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Transcript

The Year of Egypt's Second Revolution, the Balance Sheet So Far

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Chair: Professor Charles Tripp
SOAS

Professor Charles Tripp: Welcome to the latest of the MEC lectures. It gives me enormous pleasure this evening to introduce to you Professor Roger Owen who will be talking about the year of Egypt's second revolution, the balance sheet so far. There is something very tedious for the person who is about to speak when the person chairing it says of course the speaker needs no introduction. But I'm sure for most of you here, you know Roger very well indeed through his extraordinary, distinguished career as a writer on Middle East and economic history, on politics and on different aspects of the contemporary and the 19th and 20th century Middle East. As you know, he is published extensively both on economic history but also of course branching out to a very original book on Lord Cromer. Also, I think, in April of this year there will be a book of his coming out on the rise and fall of Arab presidents for life, which will be coming out in April 2012.

Of course, within this very understandably distinguished and sparkling career, there is one blemish and he may not have to answer to history for it, but he certainly has to answer to my long suffering students. Because it was Roger who set me off on the study of the politics of the Middle East as an undergraduate. He certainly has to answer for that, I'm afraid. But I'm sure you will forgive him because he will give us extraordinary good value this evening talking about the year of Egypt's second revolution. Roger will speak for about 40 minutes or so and then we have about 40 minutes for questions and discussion. I'll hand the floor over to Roger. Roger, thank you very much indeed.

Professor Roger Owen: Thank you all for coming. Wave from the back seat if I can't project. I will do my best. I tend to try to speak to people in the back row. You can hear me? Very good, thank you. Thank you very much for this invitation. To Fawaz Gerges. LSE has been part of my life for a very long time. I don't think I've ever actually given a formal lecture here so it's a first for me. Thank you for the invitation and thank you all for coming.

I'll read my title again – "The Year of Egypt's Second Revolution, the balance sheet so far". The first revolution I am talking about is the one that took place in 1952. Although it was the result of a military coup, it soon turned into something more like a

traditional revolution, although then it turned into an authoritarian dictatorship. But the years after 1952/53/54 had something of the revolutionary fervour that one associates with popular revolutions where people come together in order to re-jig the political system, to get rid of the old, to try and create a new constitutional and democratic order. There was an attempt to produce a constitution in 1954/55 by a constitutional commission which was then overruled by the late President Nasser. So it has some of the characteristics of a world revolution, although it is now remembered mainly as a revolution against the British rather than a revolution on behalf of the people.

So first, I think some definitions: what do I mean by revolution and why is that a good way of talking about what is sometimes called the Arab Spring? I mean, Spring obviously because to begin with, the demonstrations were largely peaceful and therefore aping those of Eastern Europe such as the Velvet springs and things that took places in those parts. But I think it was Amr Moussa, the late Secretary General of the Arab League who said it was a revolution – *al-thaura*. I think he made that pronouncement in February last year, and I think by calling it a revolution it gives one access to two useful models and analogies. One is clearly the parallels with the famous popular overthrows of the old order of France and Russia via a spark, via barricades, via popular uprising. So you have access to that literature and I often think poor Mr Bouazizi who was the spark – Lenin spent a great deal of time wondering when the spark that would ignite the Russian Revolution would take place. He had a newspaper called *Iskra* – Those of you who remember your Russian history. So it was a revolutionary situation, but lacking a spark and so that's one set of questions people who study these things ask -- Why did this particular spark happen there and in that particular case? But I'm not going to address that.

Revolutions also lead to an attempt to create a new political and socio-economic order, a prolonged process that often proceeds in fits and starts and the trajectory which is impossible to resist. I remember sitting in Harvard talking to my colleague Robert Darnton who knows a great deal about that French Revolution and thinking about what it was like in the excitement outside the Bastille in 1789 and not at that

stage knowing that along the way there was a Napoleon or anything else that was going to happen. This is a reminder that these are open-ended events and very difficult to predict, but one can be sure that they go on for a period of time and that, as I say, there will be fits and starts and false starts and it is very unclear what kind of new order will emerge at the end of them. Perhaps it will lead to a new autocracy by the appearance of someone like Napoleon or Lenin in the name of protecting the revolution from itself.

