CHAPTER 9

SECULARISM, POSTSECULARISM, AND STATES OF EXCEPTION IN THE 2011 EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION AND ITS AFTERMATH

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Introduction

Among the numerous attempts to account for the events that in February 2011 led to the ousting of longtime Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, the analysis of Samera Esmeir is deserving of particular attention. For her, the 2011 Egyptian revolution should be understood as a “state of exception” in the form of “a suspension of the grounds of legitimacy of both the Egyptian state and its constitution,” which replaced a different “state of exception,” namely, the normalization of an “illusionary” state of emergency that authorized the regular adoption of “exceptional” measures by the state security apparatus. The original state of exception was the response of the regime to its massive crisis of legitimacy. Eventually, this resulted in widespread popular protests against extensive corruption and economic policies that had dramatically impoverished Egypt and created huge inequalities, against the restriction of civil liberties, free speech, freedom of the press, and, overall, against a system that had deprived the young generations, largely unemployed, of hopes and possibilities. The state of exception under Mubarak was thus a set of emergency laws that endowed the state, and in particular the police, with an extraordinary array of powers—including the right to “prohibit demonstrations, censor newspapers, monitor personal
communications, detain people at will, hold prisoners indefinitely without charge, ... send defendants before special military courts to which there is no appeal" and engage in the widespread and systematic use of torture—which de facto had contributed to turn Egypt into a police state.

According to Esmeir, “The revolution shifted the definition of the exception from the grounds of normalized security-driven legalities, which were the Egyptian state’s technologies of rule, to the self-organized plural groups working collectively ‘on the ground’ and laying claim to the present and the future of Egypt.” Indeed, “The people wants the fall of the regime” was the main slogan of the revolution. It embodied the awareness of a newly found unity and a call for collective action that defeated long-established factionalisms. Accordingly, a distinctive aspect of the revolutionary “state of exception” was its cutting across the institutional, political, and psychological barriers that had long “polarized Egypt’s political terrain between more Islamically-oriented currents (most prominent among them, the Muslim Brotherhood) and secular-liberal ones.” As anthropologist Charles Hirschkind points out, “Competing visions of Egypt’s future have long been divided along secular versus religious lines” to the effect that, Maha Abdelrahman remarks, the polarization between secularists and Islamists has been a central question in Egyptian politics and has had implications for “every sphere of the political and the social realms.” Hence, the chanting crowds in Tahrir Square, which saw together secularists, Islamists, Muslim Brothers, communists, leftists, and liberals acting under “a collective ‘leadership’” and uttering slogans such as “Our revolution is civil; neither violent, nor religious,” and where Muslims and Christians prayed together without being perceived by leftists and liberals as a threat to the secular nature of the revolution, represent an exceptional challenge to Mubarak’s security-driven state of exception and to the secularist-Islamist polarization.

This challenge raises questions about the nature of this polarization, the related politics of resistance, and its exceptional and time-bound character. Accordingly, this chapter will explore three main arguments. First, it will argue that the long-standing polarization between secularists and Islamists in Egypt should be accounted for not just as an instantiation of conflicting theo-political visions and sensibilities, but also as a product of secularism understood as “an expression of the state’s sovereign power.” This perspective approaches secularism as a power-knowledge regime that conceives