtue theory as put forward by theorists like Amy Gutman, Stephen Macedo and William Galston divides civic virtues into four categories: general virtues like courage, law-abidingness and loyalty; social virtues as independence and open-mindedness; economic virtues like work ethic; and political virtues as in the capacity to discern and respect the rights of others, willingness to demand only what can be paid for, ability to evaluate the performance of those in office, and willingness to engage in public discourses. It is these two last virtues (ability to question authority and the willingness to engage in public debates) that are the most important components of liberal virtue theory (Kymlicka and Norman 1994, p. 365). *Belonging and inclusion* are another two dimensions of defining citizenship. Citizenship is about feeling at home in the nation or as Mehta (2006) puts it as the capacity to see the nation as a repository of your own history and culture. However, two lucid cases offer a controversy to the argument on belonging. These are evident in cases of the marginalized Bedouins of Sinai, and the economically deprived youth who did not hesitate to jump in dilapidated boats heading illegally

to Southern Europe in search for a better life.

If we look at citizenship as a relation and not a right, it would be bi-dimensional in the sense that there is an association with other communities and with the state. We find how social inequalities are so pronounced in a manner subverting the practice of citizenship. Relations with other members of society forming different communities do not contract the essence of citizenship on a social level, but when we look at the political level, the numerical majority of Muslims is not ready to accept a Christian or rather a non-Muslim ruler, and probably would never accept one. Intellectually, there was a rise of the debate in Egypt on citizenship days after the revolution to address the communal problems that erupted in Imbaba. The *mufti* gave an opinion that citizenship is the solution and the remedy to the problem of communalism. As for citizenship being a relation with the state and its apparatuses, this is totally missing from the Egyptian scene. Citizenship has been used as a tool for the marginalized (be it the Bedouins of Sinai, or political opposition forces like the Islamists). The sense of self-respect that is synonymous with citizenship to a great extent, and leads to calls negating second-class citizen character and equality in application of law, is stressed through calls for public expression that is definitely unapologetic (again in Mehta's words). Arendt's words carry very valid meaning now:

> Human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities (Arendt 1973: ix)

Arendt also spoke of a republican form of active citizenship. Dealing with a notion of active citizenship, Asef Bayat fascinatingly analyses street politics in the Middle East and captures the meaning of active citizenry as "the ability to create social space within which those individuals who refuse to exit, can advance the cause of human rights, equality and justice" (Bayat 2004: 5). Active citizenship thus refers to

> A sustained presence of individuals, groups and movements in every available social space, whether institutional or informal, in which it asserts its rights and fulfills its responsibilities. For it is precisely in such spaces that alternative discourses, practices and politics are produced. (Bayat 2004: 5)

New constellations of democratic and universal perceptions gained importance. Of those attempts were the desire to rid citizenship of its ascriptive and particularistic qualities, and thus an intellectual move from the concept of 'place', where particularism and ethnos dominate, to a concept of 'space' where conceptions of universalism and demos prevail. Bayat takes the concept of space as a contentious arena for street politics. According to him, conflict between the state and society originates because of the active usage of space by subjects who were supposed to be using it only passively (through walking, driving, or how the state dictates). By being active users, they challenge the state's control over public order. This is especially the case in neoliberal cities where the numbers of occupants of the street (street vendors, youth, women, and even children) are overwhelming (Bayat 2009).

The street does not appear as a brute force or physicality, but it is an expression of a political street of modern urban theatre of contention for ordinary people who are structurally absent from institutional positions of power (Bayat 2009: 211). Streets of contention (such as *Istiqlal* in Istanbul, Revolution street of Tehran, *Talaat Harb* and *Qasr al Nile* of Cairo) are all connected to squares and thus provide centrality, accessibility and proximity to vicinities of campus, university, mosques, bookstores, coffee shops, independent theaters, and art galleries. They carry symbolic and historical significance (*Tahrir* square has the biggest apparatus of state bureaucracy called *Mogama' Al-tahrir*, there is the nearby High Court, and *Abdeen* palace). They are also

metropolitan hubs that are well connected with transportation. Finally, they are flexible and easily maneuverable with lots of shops, buildings, and alleys where protestors can hide while fleeing the firing of the police forces.
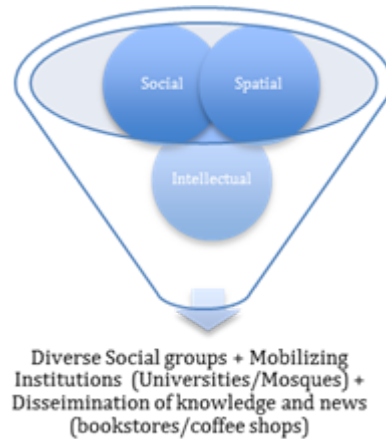
Figure 1: **The Political Grid**

Can subjects really turn into citizens? This remains a question to be answered, as the present and future get unfolded. After February 11th and the ousting of Mubarak, three main discourses governed the scene when it came to citizenship: the first is the fear of Copts of an Islamic State, the second is the preceding and uncalled for polarization into the Islamist camp and the Secular liberal camp, and the third and newest is the marginalization issue of the Bedouins of Sinai. Other dilemmas remain. These are first the underlying principles guiding citizenship: who invents them and who governs them? This in turn leads to a democratic and legal paradox when applied to the debate on constitution. The second is the separation of religion and state as a principle of citizenship and the doubtful operation of citizens as autonomous individuals.