It also gives you access to a vocabulary that includes the notion both of revolution and reaction. So all revolutions are opposed by the people who wish to return to the old status quo or who resent the revolutionary intrusion in their lives in various kinds of ways. I think that was perfectly clear to the young Egyptian revolutionaries in Tahrir Square and is still perfectly clear, that whether you call it the deep state or something or other, there are persons, institutions and associations connected with the old regime who would dearly like to bring the revolution to a halt and to get back to something like the old traditional verities.

Second, if you call it a revolution you get something of a revolutionary programme also drawn from French and American experience, when those obliged to create a new order to replace the old, there seems to be one model: you have a constitution and you have elections. I don't quite know enough about world history to know why that should be, but it seems to me that if you call something a revolution this is an automatic consequence. The beginning, again, seems to require the creation of a new constitutional order and that has something to do with democracy, something to do with elections, something to do with bringing the people who made the revolution on to the political stage – if only for a moment. There is a considerable American literature – which I don't know how well it's known in England -- called the 'constitutional moment' when people forego their sectional and traditional interests in order to come together to allow a constitution to be made in their name and I think there is still something to be learned from the American political experience. If you read the first sentence of the American constitution – it says 'We the people of the United States'. What right did those 25 gentlemen who drew up the constitution, how

were they able to speak in the name of the people of the United States? It is something of a trick, it's something of a moment and we are still in the middle of that. How does one choose the constitutional commission, how does one legitimise it, how do people agree that these particular groups of people will do it in a particular kind of way? And there, I think as far as Egypt is concerned, there is something to be learned from Tunisia where, in the elections run by the al-Nahda movement as one knows, the parties were forced to put forward an electoral platform, so that in order to be elected they were not only elected to the Tunisian government, but they were being elected as constitution makers and they were forced to reveal what kind of constitution they wanted and therefore address some of the questions that you have to think about -- are you a republic, how parliamentary you are, what are the powers of the president, of the parliament so on and so on. So there has to be some form of national discussion about these enormously important issues.

This is an aside of course. The Americans talk a great deal about democracy but the American constitution is the last thing that anyone seems to want to have in their own country with its enormous division of powers. It was designed, as liberal constitutions were in the 18th and 19th century, to curb the power of a person conceived of as a despot. But nevertheless, the extreme separation of powers seems to be dysfunctional and therefor, if one was thinking about it as an Egyptian constitution maker, I think one would think about the American constitution and American support for democracy, but then one would immediately abandon that particular model, although I think a supreme court or some constitutional court with powers of adjudicating legally what is in the constitution and disputes about it is probably quite a good thing.

The word revolution then applies to both Egypt and Tunisia. There were, in both cases, popular movements which were designed to create a new order. In Egypt, the process can be illuminated with parallels to previous revolutionary moments which can also be used to say something useful about what is likely to come next. When I'm talking about Egypt or anybody is talking about Egypt now, you are talking about something of a moving target. It is not moving quite as fast but there was a time, until

a few weeks ago, if I went out in the morning and came back in the evening, quite important things had changed in Egypt. You have to keep up as there are so many players involved. It is so inchoate. Nobody is quite sure where they are going, who is in charge and all that kind of thing, as must be true of most popular revolutions. But nevertheless, the business about answering questions about what is likely to happen is difficult and I think what I want to do is generate a few ideas out of the notion of revolution and out of comparison with other revolutionary moments in Egyptian history, which might be able to tell us something about what might or what is more likely to happen from now on.

Just then by way of a brief diversion, I'll say something about the revolutionary experience supplied by Midan Tahrir – which is a *midan*, not a square, but nevertheless has played an important role. For me, the wonderful historical irony that a square named 'liberation' created by what turned out to be an authoritarian regime – the Nasserite regime – then was used by the people for the first time in order to overthrow the successor regime – the Mubarak regime which came after the Sadat regime.

