To what extent is the history of Egypt repeating itself?

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To What Extent is the History of Egypt Repeating Itself?

This paper explores the question of whether the history of Egypt has been repeating itself. Throughout the past 20th century Egypt has been in a continuous cycle of revolutions and authoritarian regimes. Hence, we can never be sure whether the recent 2011 Revolution will lead to something different than the regimes we have seen in the past. Nonetheless, this recent uprising could be the first break from the cycle. First we establish what a revolution and authoritarian regime are, to make sure that this has been true of Egyptian history. We then regimes to see whether there are similarities; thus a repetition of history. We compare revolutions and also look at statistics that show that revolution does not always lead to a democracy, and implement it on the Egyptian model. This research also uses many scholarly and popular sources to compare historic events and see where there is a resemblance in details. In addition, the idea of Egypt’s recent revolution being a repeat is apparent in studies which compare it to the Iranian 1979 Revolution. This could be true, but here we compare different episodes from Egypt’s own history, since that would be something interesting and worth studying. This research paper, which compares the revolutions and regimes from a little over one century of Egypt’s history, could be seen as limited, since the past century has been greatly packed with political events. In the end, it is up to the reader to decide on the research question, and is also important is to build up from this research paper and explore many other different dynamics of Egypt to be able to successfully conclude whether it has been in a repetitive state or not. This paper is just the start.
No one could have condensed it all in one line, but the Prime Minister of Italy did, commenting on the 2011 Revolution, he said, “There is nothing new in Egypt. Egyptians are making history as usual.” Perhaps one must first look at the 20th century until present day Egypt; we see that it has been through a continuous rule of authoritarian regimes. For some, that’s not exactly making history, it’s actually repeating it. This is what I hope to discuss in my paper. The recent 2011 Revolution could be considered making history only if it doesn’t lead to an authoritarian regime. If it does lead to a similar fate though, then that would be repeating history. In my paper, I will talk about all these historic events that Egyptians have been “making”: the 1919 revolution, the 1952 revolution and their results of authoritarian regimes in Egypt. Thus, we can never be certain that the 2011 Revolution won’t lead to another dictatorial rule, by simply looking at the country’s history.

Before one talks about these events and critically analyzes them, two very important words must be clearly defined: revolution and authoritarianism. Let us first discuss revolution, which is the “overthrow of an established order which will involve the transfer of state power from one leadership to another and may involve a radical restructuring of social and economic relations.”1 This would mean that we had a revolution in 1919, when the Egyptians refused the continuous rule by the British and instead demanded independence. Therefore, there was a change from one leadership, colonialism by Britain, to another leadership by King Farouk. Although not exactly involving a “radical restructuring”, since the Armenian King was believed to be a mere puppet heading the government placed by the colonialists, we can still call it a revolution, according to this Oxford Dictionary. The 1952 military coup by the Free Officers would definitely be classified as a revolution. It involved a complete change of one government by another one; it changed from a monarchy to a socialist and with hindsight, another authoritarian regime. Finally, the 2011 Revolution is

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also an overthrow, but we have yet to see the “radical restructuring” and a legitimate transfer of leadership. Although the 2011 Revolution might not exactly fit all the criteria needed for the definition of revolution according to this dictionary, we shall simply stick to calling it a revolution for the rest of this paper. Using the same dictionary, authoritarianism is defined as “a style of government in which the rulers demand unquestioning obedience from the ruled.”

As seen during the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, we have been through a total of five different authoritarian regimes, which left little for “individual choice.” One was pre-1919 with absolute colonialism, then a monarchy, then Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and finally Hosni Mubarak, in that order. Hence, we have established that the country has been in a continuous cycle of revolutions and authoritarian regimes. Have they been similar? Could history really be repeating itself in Egypt?

