

# DEMOCRACY IN EGYPT

*Applying the Tocqueville Standard*

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Westerners have long hoped that our material prosperity and comforts would serve as a model in the Middle East, and that democracy would enthusiastically be embraced there. But the hard work of building the rudiments of self-rule at a working level in those societies—the make-or-break for a true democratic revolution—has taken a backseat to wishful thinking. In the recent Egyptian uprising, when threats, riots, and premonitions of violence persuaded the Egyptian Army to schedule presidential and parliamentary elections in September, the Western media nodded approvingly, but didn't spend much time considering the principles on which political parties are built, what kinds of parties are likely to emerge from Egypt's current state, and whether they will improve Egypt's prospects for individual liberty.

History does not offer much confirmation that quick elections after uprisings actually increase the long-range prospects for political freedom. Shortly after the revolution in France, Edmund Burke noted that free and fair elections were indeed held, but political freedom was soon silenced by the representatives who were elected. Out of political ignorance, inexperi-

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ence, personal profit, or factional interests, elected representatives quickly dismantled the remains of all old social structures, irremediably squan-

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dered the public treasury, destroyed industries and laws, and brought on sixty years of recurring revolutions.

The hasty implementation of democratic institutions in an inexperienced political environment is always difficult. Among the challenges Egypt faces as it undertakes the daunting task of creating political freedom is, first, to examine the principles that are fundamental to the nation’s political life and, *then*, to encourage the

emergence of parties. Under ideal circumstances, such a process would change the Middle East positively—and far more radically than any coup or uprising. It would light the way for popular rule in the region, increase the chance that governments would protect rather than oppress, improve the status of women, and raise the standard of living. For now, however, such a regional outcome is impossible to see.

One cannot help but wonder what Alexis de Tocqueville would say about Egypt’s plight. Perhaps the most astute observer of modern liberal democracy, the French philosopher famously diagnosed the challenges facing America in the early nineteenth century, writing of a lasting tension between liberty and government-assured well-being. He predicted that this disparity would serve as the chief underlying conflict in domestic politics, and the character of our political parties surely proves his point. Tocqueville’s two great works, *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime*

*and the French Revolution* both examine the necessary conditions for the development of democracy. For Tocqueville, there were two key questions: What are the grounds on which true political parties are formed in free societies and what is the political and psychological significance of private property?

Tocqueville writes that “great political parties” must be organized around an entire population’s essential interest, and argues that the most pertinent interest of all citizens is the extent of central power’s authority and the related question of safeguarding the political rights for whose protection the state exists.

The prominent parties in most functioning liberal democracies are, in fact, organized around these very questions—and the extent and power of governments in such states fluctuate according to the answers. Egypt could significantly improve its prospects for democracy if, in addition to rushing a vote, the new parties debated how the state should protect the freedom of all Egyptians. Given the right amount of armed oversight to prevent violence, any country can hold “free and fair” elections. But if the limits of political debate are circumscribed, for example, by a powerful religious party that severely hinders or fails to acknowledge individual rights, no election can bring about a liberal democracy. And at the moment, parties in Egypt seem to be organizing to bring power to a handful of people with their own particular interests.

Among the front-runners of the self-proclaimed “liberal” parties in Egypt is the Democratic Front Party, whose vice president, Sekina Fouad, compared Jews to locusts in a publication two years ago, where she argued that Jews consume and destroy societies. Another leading party, Al-Wafd, has for years used conspiratorial manipulations and anti-Semitic slogans to gain popular support. Never has either party articulated how to safeguard civil rights or protect political freedom. The US is right to support popular rule in Egypt, and elections are a basic mechanism of democracy, but there is an important difference between form and substance, and it would be a mistake to assume that merely holding elections will advance the cause of Egyptian democracy.

Egypt’s geography should not be ignored either. Madison pointed out in *Federalist* 10 that a state easily falls victim to demagoguery when its population is unevenly distributed throughout its territory, as is the case in Egypt. Eighty percent of Egypt’s population resides in the relatively close cities of Cairo, Alexandria, and urban centers along the Nile. This

unevenness rapidly facilitated Egypt's revolution but could just as easily help the spread of undemocratic forces, even under the guise of a fair electoral process.

In *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Tocqueville observes that it is "quite understandable that when a nation is badly governed it should develop a wish to govern itself." But, he continues,

a desire for independence of this kind, stemming as it does from a specific, removable cause—the evil practices of a despotic government—is bound to be short-lived. Once the circumstances giving rise to it have passed away, it languishes and what at first sight seemed a genuine love of liberty proves to have been merely hatred of a tyrant.

Once the guillotine had finished its work, the French uprising ended in exhaustion and factious satisfaction of private interests. The central administration's power reemerged and expanded to correct the revolution's sanguinary excesses. The popular will approved, but the public good nonetheless suffered. Without genuine political parties to articulate the role of government, a similar fate awaits Egypt.

If Tocqueville were witness to Egypt today, he might warn of an even worse possibility than administrative expansion and its supreme rule—the rise of a new and radical religious power that establishes itself by manipulating public opinion and flattering or threatening the citizenry. In late February, the Muslim Brotherhood articulated a new political program aimed at cultivating its political base. To serve the public good, the Brotherhood intends to sweep the country "clean of the remnants of the former regime." This, the Brotherhood's leaders said, includes not only all those individuals tied to the Mubarak administration, but journalists and middle-class business owners as well. In fact, the Brotherhood's list of enemies is so general that anyone above the poverty line appears to be subject to suspicion and blamed for the country's troubles.