So this is the square that used to be where the British barracks were, which then when regained from the British after the WW2 when the troops were withdrawn became an empty space, which then became a kind of showplace place for the Nasser revolutionaries and some of the important buildings of the Nasser regime like the Arab League were built in Tahrir. It was a focus for revolutionary activity. But the story of 1953, the next year when Tahrir was created, is an enormously instructive one. There was supposed to be a festival of the revolution. The young officers in rather small cars paraded through the square. They were mobbed by people – they didn't actually like that very much. And the next year the festival of the revolution was held outside in the Abdeen Palace and Nasser and his friends addressed the crowds on the balcony. And I think you can date that symbolic moment to the time when a revolution made in the name of the people and there is a square called 'revolution' which might have contained people, but did not contain people because they were regarded as dangerous and therefore to be addressed from a far. So I find it

particularly nice – and I say historical irony -- that the square had been reclaimed for the first time by the people and one can say that this revolution is by the people, for the people, but in this place called 'liberation square'. It is also – this is another historical thing -- that the young woman who decided to go to the square and start the whole thing off on Police Day, on the 25 January – which itself was a historic day as it marks the day when British had killed auxiliary policemen in the canal zone in January 1952 – she went there on this day in order to challenge the police, on Police Day and draw attention to them and was incredibly successful in discrediting the police and the minister of the interior in no time at all in that particular place. So the desire to parade the police as important and revolutionary figures was completely delegitimised in that square at that particular moment.

Now for the rest, let me do two things: To provide a chronology of the most important events of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, now almost a year out. Two things are going on at the moment: the counting of the 3rd stage of the Egyptian election, but also we are coming up to the anniversary of the young woman who went to Tahrir on the 25th of January 2011. So I want to say that and I want to look at possibilities and probable developments in 2012 via comparisons with the revolutions of 1919 and 1952.

So the first important moment in the 2011 revolution is when the army refuses to act, perhaps because of the general sense of their own weakness. I had a real feeling following it at the time that the generals felt that if they ordered the soldiers to shoot and the young soldiers to move in at that particular stage, they might have refused. So that reflects as much the weakness of the army as the power of the army and it also reflects something that is less well known which is the extraordinary power which the Obama administration has over the Egyptian army. It was enough on January the 27th and 28th for either President Obama or Hillary Clinton to pick up the phone and say to the army 'you must' or 'you must not', for that to be obeyed. And that needs a bit of explanation because America has many armies subject to its influence – the Israeli army and others – over which it seems to have extraordinarily little influence. But I think it is something to with the fact that the Egyptian army is full

of dirty secrets, one of which is that it can't actually fight. If you talk to American officers, the Bright Star manoeuvres now exist on computers. The Egyptian army is incapable of doing military manoeuvres. It just doesn't have the capacity. It has other capacities. It is deeply implicit in corruption and a military-industrial sector. So those two things are well-known to the army and to the American and that and allow the Americans to blackmail the army when necessary. An incident of this kind happened only the other day when the police came and closed down two NGOs which are supported from the United States in Cairo and Panetta the American Secretary of Defence picked up the phone and it was reversed immediately. So if you have cause for optimism, it is I think that the Egyptian army is not quite as Nasserite and quite as willing or able to move centre stage in the Egyptian political process as one might suppose just because of this American influence over it.

Then, in March, there was a document in which a decision was made to hold elections to a parliament which itself would choose members of a constitutional commission from its own ranks in three stages -- elections in November, December and January. Egypt has 27 provinces – 9 provinces at a time, so we just finished counting in the third round of elections. And this led of course to the formation of parties and the discussion about parties and rules and roles and many amendments to the basic law of 1972 and, in some cases, amendments to amendments. This is a very messy business. I think when one gets to 1923 and the electoral law of 1923, it was clear that it was meant to favour the Wafd – the Egyptian leading nationalist party. Electoral laws when they come *de nova* are usually produced by one section of the political elite in order to favour one particular outcome and then what happens after that is you have an election, you do a bit of psephological analysis. You decide that it's not favouring you or not favouring you enough and then the next stage is you think about redrawing . Then the next stage is you think about withdrawing constituencies or having another set of elections.