I believe that this research question is important for many varied reasons. To begin with, this question has rarely been discussed before; I even had trouble looking for a directly related source, both scholarly and popular. Thus, it would be interesting to talk about something that has not been frequently discussed. It has been widely speculated that the recent revolution holds many similarities with that of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (Ivens), and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 (Goldstone), but it hasn’t been discussed before that the revolution has similarities with other revolutions happening in the same country! Also, it would be quite interesting to see that the people have been revolting throughout the years, yet the dream of having a democracy is only apparent in the most recent 2011 revolution. Why couldn’t we democratize peacefully during the 20th century? Also, if revolutions before have not lead to the required results, then can we even be sure we will become a democracy after this revolution?

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Revolutions happen everywhere around the world, and demands include freedom, social equality, employment and the right to individual choice, or democracy. A recent research recognized a surprising pattern. They found that from the end of World War II, 88 countries became democratic, yet only 19 of them actually democratized through revolutions, that’s only a mere 22%. Most countries became a democracy through “gradual political reform or negotiations between incumbent political parties, the military and opposition forces.” In addition, of the last 46 revolutions that took place, 27 ended in authoritarian rule. What is also insightful about this research is that is shows that the 19 democracies that came through revolutions all survived since they were backed up by popular support necessary to continue it. Furthermore, 53 of the democracies that were simply a transition went back to being dictatorships. What we see from this research are two main statements: revolutions only sometimes lead to democracies, and if they do, they become durable democracies. (Albertus and Victor). We can relate this directly to Egypt. The 1919 revolution led to an authoritarian regime and so did the 1952 one. The 2011 Revolution has a low probability of leading to a democracy according to these statistics, but if it does, then the future Egyptian democracy will be long lasting. Some disagree, for example, Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister pointed out that this possible future democracy could just be a stepping stone for the Muslim Brotherhood to implement their authority over the country, by first gaining power through free and fair elections (Zuckerman). Hence, there is still this possibility that Egypt might be ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood implementing an authoritarian regime, yet again. Although we do not know this for sure, it is one potential scenario.

Many have studied the similarities between the recent revolution and the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Some say that because they are so similar, the Egyptian Revolution might lead to a similar fate: an authoritarian regime that is controlled by religion, specifically Islamists. In the article entitled, “Democracy in Egypt No Easy Matter”, it shows how the
Muslim Brotherhood, in Egypt, is looking to implement a similar Islamic state to the Iranian model. In addition, the Iranian revolution was actually started by Democrats but later on the Islamists took over (Almond). They decided to take charge and “killing or exiling secular pro-democratic politicians with their powerful and disciplined forces” (Zuckerman). Furthermore, because Hosni Mubarak, the former president, had cut all ties with Iran during his rule, Iran is looking to restore diplomatic relations; hence increasing its influence and ties to Egypt (Zuckerman). Firstly, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Shah of Iran had informed worshippers at a mosque “that Egypt's Islamic awakening had started in the mosque” hinting that the recent revolution was similar to Iran’s (Opportunity and Envy). Secondly, Ahmadinejad, the Iranian President, is popular in Egypt for his anti-western rhetoric and his stance against Israel (Opportunity and Envy). Finally, the Iranian newspaper Kayhan, bluntly said that the region is “is ripe with major new developments and Khomeini's Islam is the engine of these events” (Reynolds). As we can see, there are many sources that overall give the impression that Egypt is just another Iran in the making, and that history is indeed repeating itself. There are even fewer discussions on how Egypt and Iran are actually two very different situations: one is Arab and Sunni, and the latter is Persian and Shi’ite. As reported in the same article, “Are Uprisings a Ripple of Iran in 1979,” they have different languages, cultures and beliefs, and therefore it is difficult for them to have an influence on each other. Even more, very few talk about how Egypt is repeating its own history. It has roughly been through the same language, culture and beliefs throughout the past 100 years, therefore it would be common sense, to compare it to itself!

