The Muslim Brotherhood has in a short period been transformed from an underground political Islamic movement into a ruling, democratically elected Islamic political party in the new Egypt. Political Islam had gained legitimacy in Egypt during the former regime. It offered social services and religious instruction; responded to popular demands; and tried to entrench Islamic ideology in everyday life. The political Islamic movements stood for pride, authority based on high moral standards and national self-determination. In several respects, the political Islamic movements of Egypt delivered what they promised to especially the Egyptian poor, unlike the state. Many women and men in Cairo that I met one taboldstyle one.taboldstyle years ago considered Islamic politics to be a form of moral Islamic modernisation and this belief helped to restore their sense of confidence in the nation. However, today the political Islamic party needs to meet several demanding challenges, and the clock is ticking.

DURING MY EARLIER research in Egypt in the early 2000s, there were two dominant emotions among the people I met daily, fear and lack of hope. One year ago, these sentiments had radically changed into hope and lack of fear, not only among my former interlocutors, but in Egyptian society in general. By the end of the fall of 2012 and after 100 days under the new President Morsi, one of these feelings has begun to change. There is still a general lack of fear, but today there is a growing crack in the feeling of hope. There are also new sentiments—confusion and frustration. To understand the importance of these emotions in the Egyptian uprisings and in relation to change, security and stability, we need to go back a couple of years.

The women and men I worked with 11 years ago lived in various low-income areas of Cairo, both in the old Islamic quarters and in the newer suburbs. The Egyptian state at this time frequently made use of the Emergency Law, which allowed for the prohibition of demonstrations and the deployment of security police in response to political instability. Central security troops outnumbered protestors in the spontaneous demonstrations during the Iraq War, in sharp contrast to the uprisings of 2011 and later demonstrations. The central parts of Cairo were filled with helmeted police and military equipped with shields and heavy weapons. People complained to me of torture and arrests following the demonstrations, but also of censorship of the national media.

Text by Maria Frederika Malmström

If you’re not confused, you haven’t been paying attention”, @iyad_elsagafi wrote on twitter.

Photo: Marie Girod
They felt that doomsday was approaching. Many were dissatisfied with their lives and were despondent about the future. The majority could see only dark prospects for themselves and their children. They frequently described the suffering Egyptians experienced because of Mubarak’s policies. People reacted with anger and dissatisfaction at the state’s weakness towards the West and the economic mismanagement. The Iraq War highlighted these feelings and nourished a sense of fear and hopelessness. Deteriorating living conditions and regional instability contributed to a sense of loss of control and undermined confidence in the state. Egyptians seem to have for a very long time taken care of the people in poor areas. They stand for morality and self-esteem as well as for the forging of an Arabic identity, in contrast to Mubarak’s state-promoted ‘secular’ Islam. The only alternative for the majority of Egypt’s population have been the low-cost health facilities, low-standard public schools and the Islamic charity organisations. These organisations have offered free and inexpensive health services and interest-free loans based on religious education and guidance from Orthodox Islam. Islamic charity organisations have indeed played an important role in the poorer parts of Cairo and offered a political alternative to unpopular national policies. Today, liberals, leftists and secularists in Egypt agree that political Islam in Egypt and in North Africa has not only been well organised for a long time, but has also been very smart in buying the voices of the poor through social charity. In the words of one observer, “Now it is time for them to harvest what they have planted.”

EGYPTIANS HAVE ALWAYS been politically active. However, in early 2000, there were no uprisings on the streets. The rules of the state were abided by with apathy, but also with cynicism, rumour and humour. Community organisations, familial and informal networks have also been an expression of political participation. These networks kept alive alternative visions of politics and strategies to achieve shared goals. People were repressed, fearful and paranoid. Their security and basic needs were dependent on the regime. Hidden forms of action were crucial to avoid arrest and torture under the Emergency Law. When I went back to Cairo after the fall of Mubarak, I immediately sensed the new relaxed atmosphere that was marked by hope and lack of fear.

It was no surprise that political Islam won the parliamentary elections or that the leading figure in previously forbidden Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Morsi, won the 2012 presidential election. Mubarak had continued Sadat’s approach to modernisation and religion and tried to control the growth of Islamic movements. Market orientation entailed reduced state protection for the poor. Corruption, state violence, together with growing income disparities and unequal access to welfare, created political discontent and frustration. The state’s inability to manage social and economic problems and to satisfy basic needs affected people’s lives in a number of ways. The former Egyptian political system was synonymous with humiliation and impoverishment. Furthermore, conditions under Mubarak – widespread unemployment, poverty, social injustice and government corruption – helped create a climate of instability that could easily be manipulated by political forces. All this created space for political Islamists. Political Islam movements have for a very long time taken care of the people in poor areas. They stand for morality and self-esteem as well as for the forging of an Arabic identity, in contrast to Mubarak’s state-promoted ‘secular’ Islam. The only other alternatives for the majority of Egypt’s population have been the low-cost health facilities, low-standard public schools and the Islamic charity organisations. These organisations have offered free and inexpensive health services and interest-free loans based on religious education and guidance from Orthodox Islam. Islamic charity organisations have indeed played an important role in the poorer parts of Cairo and offered a political alternative to unpopular national policies. Today, liberals, leftists and secularists in Egypt agree that political Islam in Egypt and in North Africa has not only been well organised for a long time, but has also been very smart in buying the voices of the poor through social charity. In the words of one observer, “Now it is time for them to harvest what they have planted.”