But in the Egyptian case, it was subject to so much discussion in advance, it is not quite clear what result it was meant to have – although I think it's generally supposed that nobody imagined or large number of people didn't wish for a situation in which

the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi's Nour Party would have obtained so much. The main features of this particular discussion then become very technical, but I think we are at a technical moment if we are thinking about the Middle East. I mean, for a long time you didn't have to study political processes in order to understand Middle East elections or anything of that kind. They were clearly manipulated and exercises in building up support for the rulers. But I'm now back where I was studying politics, philosophy and economics at Oxford in the late 1950s when we studied rival systems of PR versus first-past-the-post. They usually had foreign names like *scrutin de liste* or *scrutin* the something or other.

So we are back to nuts and bolts now and, in a sense, it's more boring, but one of my strongest arguments is that if you are in the democracy game – and this is what I tell the Americans who ask me how to do it -- you have to understand these things -- the differences between a parliamentary system and a republican system, the different kinds of electoral choices that you have and so on. And this has become of enormous importance. I know many people regard this as extremely boring, but it is, in fact, the nuts and bolts of a working democracy and something you should consider. As an anti-American aside, Americans talk about democracy, but I think they actually understand very little about its workings, its proper workings. I think they think elections are enough, but this business of the holding elections and the systems you use and the people who are allowed to stand for parliament and whether you have independence and whether you have lists and so on is of enormous importance to the healthy working of a democracy.

So they were arguing in effect of the balance of two systems – first past the post and proportional representation, whether one should have independence or party lists. And in the background were larger notions like, is it a parliamentary system, and is parliament sovereign or where does sovereignty exist outside – I mean, in a republic, the people are sovereign but then the president very often interpret the wishes of the people. That's what Ben Ali always spent his time, speaking in name of people, saying it was a sovereign thing. But now the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups in the Middle East are working towards a notion of parliamentary sovereignty and

based on what they see about British practice and so on. But if you are the largest party in parliament and parliament is sovereign, then the prime minister becomes more important than the president and that is a different kind of politics than the one we have been traditionally used to in the Middle East.

So as I say, in this particular case, there were arguments about all these things and there were also threats of boycott and so on which is the ultimate threat of democrats against a military junta or something or that kind – that we simply won't play the game of pretending that Egypt is a democracy and we will expose the army for what it is. All that was going on so it is a nicely complicated situation of which reading the vast amounts of literature that is produced by the website *Jadaliyya* for example, which I commend to all, learn an enormous amount about laws and practices and parties, but I still haven't quite got that story down. And I think one can also learn something about what will obviously be the process in Egypt at the moment from what the process was in 1922 and 1923 when Egypt first had multi-party, contested elections under an agreed electoral law is that people will now look at this and those people who oppose the Muslim Brothers and so on will want to change the law, change the constituency system, change something or other and others will look to advantages and there is not much stability in such a system. What I long for in those moments when I think about the interests of democracy in the Middle East is that it might be possible to hold three or four elections under the same rules so that everybody believed in some kind of constituency. But this probably is not going to be the case unless one can come up with some way of binding everybody into a system whereby for five or 10 years you agree not to change the rules or you only change the rules through constitutional court or something of that kind. Then the discussions warmed up in the light of earlier electoral experience of course. It was still a surprise win for the Muslim Brotherhood and the Nour Party, and also the efforts of the army under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to protect its military interests in the name of its own self-proclaimed role as co-instigator and protector of the national revolution.

So now let me just say a few words about the main protagonists in these discussions. The Muslim Brothers, anxious now because of their electoral popularity, to assert the primacy of parliament and its right to draw up in a constitution but model it in terms of their own desires to appear as moderate and the ability to address salient issues – like economy, jobs, debt etcetera – to which they will be called to account in only about a year. So the Muslim Brothers are interested in power to parliament, but they also recognise that if the prime minister is an enormously important person within the new system, then they have to deliver the goods that matter most to Egyptian in terms of the economy and jobs and so on.