In 1914, Egypt was declared a protectorate by Britain, meaning it was under tight control of the British through forceful means (Milton-Edwards 35). This means that Egyptians did not rule themselves, and therefore, they missed the sense of belonging to their nation. Consequently, there were national movements as far back as 1918 (Milton-Edwards
35), even before the county became independent. This notion of nationalism was also apparent in 1952. Therefore, the idea of nationalism is similar between the 2 revolutions, the 1919 and 1952 because in 1952, the coup d’etat was by the Egyptian nationalist officers (Milton-Edwards 36). The first revolution was led by Saad Zaghlul, while the latter by Gamal Abdel Nasser. As we can see here, both had a figure leading the population, another similarity between them. Furthermore, the 1919 Revolution started with an initial youth movement at the Law School of Cairo University (Abdalla 43). Similarly, Gamal Abdel Nasser was supported by mostly the student population (William 153), and they were revolting already a few months ago in January 1952 (Abdalla 98), even before Nasser took over. In addition, he himself was a student political activist before joining the army and Anwar el Sadat once said, “It was the students ... who affected the spiritual revolution so necessary to our political revolution” (William 21). Moreover, As Owen Holloway said, “The only vocal class in a nation of illiterates must be very vocal” (Abdalla 98). This shows how student movements were a large contribution of any revolution, since their voice was the loudest and they were persistent on their demands for improving economic conditions (Abdalla 98). In addition, there was always the comparison years after 1919, of nationalism during Saad Zaghlul’s era and what should be happening in Egypt during the mid 20th century. Gamal Abdel Nasser once wrote in 1935, “Where is the growing nationalism of 1919” (William 21). Here we can see how there is always a reflection on past revolutions, and little did Nasser know that he himself would restart this nationalistic approach almost 20 years later. We can see a very wide common ground between 2 revolutions separated by only 33 years. They were both very nationalistic movements, hence they ensured popular support by the Egyptians and succeeded, they were both cemented by involvement of the youth and they both had one main leader in the spotlight.
If we take these similarities and apply them to the 2011 Revolution, we see that they all do share common ground as well. The recent revolution was also very nationalistic, and unity of Christians and Muslims was apparent, but being Egyptian came first (Zewail 39). Furthermore, as in 1952 when there was a reflection on 1919, even in 2011, there was a reflection on the 1952 revolution. Numerous protestors have been seen carrying posters of Gamal Abdel Nasser, from early February until today (Gamal Abdel Nasser). In addition, the youth were also the ones who initiated the protests and who wanted to bring about change (Zewail 1). Wael Ghonim started a Facebook page, which set off the revolution in 2011. He then “pulled together an alliance of different youth groups via the web” (Swaine). Therefore, we can see how the youth contributed, as they encouraged each other to go out and protest through Twitter, text messaging and other means, before the service got cut off (Swaine). Perhaps one main difference that this revolution has with the others is that it doesn’t really have a leader. Of course, Wael Ghonim has been credited with starting the revolution, but he was not the one who led it. Instead, he has been named “The Spokesman of the Revolution” (ElBaradei).

The 1919 revolution led to 800 deaths and 1,600 injuries (800 Natives). In contrast, the 1952 revolution did not lead to any deaths because there was no fighting, except that they ordered the killing 2 protestors in August 1952 (20th Century Special). In 2011, the death toll was at least 846 dead and more than 6,400 injured (At Least 846). Hence, deaths and injuries show that violence was present during the 3 different revolutions, but on different levels. Also, the first revolution was initiated by a leader, Zaghlul of a political party called Al Wafd, while the latter was by officers from the army. Another difference is that after the 1919 Revolution, although it was nationalistic, the British were still in control (Milton-Edwards 35), and a couple of years later, negotiations led to the formation of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty which “further shored up British interests” (Milton-Edwards 35). After the 1952
Revolution, Nasser worked in the opposite direction, trying to defer foreign interests in the country. He abolished the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty in 1954, and nationalized the Suez Canal, which was traditionally under British control (Milton-Edwards 36). Furthermore, Sadat worked in the opposite direction, trying to restore ties with the West through economic liberalization policies such as *infitah* (Owen). Hence, foreign intervention has been manipulated to suit the leader’s needs and his policy application. Goldstone also says that “international powers must either refuse to step in to defend the government or constrain it from using maximum force to defend itself,” for a revolution to be successful, but we still do not know the kind of foreign policy the coming leader will implement. The Anglo Egyptian Treaty was created 27 years after the 1919 revolution, and was abolished 2 years after the 1952 revolution, maybe we would need to wait an equivalent amount of years before we can accurately comment on the foreign element in relation to the recent revolution and foreign policies following such uprisings.

