Urban Backlash against Democracy: Battling the Tyranny of the Majority or the Rise of Rural Power?

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ROBERT R. BIANCHI

**URBAN BACKLASH AGAINST DEMOCRACY:
BATTLING THE TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY
OR THE RISE OF RURAL POWER**

ABSTRACT

During the 29 months between the overthrow of the Mubarak dictatorship and the military coup against the democratically elected government of Muhammad Mursi, about thirty million Egyptians voted in four major national polls – the constitutional referendum of March 2011, the parliamentary elections of November 2011-January 2012, the presidential elections of May-June 2012, and the constitutional referendum of December 2012. Despite the shifting alliances and counter-alliances that characterized these electoral battles, voting patterns reveal a consistent nationwide dominance of the Freedom and Justice Party that was rooted in the provincial capitals and villages of the Nile Delta with particularly enduring strength in Upper Egypt. Eventually, holdovers from the Mubarak regime allied with local elites ('ayan) connected to the Wafd Party and with Christian groups tied to the Egyptian Block in mobilizing an opposition coalition that was centered in the more prosperous districts of Cairo and a handful of neighboring governorates in the southern Delta. Although the opposition managed to enlist the military in removing the elected government and repressing its followers, we can expect to see similar voting patterns if free elections are held again even if the competing parties adopt different names and slogans.

KEYWORDS:

Elections, Muslim Brotherhood, democracy, revolution, urban-rural cleavage.

Egypt's democratic revolution has unleashed countless power struggles filled with heroism, treachery, and bloodshed. Still, there is no end in sight. Egypt has seen many revolutions and it is certain to see even more.

Democracy has not failed in Egypt. On the contrary, it has empowered millions who never dreamed of freedom because they devoted everything to daily survival and had nothing left for wishful thinking about a better future¹.

Indeed, it is precisely the sudden inclusion of the most forgotten parts of society that has provoked a counter-revolution by big city residents accustomed to grabbing all the best seats at the nation's cheerless banquet of scarcity. For the more desperate members of Egypt's urban elites and middle classes, the prospect of being permanently demoted to ordinary citizenship sparked enough panic to push them into the waiting arms of Mubarak's old cronies and henchmen. The backlash spawned an unlikely coalition joining so-called "liberals" and "secularists" with the very judges and police, and with the same landlords and generals – even the same Arabian monarchies – they had denounced in Tahrir Square three years before. The angry streets of Cairo gave birth to democracy but, when the same crowds saw their privileges slipping to the countryside, they rose once more to bury it.

But burying democracy is no easy matter. After thirty months of free elections and hard-fought referendums, Egyptian voters have created a nationwide electorate. Popular sovereignty is no longer a hollow slogan or a throw-away line in a sham constitution. Counter-revolution is bound to provoke its own antithesis, and the more vicious the repression today, the more certain the reaction tomorrow. Common people in every part of the country have learned quickly the art of building coalitions and counter-coalitions, and they continue to hone that talent with each passing day. History gives ample evidence that, once acquired, those political skills can long outlive the personalities and groups that perish in passing coups and purges.

Sooner or later, Egypt will have more elections, and the winners and losers of the future might not be so different from the winners and losers of the post-Mubarak contests. Labels and shells may come and go, but the underlying social and economic conflicts are bound

1. Bianchi 2013, pp. 87-138.

to play out for generations. If we wish to anticipate the likely contours of Egypt's future political struggles, we should try to understand more clearly the alliances and confrontations that have shaped voting behavior in the recent past.

THE CRITICAL CHOICES

On two occasions, voters had to make key decisions about the trustworthiness of institutions inherited from the old order. The constitutional referendums of March 2011 and December 2012 amounted to up or down votes of confidence, first, for the military and, then, for the judiciary. In both cases, the verdict went against the holdover elites and in favor of clearing the way for new blood².

