I, once again, found myself in Cairo during the second half of September. The trip was not long and I would never commit it to writing if it wasn’t for one particular circumstance. The fact is, Egypt is like a second home to me. At the end of the last century, I spent a long 15 years living and working in Egypt and in this new century I still visit it 2-3 times every year. Naturally, I have a number of friends in the country, be they Egyptians, Russians or Europeans. This is why talking to them, reading the local newspapers and simply observing the situation, even if only for a few short days, still gave me a lot of food for thought about Egypt’s present and future.

Cairo lives a completely normal life. There are neither police nor the military filling the streets. The smaller restaurants are full to bursting in the evening while the classier ones are quite empty: the effects of the increasing prices and an almost complete lack of foreign tourists are quite visible. There is no shortage of goods, with the only exceptions being butane tanks (which are used by most Egyptian families for cooking) and cheap 80 octane gas that is commonly used by taxis, disregarding the model and year of their vehicle. The national pita bread, a staple in the diet of the majority of Egyptians, still costs 5 Piastres, which is less than one European or American cent. The city still has a curfew, which is even earlier on Fridays, at 19:00, when those opposing the current regime most frequently hold their protests. I was watching the streets on one Friday evening from the window of my apartment in Cairo. To my surprise, both people and cars were still out on the street after 19:00, although not nearly the same amount as on a regular day.

The centre of attention within the political life of the country is the development of a new constitution. The 2012 constitution, which the Islamists forced onto the Egyptians, has been invalidated. A commission of 10 experts was tasked with the first steps of drawing up the constitution. In September, a larger commission of 50 people began their work on it. The commission is headed by former Secretary General of the Arab League and one of the leaders of the Egyptian liberal wing Amr Moussa. The commission includes representatives from a wide political spectrum, including those from the conservative Islamic party Al-Nour (Party of the Light). There are no Muslim Brotherhood representatives within the commission. By taking up arms in August, they have closed the door on their participation in the political life of the country and have been banned through a court order. The final version of the new constitution will be presented to the public and to the interim President Adly Mansour only at the beginning of November. However, based on information about the commission coming from the printed media, it seems that Egypt will receive a secular government and creating parties based on religion will be forbidden.

The new constitution will be put through a national referendum, which will be followed by – according to the “road map” presented by the military after President Mohamed Morsi’s ousting – parliamentary elections and then presidential elections. In the meantime, an increasing number of voices are proposing to switch the order of the parliamentary and presidential elections. The arguments for this proposal claim that electing a president can stabilize the current situation and will hasten the process of legitimizing the regime. The U.S. and the EU have judged the ousting of Morsi to be a military coup and are using this as reason to refuse to provide Egypt with much-needed aid. The very interpretation of the event in this light is insulting to most Egyptians. After all, on June 30 the streets were filled with three times as many Egyptians who were demanding the resignation of the president than the number of votes he received in the election. There is a sign hanging above the entire street in the prestigious...
Zamalek neighbourhood that states, in both Arabic and English, “America, get out! This is a revolution, not a military coup!”

There are also many discussions about candidates for the president’s post. There is an increasing number of supporters who are backing the candidacy of the Defence Minister General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. This man is currently very popular in Egypt and he is called the saviour of the revolution. It was al-Sisi who took upon himself the responsibility of ousting Morsi. A significant part of the population believes that he is the candidate who best fits the country’s current main goals – stabilizing the situation and strengthening the nation. The movement “al-Sisi – raisi” (‘al-Sisi is my president’) is gaining momentum.

In this respect, an interesting discussion has come to light. This is the secretly recorded conversation between the former president Hosni Mubarak and his doctor, which has leaked to the media (he is currently in a prison hospital). Mubarak is heard saying that he did not at all plan to make his son Gamal his successor, that this was all a U.S. plot, and he argued this by saying, “I understand very well that it is difficult to rule this country, this can only done by a military man”.

General al-Sisi himself is currently shying away from any proposals to nominate himself as a presidential candidate. Meanwhile, General Ahmed Shafik, who has emigrated to and currently lives in the UAE, has stated that if al-Sisi does not participate in the elections, then he will put in his own nomination. At last year’s presidential elections, Shafik, former commander of the air force, was able to get through to the second round with Morsi, where he earned 48.3% of the votes.

Despite al-Sisi’s popularity, not everyone, even within the secular layers of Egyptian society, wants to see a general once again sitting in the president’s chair. According to them, this is not very compatible with the secular character of the government, which is what most Egyptians truly desire. Military men have headed the government for six decades, up until 2011, and that is quite enough, they say.

Overall, even with the unity within the liberal left of Egyptian society there are still many disagreements on key issues of how to construct the Egyptian government from its numerous parts, which amount to a few dozen parties and movements. After Mohamed ElBaradei disgracefully fled Egypt in August (he did not support the decision to forcefully disperse the pro-Morsi crowd of perpetual protestors at two Cairo squares), the liberals have been left without a leader. It is currently difficult to see anyone being his replacement, which can also be said of nominating a single presidential candidate, even though leaders of the left and the liberals who initiated Morsi’s unseating agreed upon nominating a single candidate.

Apart from al-Sisi, there are currently two other very popular figures in Egypt, whose photos are frequently seen on various signs:

- The first is the deceased President Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose name is synonymous with Egypt’s revival after the anticolonial and antimonarchic revolution of 1952. Naser’s successors, and the left leaning forces in general, currently play a key role in Egypt, which includes within the interim government. As such, the Deputy Prime Minister Ziad Bahaa Eddin is the leader of the social-democrats.
- The second figure is the Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Egyptians have always been friendly towards Russia and Russians. Their memory of Russia’s close and critically important cooperation in the 1960s is still strong, especially in the older generations. However, the current wave of emotion reflects the present day realities in Egypt, not just its history. Egypt cheerfully welcomed the news from Putin that Russia respects the will of the Egyptian people. It was interpreted as Russia recognizing the legitimacy of the change of government and this stance was in direct contrast with western positions on the issue. The trust towards our country has acquired further strength thanks to Russia’s effort to regulate the situation in Syria, due to which a western military intervention into the country was halted.

However, the Egyptians do not live within their politics alone. The slogans of the January 25, 2011 revolution which overthrew President Mubarak were “Freedom, dignity and social justice”. There is currently plenty of dignity and freedom, but the latter is a bit of a trickier question. However, the government has made an important step in this direction at the end of September: it has enacted minimum and maximum wage laws within the country beginning on January 1 of next year. The minimum wage will be 1200 EGP per month. Unions have been fighting for this number for the last two years, stating that this is the cost of living. It is pointless to convert this number into USD or the Euro to really understand what it means. The prices of goods in Egypt are completely their own. I have already mentioned that the national pita bread costs 5 Piastres. I’ll add another price for comparison. The price of the Cairo subway is 1 EGP. The workers are happy, but the employers are stating that this type of levelling does not take into
account the quality of labour, prices in different regions and a host of other variables. Say what you will, but the law will need to be followed.

If I were to attempt to give a quick overview of the current situation in Cairo, then I would say that it is a feeling of relief. The Islamic government that was hated by much of the population has now been removed, their armed opposition has been quelled. There is a new dawn of a secular Egyptian government on the horizon, headed by the military, who has the trust of the majority of Egyptians. Not all is progressing smoothly, but, as they say, he is lifeless that is faultless.

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