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A Tour of Egypt's Half-Finished Revolution

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I arrived in the Egyptian town of Edfu on a Friday in early February. The temple there, a wondrous reminder of the Egyptian pharaohs' obsession with eternity and architectural monumentalism, was eerily quiet and empty of tourists. But the silence was more than filled by the blaring sound of the Friday sermon, broadcast over loudspeakers at unavoidably high volume. Between verses of the *Qur'an*, the voice waxed violent about the "American massacre of innocent Muslims in Iraq." There is a correlation, I've noticed, between the volume of mosques' loudspeakers in a country and its radical Islamists' ambitions and aggressive claims to power. Thirty-three years ago, one of the first hints of rising religious despotism in Iran was the sudden increase in the volume of loudspeakers in every neighborhood mosque. Piety was no longer private and voluntary, but public and mandatory.

I was spending just over two weeks in Egypt as part of a Stanford alumni tour of the country—a few days in Cairo, the rest up and down the Nile, through towns and villages still bearing signs of the parliamentary elections. The entrance to every town and village was guarded by units of the army, and occasionally by a bevy of armed locals. A surprisingly large number were sporting a black mark on their foreheads, called *zabiba* in Arabic—a sign that they pray and prostrate themselves so often that a callus has developed on their foreheads. In Egypt, as in Iran, a callus of piety used to be a true rarity, but in both countries today they are indispensable tools of political ascent. It is hard to find a member of the Egyptian parliament—or Iran's for that matter—that does not sport a *zabiba*.

For the few blocks from the boat to the Edfu temple we had to use a weather-worn carriage, pulled by a sickly horse and driven by Mahmoud, a man who said he was under forty but looked much older. His few remaining blackened teeth betrayed long years of malnutrition and ill-health. On the way to the temple and back, Mahmoud talked pleadingly about his economic plight and the difficulties of feeding both his horse and his family of four. No tourists, he said, which meant no food. When I asked him which party he had voted for in the last election, he told me—with sardonic resignation—that he had voted for the Salafis. They won't do anything for me, or my horse, he said, but at least they might create a sense of Islamic community in this world and help with salvation in the other.

Tourism had accounted for at least half of employment in Egypt, but the tumult of last February's uprising and the instability that has defined Egypt ever since have brought tourism to a grinding halt. Despite the resulting economic hardships, the first order of business for the new parliament's radical Salafi members was to demand segregated beaches and a countrywide ban on alcohol.

The resolution did not pass, but Salafi forces had already succeeded in shutting down many bars in the country long before last February. If Lawrence Durrell's brilliant *Alexandrian Quartet* is still an engaging reminder of the rich cosmopolitan life of Alexandria, where Copts and Jews, Muslims and Europeans lived amicably together, Alaa Al Aswany's novel *The Yacoubian Building* chronicles the gradual change in the country's cultural makeup in the decades before the fall of Mubarak. The closure of bars might be discernible only to an informed observer; more stunning and impossible to miss is the change in the visual fabric of Cairo and other towns and villages. Outside Cairo, women are virtually absent from the public domain, and in Cairo it is increasingly difficult to find a woman not wearing some version of the hijab. Even the negab—where a black veil covers not only the entire woman's body, but hides her face and eyes—is becoming more and more prevalent.

To be sure, the rising political influence of religious fundamentalism is not the only challenge looming for Egyptian liberalism. On the one hand, there is the military's top brass, which were widely seen as liberators last year but now appear reluctant to turn over power. And there are also the twin scourges of poverty and governmental incompetence. On the edges of Cairo, on the way to the pyramids—those masterful reminders of architectural genius—I found easily the most remarkable symbol of lawlessness, corruption, or failure of governmental oversight: thousands of multi-level, clumsily constructed, illegal, half-finished brick buildings. The locals call it *Ashwa'awat* (accidentally grown) and estimate that several million people dwell in this urban jungle. The neighborhoods have no electricity, no sewage system, and no garbage collection. Police or even military do not dare enter the areas. Virtually every one of these illegal buildings looks and is half-finished—a metaphor, perhaps, for the unfinished business that is the democratic transition in Egypt.

Abbas Milani is a contributing editor for The New Republic and the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford, where he is the co-director of the Iran Democracy Project. His latest book is The Shah.

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