The 2011 plebiscite endorsed a rapid timetable for phasing out military rule instead of a "go slow" option that would have delayed elections and civilian government until army-appointed jurists and politicians could hammer out a new permanent constitution. Outside of the capital city of Cairo, keeping the army in power was widely seen as a tactic to avoid – and even to prevent – free elections because they would inevitably reflect the interests of the majority in the poorer provincial towns and villages. Hence, the fast track to democracy carried the day easily in every governorate.

The 2012 referendum was more contentious and passed with a smaller margin. It approved a new constitution that tried to bolster the presidency over the judiciary. This vote amounted to much more than fine-tuning the separation of powers. It was, in fact, a direct confrontation between Egypt's first democratically elected president, Muhammad Mursi, and the judges who had dissolved the first democratically elected parliament which was led by the president's Freedom and Justice Party. The president won the showdown, but it was a Pyrrhic victory that enraged his enemies and sealed their determination to bring him down at all costs.

The counter-revolution aims not only to remove a government, but to destroy the political coalitions and social networks that undergird its power. The roots of the Freedom and Justice Party and its electoral allies have penetrated so deeply and widely into Egyptian society that they could probably produce democratic majorities for years and even decades into the future. That prospect is precisely the reason that their "liberal" rivals are so desperate to halt and reverse the revolution they once championed. The lethal force against Mursi's supporters

2. Lajna al-Qida'iya al-'Uliya lil-Intikhabat, 2011; Lajna al-Qida'iya al-'Uliya lil-Intikhabat, 2012a.

reveals the wider goals of the repression – not to settle scores and level the playing field, but to wipe out the competition and drive it underground.

What are the social roots of the parties that battled for voters' support in Egypt's struggling democracy? How did they maneuver and adapt to changing threats and opportunities? And what makes the most successful contestants so menacing in the eyes of the losers and the holdovers from the authoritarian past?

Answering these questions requires a closer look at the legislative and presidential elections that took place between the constitutional referendums that paved the way for the rise and fall of Mursi and his party. Those elections produced fluid and powerful coalitions that constantly surprised winners and losers alike, pushing them in directions they did not foresee and could not control.

SHIFTING ALLIANCES AND COUNTER-ALLIANCES

Every one of the nationwide polls – referendums and elections alike – was a milestone in the revolution (Table 1). Enthusiasm and turnout remained high despite tedious delays and numerous runoffs. There was no evidence of “voter fatigue” even when sporadic violence and bitter court challenges marred the historic sense of political drama.

Nonetheless, the presidential elections of June 2012 were a decisive turning point – a clear departure from the legislative elections just six months earlier and a harbinger of the divisive constitutional referendum six months later (Table 2 and Table 3). The electoral coalition that sent Mursi to the Presidential Palace was very different from the voter alignment that had put the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in charge of Parliament³. Understanding the contrast between the FJP alliance and the Mursi constituency helps to explain the deepening polarization that upended Egypt's democratic experiment.

In the parliamentary elections, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood rallied a wide cross-section of voters nationwide – in the big cities, the provincial towns, and the countryside⁴. FJP candidates ran well up and down the Nile valley, including the Delta in the north and the Sa'id in the south. All other parties were distinctly local operations, showing limited pockets of strength in one region or another, but nothing approaching the FJP's national presence (Table 4).

3. Lajna al-Qida'iya al-'Uliya lil-Intikhabat, 2012b; Lajna al-Qida'iya al-'Uliya lil-Intikhabat, 2012c.

4. Kristof, 2011.

In the presidential elections, Mursi's pattern of support paralleled the earlier results of the legislative polls, but he did much better in strongholds of the Nur Party than in districts that had elected deputies from his own party, the FJP (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Mursi did best in Upper Egypt—particularly in Fayyum, Beni Sueif, Minya, and Assyut— and in the poor Delta districts along the Mediterranean coast— Baheira, Kafr al-Sheikh, and Damietta. However, in between these zones, he lost nearly everywhere else. Cairo and the five contiguous governorates of the southern Delta all favored Ahmad Shafiq, the former Air Force commander who had served as Mubarak's last Prime Minister.