Then we have the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, with an interest to secure its own continued interest, that is to protect a military interest, narrowly defined either within the new constitutional structure or above it, so that they are not subject to civilian accounting or scrutiny. And they find for themselves a constitution of the fearful – people who worry about what a Muslim Brother democracy may look like, among Copts, Christians, among women who fear the return of a kind of Islamic misogyny as far as the women of Egypt are considered, minorities, secularists and so on. And the system won't be at rest until I think can be argued until both the military interest and the religious interest are secured and there is a consensus as to how this may be done. So the military at the moment is insisting that the Supreme Council, not Parliament, will chose the next prime minister, and that it also has the power both to appoint a committee to oversee the drafting of the constitution in order to limit the influence of religious extremism and the right to issue super-constitutional declarations which exist over and above the constitution and which can't be touched by the constitutional drafting commission itself. So in this jockeying for position and so on, there is a desire to have a powerful position, but also to trump other people's legitimacy and demands by saying this council commission can do this, but there are certain things it can't do and the army will secure the interests of those people whose interests are not adequately addressed by the democratic process. One can easily imagine the kind of arguments that are used at this time.

So the battle lines are now drawn for the new parliament which is to be elected by the 14 January – very soon of course -- with 498 elected members of the national assembly and 10 appointed. That will be followed by election to the upper house – also elected in 3 stages – 180 members elected and 90 appointed. Then, on 17 March, these 2 institutions will meet to select a commission when all will have to be worked out including the role of the president, the balance between the president and parliament and one hopes that this way of doing it becomes an instrument of compromise because of course the whole point is to have a system that allows plural views. So the electoral process and the constitutional process becomes a process also you hope of compromise between the various interests involved.

And then we have a few other interested persons. Amr Moussa is going to stand as a presidential candidate. Nobody knows what powers the president will have. Nobody as far as I can tell has begun to think about that except they know that they don't want the untrammelled powers of a Mubarak or Nasser. But how you capture and entangle as it were and fit a president into this new constitutional structure is also of enormous importance as to what powers he has – can he dissolve parliament on his own, all these kinds of things, have to be worked out. Amr Moussa's contribution to this is I think he wants a relatively constrained presidency and, if he became president, he would only stand for four years. So his bid to pre-empt that or make an important intervention in that particular debate is that the president should only be president for four years. I mean, normally one thinks that the standard constitutional practice in the Middle East has been that the president has two five-year terms and then stands down of course. What happened with presidents for life is that they then changed the constitution at that stage to allow them to stand for a 3rd and 4th term. This is also a matter of enormous importance.

There are various kinds of legitimacy being deployed too – there is a revolutionary legitimacy, there is a Tahrir legitimacy, there is now an electoral legitimacy that comes from being the most powerful party and so on. All these are in play, too. So it is, as I say, a very inchoate period. But it is also one in which there are two things – in ideal circumstance there have to be compromises and agreements. If there will be

a successful constitution which lasts, there will have to be agreement on all these things between the parties on terms of the rules of the political game. And then, beyond that, there is some role for the United States in making sure that the military does not overplay its role – whatever the SCAF is. It's only half military and half old people from the security apparatus and the supreme council – how a genuine military interest is fitted into this.

Now let me just say a few more things in terms of constitutional parallels which might help us think about how this particularly tricky operation might go. As I say in 1923, when there was no army but the king, there was something of a dialectical process. You had an election. It was designed to favour one group. Everybody gets together. I mean, the different parties among themselves come together after the election, talk about how it works. You can see this very clearly between 1923 and 1925 in Egypt if you are interested in the constitutional history of that period. And various attempts are made to manage in advance, change the constituencies, change the electoral rules in order to favour one side or the other until it sort of settles down for a bit in 1925 until 1931.

So, that tells you what to avoid. How does one avoid that. And it tells you again what to avoid, because it is clear that this particular process of changing the rules and trying to advantage one political party over another finally led to the discredit of the whole political class. Of course, other things happened as well – the defeat in Palestine in 1948, but you could say that the bad performance of the political system and the behaviour of the political class, the tinkering, the search for advantages and the way there was no agreement on rules about the proper conduct of political life – that this finally led to the discrediting of the political class and then you get the Nasser period and the attempt to begin again in 1952 with a new constitution and a new single-party political system. And now we begin again. As I say, that seems to be one of the main challenges facing Egypt at the moment – that they don't go along that particular line in which the politicians discredit themselves by this search for constitutional advantage.