The pertained reality of the ascent of Islamists to power erased the presumptions concerning the first discourse on the fear of Copts. An Islamic State was not the main goal of the Islamists, who proved to follow the same path of their predecessors; namely the monopoly of power and the failure to address political pluralism as a strategy of inclusive governance. Despite the proven irrelevance of the first discourse, the second one assumed predominance and culminated eventually in the military ousting of the democratically elected president. The third discourse was entirely neglected in the short period of the Muslim Brotherhood, but acquired deviant attention during Al-Sisi's ascent to power. Suddenly the marginalization discourse was replaced with one of a fight against terrorism. Sinai became a spot where terrorists are harbored and are threatening state security by targeting the military. The citizenship and right-based discourse has been superseded by the state security priority and public order.

Conclusion

Part of what happened in the Arab world is that authoritarian states failed for the first time to normalize the usage of violence against protestors. Solidarity or *'assabiyya* migrated from the rulers to the masses.[1] Therefore, the immunity of Gulf States remained static (since the

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[1]The notion of solidarity or *assabiyya* is one of the cornerstones of sociological analyses of Muslim societies and thought. *'assabiyya* is a concept elaborated by Ibn Khaldun, the medieval Arab scholar who is often considered

rulers' *assabiyya* is stronger, intertwined and consistent with the nation's *assabiyya*). Despite this, several drastic changes happened afterwards and were exemplified in the strengthening of women's movements in Saudi Arabia, especially the quest to drive; elections at the local level and the *shia* demonstrations in Bahrain, to name a few.

In Egypt, protestors obstinately turned protest into a ritual, a daily activity with increasing numbers of mobilized people. Protestors managed to normalize their protest as a daily routine and not just in *Tahrir* Square but also all over Egypt. For the first time there was an amalgamation of shared public opinions, what has been uttered secretly or privately for years, managed to be expressed collectively and publicly. Through the years following the war on terror and the consequent invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, Arab streets managed to creatively invent new strategies of protest.

The visibility of protests is one of the most notable remarks. There is the numerical visibility with the goal of creating a *millioniyah* (a term the protestors created meaning a one-million-person protest) and thus the symbolism of breaking fear and mass support of demands for change. Another visibility is that of graffiti. The first thing that would strike you, once you went then to Cairo or Alexandria, is the amount of graffiti expressing the new free Egypt which was all drawn at the time of the protest and especially right after February 11th, 2011. Messages were easily live and electronically transmitted through Aljazeera channel, social media (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube). These message transmitters played as triggers or means through which "to imagine" and "to express" became synonymous or leading to one another.

Figure 2: **The joke reads: Obama- I think you should write a farewell letter to the Egyptian People. Mubarak- Why? Where are they going?! (Photo taken from a public Facebook post, 09/02/2011)**

I would like to conclude with an optimistic spirit since one of the unique protest strategies

the founder of sociology. Here it is used as a conceptual tool. As explained in his Muqaddimmah, *'assabiyya* shows how power is the basis of ruling, and every state is established upon violence, and not on a contractual relationship, and when *'assabiyya* reaches its climax, the tribe attains then royal authority, either by despotism, or by backing.

was the joke. Joke generation signified the ability of Egyptians to create real public opinion. However, before January 25th, it usually failed to transform this public opinion from an implicit to an explicit form. The political joke has been, historically, one of the main characteristics of the Egyptian society. A joke was not intended for mere mockery, but for knowledge. One should look at the refrain from participating in mainstream political life due to the practice of political behavior through jokes, as indeed a form of opposition. A joke becomes an opinion. In the preceding time of the revolution, there was a notable disappearance of the high volume and strength of the political joke in Egypt. A joke used to summarize people's demands of change, but some sort of distortion plagued the Egyptian society and led to the disappearance of this crystallization of the collective spirit. This was on account of the monotonous political life and the lack of hope in change, in addition to the civilizational backwardness that the society suffered from and hence imposed a culture of subjugation. With the Tahrir protests rising, the Egyptian regained her spirit again and the joke reappeared with an intense momentum.

Arts thus emerged as a creative way of protest, just like it happened in Iran in 1979. Songs were one of the tools to overcome fear and to express feelings. YouTube came in handy at that time to disseminate these songs played and sung in the square to the rest of the world, or at least to those out of *Tahrir*. Three songs became very popular, one was written before the revolution but was sung during it and had elements of increasing confusion, weakness and fear, and obstinacy through the promise to keep changing. Another was made right after the revolution and carried the notions of martyrdom and paradise.

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