Shafiq's strongest support came from the fertile river lands at the heart of Egypt's agribusiness—Qalubiya, Sharqiya, Minufiya, Gharbiya, and Daqhaliya (Figure 3). These districts are historic bastions of the Wafd Party whose core of landlords and professionals encouraged an impressive turnout for Shafiq that put him in striking distance of Mursi until the very last votes were tallied. The sudden success of the local elites (*'ayan*) in the Delta was a stunning turnabout from the legislative elections when the FJP had trounced their candidates in nearly every district, denouncing them as poorly disguised "leftovers" (*feloul*) of the Mubarak era⁵.

In the six months between voting for Parliament and President, the combined forces of the Wafd and Mubarak's former National Democratic Party came back with a vengeance⁶. They assembled a powerful counter-coalition against the FJP and Nur that swept all of the Delta except for Alexandria and the distressed Mediterranean districts that had suffered the greatest environmental degradation and outmigration.

Mursi's urban losses were heaviest in Cairo, but he held his own in Giza and Alexandria. Even in the big cities, rural voters played an indirect role. Districts populated with recent migrants supported Mursi more than the well-established neighborhoods and upscale middle-class areas. In Cairo, Mursi carried the working class district of Helwan to the south while suffering his worst defeat in the wealthier suburbs of Madinat al-Nasr and Misr el-Gadida in the west. The most stunning turnaround in the capital city came in "Islamic Cairo" and its immediate neighbors. The FJP had made a clean sweep of the locally elected deputies—ten out of ten—but Shafiq won just as handily in this older business district as in the modern centers in Qasr al-Nil and the corniche⁷.

5. Hussein, 2011.

6. El Din, 2012.

7. Bianchi, 2012, pp. 21-22.

Giza went to Mursi, but the southern migrant zones gave him larger margins than the “posher” residential and commercial districts of Agouza, Dokki, and Mohandessin. Alexandria showed the same pattern – Mursi won big in the outlying neighborhoods to the northeast and southwest, but he just got by in the central business areas. In all three big cities, Shafiq ran strongest in the modern downtown districts and Mursi swept the transition zones on the peripheries where the influx of rural migrants was most pronounced.

Compared to the FJP’s wide-based coalition, Mursi’s support was much more concentrated in the poorer countryside, particularly the Sa’id, and among urban migrants. These were precisely the voters that had rallied behind Nur’s candidates, propelling them to a stunning second-place finish in the national polls and in the new legislature⁸. Without intending it, Mursi’s campaign had made a clear tradeoff – shedding softer support in the big cities and the richer lands of the Delta while adding voters from the Muslim Brotherhood’s hardline religious rivals. From this point forward, Egypt’s revolutionary struggles were saturated with growing regional and class divisions that undermined any effort at political compromise.

Meanwhile, Shafiq’s campaign fashioned a powerful counter-coalition around a core of Wafdist and former-NDP loyalists who had been biding their time in the aftermath of Mubarak’s fall. Soon they were joined by the Egyptian Block and their supporters in the more politicized factions of the Coptic community. In this context, voting for Mursi carried very different implications from voting for his party’s candidates in the earlier parliamentary polls. Now, it was a matter of entrusting the Muslim Brotherhood with executive *plus* legislative power – and this exactly when the two strongest Islamic parties seemed ready to flex their muscles together against everyone else.

The Mursi-Nur rapprochement only served to reinforce these fears. Religious quarrels intensified, aggravating the regional and economic cleavages that were already tearing society apart. In the midst of this social and ideological polarization, Egypt’s judges decided to dissolve the National Assembly, provoking a constitutional crisis that paralyzed government just when it need to deal decisively with a plummeting economy.