In 1952, there was the same attempt to draw up a constitution. Not much is known about that except that Tarek Beshri, the famous legal scholar, was involved as a very young man in the 1954 Constitutional Commission. They sat down and in a very kind of intellectual way said what is a republic, they asked the sort of basic questions, what are we, where is sovereignty and so on. Meanwhile, Nasser was writing his own constitution and that was the constitution of 1955 that he introduced. He just went completely round the existing constitution. So one could imagine a situation of that kind, although I think it is slight at the moment, that another constitution might appear from somewhere else within the system, perhaps from the arm , with a different set of aims, perhaps back to a single, national party or something of that kind.

So now to a few words in conclusion before our discussion. The events of a year ago were wonderful events, and one of the many questions is how one keeps that moment of revolutionary enthusiasm in memory, the spirit of all that alive. For me, and maybe for most of us, for all of you who watched it on Al Jazeera, it is the songs and the graffiti and the enthusiasm in Tahrir which is what we remember and that must be remembered. There are various kinds of people, including sadly my old friend Jon Alterman who say the real revolution is the revolution of the Muslim Brothers. No. The real revolution is what happened in Tahrir. That's the real revolution and that's what we have to hang on to and the extraordinary outpouring of feelings of being alive, of imaginative response to political problems of brotherhood and sisterhood and so on. That was a release. That's enormously important.

But in some ways those moments are also a handicap for those who want to engage in the day-to-day political process. If you talk to some of the young people from Tahrir, their programme for the entire restructuring of the Egyptian society and the Egyptian administration would take about 25 years to complete. It doesn't fit with any electoral chronology that one can imagine. They see the police as deeply corrupt. They see the educational system as inefficient. I think Amr Moussa is a bit in the same situation – he was talking about a five-year plan or something. I haven't heard about someone talking about a five-year plan in Egypt for quite a long time. It does

cause one to remember various things going on in the 50s and 60s. But there is this other current that is released not into practical everyday politics, but a desire for a very much comprehensive route and branch restructuring of Egypt's society, its political and its legal system, and its educational system.

Nevertheless, I think this is a moment where people are forced to come together to agree on a set of rules, and it is happy I think for the Egyptian people that revolutions in the modern world do lead to the notion that one must have a new constitution and that a new constitution requires one to think very deeply about government and how it should be arranged and so on, and the balance between as I say the president and parliament and so on. And then that thinking has to be sold back to the people as legitimate in the terms of preservation of sectional interests. This is a messy business and causes huge problems, but it also, it should be noted, matters enormously to the Egyptian people, but it also matters enormously to the region. I mean, Nasserism spread out of Egypt and led to revolutionary command councils and Nasserite revolutions in Sudan and Libya and places like that. What one hopes is that if the Egyptians get it right and show that it can be done that it will have an effect on the Arab states all around.

Finally, a few more lessons. The first would be to return to this what I hope will be a renewed interest by everybody in this room and students and so on in the nuts and bolts of constitutions and electoral processes. We have to go back to that and remind ourselves what kind of issues in the electoral process have to be decided on, and the kinds of compromises and structures and so on that have to be created to allow a working, plural, competitive democracy. I think there is some role for people outside as far as intellectual work is concerned. It often has been said in Arab newspapers that the intellectuals aren't present. I mean, they are present in places like Syria where you can still work away at a tyrannical regimes. But there isn't an obvious intellectual leadership in Egypt as far as I can tell. Maybe people can contradict me on that. Those who know something about Egyptian history – when you are trying to start again, some kind of historical anchor, some kind of knowledge of what came before, some kind of the knowledge of revolutionary hopes, of the role

of Tahrir, of the electoral processes that worked in the 1920s, is useful in some kind of way, not necessarily immediately useful, but available for those kinds of Egyptians who want to make a substantial contribution to the intellectual debate about these things inside of Egypt itself. Thirdly, I think one should be aware of pessimists and cynics who want the Arab spring to fail – sometimes for anti-Islamic reasons, sometimes for racial reasons, sometimes just to show the Arabs can't manage democracy. That's one of our tasks, too, to try and contradict that and make a reasoned case as I've been trying to do for what the Egyptians are trying to do and what they need to attend to and how they might fail or how they might succeed and what the new system might look like. Thank you.