WHEN I WAS in Cairo in October 2011, some of my former interlocutors among the Egyptian poor told me they still believe in the Muslim Brotherhood. This organisation was seen as credible and as a stable political actor. Others no longer trusted political Islam: “They show their real ugly face now.” However, most of those I talked to last year, from different social strata and with different political affiliations, saw no problem with political Islamists, who used religion to convince people of their principles. Rather, their problem was with the continuance of army control of the state. Egyptians seem to be more and more confused. There are so many uncertain future scenarios, ambivalences, conflicting images, rumours and forces in constant flow. Furthermore, the lack of hope is not confined to the political opposition to political Islam: even among the poor who believed in the Muslim Brotherhood one year ago, today the majority has lost their faith in the brothers.

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD in general and President Morsi in particular, face huge challenges and difficulties. In particular, how
Members of the Journalists Union march down to Tahrir Square. Since President Morsi announced legislation giving him near-absolute power, clashes have worsened between his supporters and protesters.
will they manage to keep their promises to Egypt’s poor population, who make up the vast majority, and how will they navigate between internal and external forces and act in global politics? It takes time to change former structures – as one Egyptian scholar points out it, “the bottom is still rotten” – and establish new politics. However, Egyptians have been patient for too many years, but their patience is wearing thin. Emotions of insecurity and loss of control may also lead to a longing for the past.

Even if Morsi has scored several national political gains by raising Egypt’s international profile among some of his former liberal critics, he is also failing to achieve what he promised for his first 100 days. The focus on global politics, while neglecting the development of Egypt, seems to be making him increasingly unpopular. Among his underprivileged followers who lack resources and who are struggling to meet their basic needs, there is no patience. In a voluble outburst, one taxi driver told me that in fact everything had been better under Mubarak. The former regime was corrupt, yes, and there was a growing gap between rich and poor, yes, but people could at least fill their stomachs and had water and electricity. Setting these emotions in the context of Morsi’s 100 day plan, it is not difficult to understand the irony and the very core of seriousness in the popular mango jokes that cropped up after a TV interview with the president, who said that during his rule the mango was affordable and attainable by all. An ironic comparison between Morsi and Marie Antoinette was immediately published on social media: Let the people eat mango! (instead of bread).

THE EGYPTIAN STATE has signed a $200 million loan with the World Bank and President Morsi has requested a $4.8 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund. To meet the IMF’s conditions for the loan, the president will have to gradually remove subsidies from basic goods, such as bread. In 1977, bread riots erupted among the Egyptian poor in a spontaneous uprising against President Sadat’s acceptance of a World Bank and IMF-mandated end to state subsidies on basic foods. One of the slogans at the time was: “Thieves of the Infitah [open door policy], the people are famished.” The President Morsi has been sensible in navigating between appeasing public opinion and preserving good relations with the US...
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the US provides $1.5 billion in military and other aid annually. When President Morsi tried to put his foot down after the now infamous YouTube clip of mid-September 2012, condemning violence but welcoming peaceful demonstrations, President Obama immediately called him. He let Morsi know that he was going to destroy the diplomatic relations between the two countries and underscored the need for Egypt to take satisfactory steps to protect US staff. Morsi’s tone soon changed.

It should be said that anti-American sentiment in Egypt is nothing new and has been widely used in the rhetoric of political Islam against the Mubarak regime. This sentiment certainly did not disappear after the uprising. Degradation and disrespect are part of a wider anti-Western discourse in the Arab world and are linked to colonial heritage, anti-Islamic racism, xenophobia, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Iraq War and a sense of cultural impoverishment. The invasion of Iraq and the subsequent war were seen among the poor Egyptians I met 11 years ago as confirmation of a Western ambition to turn the whole “Arab world” into a Western duplicate. During Mubarak’s tenure, the Muslim Brotherhood was a disciplined religious and anti-colonialist movement. Are President Morsi’s politics still anti-colonial, or is he just another puppet, another laughing cow, as former President Mubarak was jokingly referred to?

In his first speech as democratically elected president, Morsi proclaimed: “I affirm to all segments of the Egyptian people that I have today, by your choice and your will, through the favour of Allah, become the president of all Egyptians.” However, not all Egyptians see their president in this light. The clashes between secular-minded Egyptians and the Muslim Brotherhood are, of course, not new, but are tensions increasing in the new Egypt? As a leftist woman activist said after one of the clashes, “This is the new war we are afraid of.” The Egyptian Copts are another discontented group. Among other things, they are increasingly angry at the president’s failure to prosecute anyone for the Maspero massacre in October 2011. The draft constitution is yet another dilemma. Mohammad Al Baradei and other politicians say they will hold Morsi accountable for instituting a fair and balanced constitution. Many liberals and leftists in the Constituent Assembly have resigned in protest, since they argue that powerful Islamic political figures in the Assembly are attempting to write an “Islamic constitution” and nothing else. When President Morsi granted himself unlimited powers by decree at the end of November 2012, huge protests immediately followed and both his supporters and critics demonstrated throughout the country. Again, we can see the power of collective emotions – this time not only a total lack of fear, but also immediate rage. The decree banned challenges to his decisions and prevented any court from dissolving the Constituent Assembly. His declaration also gave the Assembly more time to draft a new constitution. However, the protests were successful and in early December unlimited powers for the president were cancelled.

It is impossible to predict what will happen in the future or which path Egypt will take. I am as confused as every Egyptian woman and man. The outcome of the current tensions remains unknown. What is clear is that by understanding Egyptians’ emotions in relation to their imagination of the new Egypt we will better understand both future dilemmas and possibilities.

First, the most significant outcome of the Egyptian uprising of 2011 is Egyptians’ lack of fear. This means that people are not afraid to act politically in relation to the current regime and the military, irrespective of how these forces might respond.

Second, the increasing confusion and frustration after the referendum may be used in a transition period as something powerful and fruitful, as a creative tool for building the new Egypt. However, it can also turn into something that I see as the biggest threat to Egypt’s future, that is, where Egyptians totally lose hope again and perceive tomorrow as pitch black.