



## Russia and Egypt: Conflicts in the political elite and protest movements in 2011–2012

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### ABSTRACT

This article describes some reasons that initiated protest movements in Russia and Egypt in 2011. The author thinks that the conflict in the political elite made was an important background that made thousands of people take to the streets of the cities. Russian and Egyptian political systems, that seem to be so different, had much in common in fact: hidden struggle between conservative «people of force» and liberals. The situation was aggravated by the coming elections and consequences of the international economic crisis. The research is based on Russian and Egyptian Media materials.

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Here, we consider some political factors that resulted in mass protests both in Egypt and in Russia. At first sight, it does not seem correct to compare the accomplished upheaval in Egypt with only a few major demonstrations in Russia, the more so as these two countries are very different. However, if we consider the situations in Egypt and in Russia in more detail, we can reveal some similar plots, which make it possible to explain, at least partly, the reasons for these riots.

There is no denying that all revolutions, both successful and aborted, imply deeply rooted political, social, and

economic prerequisites. Different researchers attempted to reveal some universal key («crucial») reasons for social tumult both in Arabic countries and in Russia, and these attempts often led to extended generalizations, in particular, in the analysis of the political component of revolutionary processes. In numerous Western studies, primarily in those of liberal origin, the regimes in both Russia and Egypt were frequently estimated as similarly authoritarian, and therefore, similarly doomed to revolutionary transformations. Estimate of the political system of Egypt as a clunky autocratic mechanism, eventually cracked and collapsed under the pressure of discontented masses, is one of the most widespread concepts of the «Egyptian Spring»; such abrupt brush-strokes and straightforward clichés to a great extent simplify, if not distort, the real situation. During the tumults of 2011, a number of Western and Russian opposition-oriented media also focused their attention on the authoritarian nature of the power in Russia, on Putin's omnipotence and on his virtual «irremovability». One of the most popular (and making everyone's mouth sore) claims

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to both Mubarak and Putin was that they had been (and still intended to be) in power for a long time, thereby violating a universal democratic principle of interchangeability of power, applied in a number of states. Hence, allegedly, is the reason for the actions undertaken by the «middle class» or «educated youth», tired of the dictatorship and suddenly ripe for the protest. The author believes that due to the liberal media, the role of «revolutionary grass roots» was romanticized and exaggerated, while the image of power simplified and diabolized. Out of the blue, revolutionary bloggers and opposition activists turned into creators of the revolution, though in fact they were its instruments. The simplified cliché of «people against a tyrant» applied to the events in Arabic countries and in Russia should be seriously criticized, and instead processes should be revealed that most often stay hidden – those related to political elites.

I am deeply convinced that in both Egypt and Russia the real fight for the future of the country was not put up on the squares of the capital cities, but inside the political elite, where different groups tried to gain political and economic influence. To this end, they used media, «independent bloggers», «social movements», efforts of the «civil society», and other modern instruments.

## 1. The presidents

The fact that Mubarak had irremovably ruled the country for many terms of office in a row, did not at all doom him to imminent collapse due to revolution. Two important reasons for what happened in Egypt were the president's age (83, by the time of his overthrow) and the unsettled problem of the succession of power. It is obvious that Mubarak, the aged head of the leading state in the region, the leader devoid of his former charisma and political energy, should have had a clear plan for transition of the power, a plan, which could have been accepted by the Egyptian elite. 83 is a risky age for presidency, especially taking into account the rumors of Mubarak's illness. (Recall that Leonid Brezhnev, who most frequently personifies the image of a senile ruler in Russian media, died at 76.) Undoubtedly, given the President's age, the issue of power transition was one of the most important problems in political life in Egypt. The probable version was that, according to Middle East political traditions, the power would be inherited by the President's son, Gamal Mubarak. Recall here Syria, where in 2000 Bashar Assad, aged 34, an ophthalmologist physician, took his deceased father's stand and headed the country. Summoning Bashar was a wise decision of the Syrian ruling establishment: the deceased President Assad's son, who had never planned to become a President himself and who had been estranged from political affairs, was easy to manipulate with and thereby presented a perfect compromise. In Egypt, however, in order to provide the power transition to Gamal Mubarak from his father, Gamal was to be approved by Egyptian establishment, which was represented by the military. Starting from Nasser, all Egyptian Presidents had come from the Army, which was a specific caste in the society. This system did not suppose inheritance of power. Thereby, Mubarak in fact challenged the system.

On the eve of the election in 2005, as Mubarak was already 77, many analysts forecasted change, predicted a new candidate from the party in power. In February, 2005 Mubarak sensationally introduced corrections to the 76-th Article of the Constitution. Now, several candidates representing different political trends in the country were allowed to take part in the elections, instead of the only possible one. In Western press, the decision to alter the voting system was named the peaceful «palm-tree revolution». Some took it as a step to real democracy, while others as the preliminaries to the transition of power to Gamal Mubarak.

Three years later, Egypt would end up in a «turbulence zone»: the worldwide economic crisis, bread price spiral, food problems, and so on. Had Hosni Mubarak stepped down from power prior to the world economic crisis, which seriously hurt Egypt, his monuments could be still getting erected all over the country.<sup>1</sup> However, before the regular president election that were to be held in 2011, the situation with the successor was still unclear. Mubarak was keeping the suspense, neither denying nor confirming his standing for election. American partners of Egypt insisted that the election be democratic and honest. Behind Mubarak, influential elite figures hovered, like Omar Suleiman, Head of Intelligence Service, and Marshal Tantawi; they considered themselves worthy enough to take up the Presidency. Mubarak could neither openly put in his son instead of himself, nor simply leave power. Nancy Elshami, a columnist from Mefhtah Magazine, suggests that, in order to «in-throne» Gamal under these conditions, it would have been easier to wait until Hosni Mubarak died and then to introduce his son as the savior of the nation from political vacuum and possible instability.<sup>2</sup> Might it have been the reason why Mubarak consciously came into office, the end of which he could well expect not to reach? Curious enough is the fact that Mubarak did not assign the Vice-President (in fact, his official successor), which provides evidence that he tried to avoid power transition to his colleagues, the «people of force».

It was Hosni Mubarak's intention to transfer his power to Gamal that triggered the conflict among political groups and resulted in the crisis of the regime.<sup>3</sup>

By 2008, the Russian leader Vladimir Putin also faced complicated problems. For Putin, whose third Presidential term would have been critically taken in the West, it was very important in this situation to find a successor, the one whose appointment would not violate the balance of forces in the political elite. Just as Mubarak, Putin also was the mediator in the political game, keeping his balance between various groups inside the political elite. The very fact that Putin was NOT to be President for at least four

<sup>1</sup> Suponina E. Mubarak's Mistake. Aug 4, 2011, <http://www.forbes.ru/ekonomika-column/vlast/71636-oshiibka-mubarak>.

<sup>2</sup> Elshami N. Egypt's 2011 Presidential Election: the Mubaraks and the Strategy of Ambiguity. 11.11.10 <http://muftah.org/egypts-2011-presidential-election-the-mubaraks-and-the-strategy-of-ambiguity-by-nancy-elshami/>.

<sup>3</sup> Friedman G. Egypt: The Distance Between Enthusiasm and Reality. 14.02.11 <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110213-egypt-distance-between-enthusiasm-and-reality>.

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