Tocqueville argues that new governments begotten from revolution level civil society as a way of eliminating opposition. In France, with the destruction of political and civil institutions, traditional and moderate social authority could no longer guide public opinion. The revolution

became a battle for the minds of the majority, growing from a mere campaign against aristocracy and hereditary privileges into a full-out propaganda war. And the radicals won. If the Muslim Brotherhood is as good as its word in Egypt, the yet small and unprotected middle class—business owners, property holders, journalists—will be targets for elimination.

To move toward more democratic institutions today, Egypt needs a larger—not a smaller—middle class, with a flourishing civil society composed of property owners with a stake in stability and moderate governance and the freedom to make decisions that will promote more of the same.

Radical religious rule would be especially dangerous in Egypt, since any new party would possess the added strength of an already highly developed administrative bureaucracy—a perfect instrument for increased tyranny.



**The Rambler himself**

Beinecke Library, Yale University

**T**he fate of the middle class depends on another democratic institution—private property. Middle Eastern autocrats are intimately familiar with the political importance of private property. Their subjects are less so. In free societies, the principle and practice of private property serves two obvious purposes, which current social science largely overlooks.

Secure ownership of private property nurtures and preserves in citizens the belief that they possess something of their own in the world; that they have something at stake, something to fight for, and that they are not merely an extension of the will of an impersonal state or a single tyrant. If citizens believe that they have a power of their own, they are more likely to find the strength to resist subjugation. Private property preserves and encourages the desire of citizens to control their own lives and take

responsibility for acting together for the common good. Secure and rational rights to property ownership lay the groundwork for this essential element in the political psychology of citizenship.

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Experience from Cairo’s suburbs—where the media reported that during the riots property-owning neighbors worked together to protect each other and themselves—bears this out. The vested interests that private property provides, and the material strength generated from it, are among the few bases on which citizens can organize against administrative tyrannies or radical religious takeovers. Middle Eastern autocrats, by withholding

from their subjects the right to ownership, by constantly and suddenly changing property laws, or by habituating citizens to nationalization, have succeeded at once in weakening opposition to despotic governance and in suppressing an important foundation of self-rule.

This is not a new theme. European Enlightenment thinkers, and the American founders they inspired, grasped this essential connection between private property and self-governance. They also knew that a society’s property rights dictate its commerce, and that a thriving commercial sector can only arise if private property is safe-guarded. Most important, commerce serves as a counterbalance to administrative centralization, or to radical religious rule, by creating opposing interests to the state, whose nature it is to expand its sphere of domination.

The growth of the Egyptian middle class over the past few years indicates the existence of an entrepreneurial spirit. Recent liberal reforms implemented by the Mubarak regime had raised the GDP by nearly five

percent per annum over the past few years. The construction industry was booming, and more and more workers with higher-education credentials were entering the workforce. Without the support of a genuine credit and banking system, however, and without legal protection for investments, middle-class spending will go more and more into the service sector and consumer goods—or into the black market. Nearly all large industries in Egypt, as in other Middle East states, are already managed by centralized planning committees, and in the absence of property rights, we can expect more of the same.

Tocqueville describes clearly how, despite the French Revolution's best and bloodiest efforts to tear down the aristocracy, France could neither expunge the idea of centralized government that characterized the old state nor establish an effective alternative. By contrast, American democracy took root, flourished, and matured from the bottom up. Its leaders were inspired by Enlightenment ideas, but the backbone of democratic governance drew strength from the town meetings, familiarity with self-rule at local levels, and habits of self-reliance that were the result of English political traditions and individual citizens' recent heritage as colonists.

Egypt resembles pre-revolutionary France far more closely than it does the American colonies before 1776. Traditions of self-governance are extremely weak, as is any sense of what to demand from the state in the aftermath of autocracy. Deep poverty is commonplace. The ownership of private property is restricted to the few, and even those who possess it both dread losing it and underestimate its political *and* psychological significance. Besides the possibility of a return to military dictatorship—the fate of France after the Reign of Terror—Egypt faces the lurking possibility of radical religious rule in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose own founding fathers enjoyed cordial relations with Adolf Hitler. For every reason to hope for democracy after Mubarak, there is an equally convincing reason to watch for and guard against its opposite.

Holding elections in September may produce positive results, as those who want peace in the region hope. However, it would be foolish for the US to allow hope to determine its policy. What's needed is a long-term plan to assist Egypt in establishing democratic political institutions. Needed now are experienced politicians who can draft laws that protect

property rights, and experienced officials who understand how to make local government work effectively at the grassroots level. The assistance of both is more immediately useful and responsible than lectures on Western values. Military officers from states that acknowledge the importance of elected civilian control over the military and can explain why this is in the interest of both the nation and its armed forces would help increase the chance that Egypt does not revert to dictatorship.

Finally, if these uprisings really were caused, as Tocqueville says, more by hatred of a tyrant than by love of liberty, US foreign policy must learn the subtle difference between the two. American policy is more likely to achieve long-term practical results if it provides the essential building blocks of political liberty than if it raises a moist finger into the wind or places its trust in whoever calls himself a democrat. ❧