During the periods where Egypt has gone through a change of regime through revolutions, we see that there is a domino effect in the Middle East; other Arab countries where going through a similar political experience. The people of the Arab World have always dreamed of full independence, starting from the Arab Revolt of 1916 which led to the capture of Damascus (Milton-Edwards 24). Egypt had its revolution in 1919, and became independent 3 years later, and around that time, the Middle East we know today, was all being created during that time. Iraq became independent in 1920, and Lebanon, Syria and Jordan followed suit. Furthermore, after the 1952 revolution, there was a similar revolution in Iraq in 1958. Additionally, three other Arab countries declared their independence in the 1950s (Milton-Edwards 31). In 2011, Egypt followed Tunisia in its revolution, while they were both followed by similar attempts in Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. We still do not know the consequences of the others, if they will also lead to a collapse of their authoritarian
regimes. Nonetheless, we can still deduce that the countries of the Arab world have a domino effect on each other, and they largely influence one another. Throughout Egypt's three revolutions, the surrounding countries have been in a similar upheaval, while they too suffered from continuous authoritarian regimes. We could even say the whole Arab world is repeating itself, but that would be another paper.

There is also something quite interesting when it comes to comparing these three revolutions and their regimes following them. After the 1919 revolution, we see King Farouk becoming the leader three years after the revolution, after Egypt became independent. While after the 1952 revolution, Gamal Abdel Nasser only became the leader in 1954, after Mohamed Neguib. In 2011, we also see that there is an absence of an immediate leader. With the three revolutions, we see that there is something similar to a transition phase, before the country falls into authoritarian hands! Again, it is difficult to compare the 2011 revolution because it is a very recent phenomenon. Up until now, we are still in this transition phase, which is similar to other phases in the past, although each one is quite unique: from 1919 to 1922 the British were still in control of Egypt, from 1952-1954 the temporary leader was Mohammed Neguib. Perhaps this is a similarity with the 2011 revolution, that the temporary leader is someone from the army.

The similarities that were just discussed show how there was a repeat of history, but we must also look at the differences. In 1919, there was an actual transfer of power to a monarchy placed by the British by 1922, as Egypt was recognized as an independent country (Shamir 17). On the other hand, in 1952, it was a forced takeover of power by a military coup by the Free Officers. While in 2011, it was an overthrow of a dictator by demonstrators. They all involved the overthrow of an authoritarian regime, but the first was through a political party, the second the army, the third the people. The 1919 revolution led to a monarchy, the second revolution led to a republic, which also turned authoritarian, and
we are yet to witness the results of the third one. If colonialism before 1919, the monarchy following that, and the three leaderships by Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak were authoritative, how can we be so sure that this revolution will not follow suit?

Egypt has been through more than enough of autocrats. “Pharaohs, emperors, Mamluks, Khedives have taken control of the Nile Valley (Shemir 61). They have been preceded by kings and modern-style authoritarian regimes. Since the Egyptians regularly had different opinions about who should rule, those who refused the status quo, vowed for regime change in Egypt, and consequently revolted, only to turn into what they overthrew in the first place (Shemir 61). The 2011 Revolution was the last test to the Mubarak regime. Perhaps the coming rule could survive for much longer than past regimes, but we must still be skeptical and work continuously hard to obtain the democracy many have been fighting for. It is still possible that we might not have a long lasting democratic environment. Egypt’s history has been rich with political events, and this paper may not be enough to come to a conclusion on whether the history is repeating itself. We could still look at the leaders themselves, their policies and their similarities. Nevertheless, the recent events that have taken place were unimaginable just a few months ago, and “whatever the final outcome…the rule of the sultans [could be] coming to an end” (Goldstone).
Works Cited


