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Political Will: An Indication For Autocracy or a Scapegoat?

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Political Will: An Indication For Autocracy or a Scapegoat?

In the field of public policy and administration, nearly every time a conference presenter ends his/her presentation about proposed reforms to public policies, or services or government administration, the main prerequisite mentioned is that the starting point for any reform to happen, or change to occur, is to have *political will*. All the recommended reforms that are proposed, despite being evidence-based, scientifically proven, or having great likelihood of success, end up having their implementation conditional on one main variable; that of *political will*.

For example, researchers propose tons of alternative solutions to reform the education system, the health system, to enhance democratization or to empower youth, but always with the caveat that there needs to be political will. **The question is: to what extent is *political will* a scapegoat? And to what extent is it a reference to the autocratic nature of the governance system?**

Checking the literature shows that the concept has had the attention of a number of political analysts over the years. The majority agree that it is a fuzzy, difficult-to-define concept but many try to break it down into a number of dimensions, including: authority, clarity of a given solution to a problem and commitment towards its implementation. I think the presence of the three dimensions differ from one political context to another depending on the governance system in place. Authority, for example, can be exercised by one person, or a ruling political party or can be checked and monitored by the legislative authority and by empowered citizens. Or it can be anything in between. Commitment to the implementation of a given solution, or the pursuance of a public policy, can be guaranteed so long as the same authorized individuals are in place, or in a more democratic context, commitment can be tied to institutions and not be contingent on individuals.

In our developing part of the world, in Egypt specifically, political will is many times considered a subtle reference to the powers that be within a non-democratic system, or even more specifically the President of the Republic who holds all the strings in the decisionmaking, or public policymaking process. Sometimes, the concept is used as an excuse for lack of achievement, a scapegoat, by officials who choose to remain in their positions, but do not manage to implement successful solutions to problems. Thus they always mention the need for more political will to succeed.

Over the years, the concept of *political will* got to be manifested in the autocratic decisions by successive Presidents of the Republic of Egypt, who decided to pursue mega national projects, many times with very little positive impact. Examples abound from the times of Presidents Sadat, Mubarak and Sisi.

During President Sadat's era in the seventies, there was the case of developing a new capital for Egypt along the Cairo-Alexandria desert road. The new city was called, not surprisingly, Sadat City, and was the brain child of the President. Buildings were prepared for government ministries and agencies with the intention of moving them out of Cairo. Time passed, Sadat was assassinated and the city turned mostly into a ghost city. Only in 2013 the University of Sadat City was established and took over the vacant government buildings.

During Mubarak's regime, there was the decision to reform vast areas of land, more than 200 thousand hectares, along the Southern borders, in what became known as the Toshka, a land reclamation project. Despite lack of consensus regarding the economic and technical feasibility of the project, partially due to the very high temperatures in the region, the project was initiated.

Over more than a decade, resources were poured in by government and by investors. But with the ousting of the President after the 2011 Revolution, very little is heard about Toshka.

During the current times, with President Sisi, one of the main national projects strongly supported by the President is the establishment of a new Administrative Capital for Egypt nearly forty kilometers to the East of Cairo. Egyptians were mostly taken by surprise by the decision. Work is underway. Investors are pouring in money. Once again, the expectation is to move the government employees to new premises by 2022. A number of hurdles and challenges are expected, on top of resistance by the current civil servants and criticisms about the national budget allocation priorities. But hopefully there will be sufficient *political way* to see the project through. We do not want to have any additional failed projects.

We have seen this happen in the United States as well. Examples include Obamacare and the current strong criticism directed to it by President Trump, along with his efforts to revoke all that has been achieved before! Similarly, because of a lack of *political will* by President Trump, there has been withdrawal by the United States from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

The lesson learned: whether in the developing or the developed world, don't attach projects and policies to individuals—this spells, "FAILURE." Authority, vision and commitment, aka political will, are needed, but better to have the equation work under a democratic regime with checks and balances.