8. Ahmed, 2012.

THE COURTS TO THE “RESCUE”

On the eve of the presidential runoff between Mursi and Shafiq, Egypt’s High Court nullified the newly convened Parliament, claiming that the election law was invalid because it discriminated against independent candidates while favoring political parties. The supposedly tainted deputies held only one-third of the legislature’s seats, but the court still insisted on disbanding the entire body and scraping the electoral system that produced it. At the time, the move was widely interpreted as a “judicial coup” by “Mubarak’s judges” – an eleventh hour attempt to tip the election to Shafiq and scuttle the FJP’s plans to combine legislative and executive authority.

In retrospect, it’s impossible to know if, on balance, the court helped Shafiq or hurt him. Mursi was already on the defensive because his candidacy broke the Muslim Brotherhood’s earlier promise not to enter the presidential race. Besides, it was common knowledge that the lack-luster Mursi was a “spare tire” – a last-minute stand-in for the Brotherhood’s first choice, Khayret al-Shater, who had been scratched from the list by election officials because of an old criminal record. Some of Shafiq’s own backers later opined that the court inadvertently saved the day for Mursi by allowing him to pose as the target of a “counter-revolutionary” plot hatched by Mubarak die-hards.

Soon after Mursi assembled a new government, the courts affirmed the dissolution of Parliament, paving the way for a series of clashes between the presidency and the judiciary that culminated in the constitutional referendum of December 2012. In the months leading up to the plebiscite, Mursi abruptly proclaimed and then renounced extraordinary executive powers to shield his decisions on legislative and electoral matters from judicial review. The referendum’s success bolstered Mursi legally, but it crippled him politically. It gave him formal authority to organize new legislative elections, but allowed his opponents to turn the tables by recasting him as the enemy of the separation of powers instead of its defender.

The new constitution passed by a larger margin than Mursi’s narrow presidential victory – 64 percent compared to 52 percent. Yet, in demographic terms, the referendum was nearly a carbon copy of the Mursi-Shafiq contest (Figure 4). The regional and class divisions were just as deep, but now they were compounded by religious and ideological quarrels and projected onto constitutional decisions that could only be taken by sober minds acting in good faith⁹. As the anti-Mursi street demonstrations gathered steam, their calls for military intervention grew more daring, their contempt for elections more explicit, and their thirst for revenge more chilling¹⁰.

9. Haroun, 2012.

10. Gresh, 2013.

When General Sisi seized power, he turned the crowds to his own purposes. Organizing an impromptu “plebiscite” of the streets, Sisi – now dubbed by the state-run media as “the Field Marshall of the people” – asked tens of millions of demonstrators for a “mandate” to ratify the military takeover and to endorse armed assaults against any “terrorists” that opposed him¹¹. The General’s call was answered. Lethal attacks on pro-Mursi protesters came from the army, the police, and civilians.

In the aftermath, it appeared that the use of force had been doubly disproportionate – not merely because of its excessive level, but also in its conspicuously heavy toll among protesters who had come to Cairo from the towns and villages of the poorer southern governorates. The writing on the shrouds of the victims told a familiar story of social inequality that was absent from the official narrative of “liberals” reclaiming their revolution from religious extremists. In many cases, the body covers proclaimed the home districts of the dead as well as their names: “Saadawy Mohammed from Beni Suef, Khaled Abdel al-Nasser from Qena” and so on¹².

Table 1. Timeline of elections and turning points in Egypt’s democratic revolution

Mubarak overthrown	February 11, 2011
1 st Constitutional referendum	March 19, 2011
Legislative elections	November 28, 2011-January 11, 2012
Court dissolves parliament	June 14, 2012
Presidential elections	May 23/24-June 16/17, 2012
Court upholds dissolution of parliament	September 23, 2012
2 nd Constitutional referendum	December 15/22, 2012
Mursi overthrown	July 3, 2013

11. Feteha, 2013.

12. Fahim and El Sheikh, 2013.

Table 2. Voting by Governorate in Constitutional Referendum 2011, Legislative Elections 2011-2012, Presidential Election 2012, and Constitutional Referendum 2012 (percent)

	2011 Const Yes	FJP	Nur	Wafd	EB	Mursi 2012	2012 Const Yes
Cairo	62.90	38.89	15.53	7.45	20.24	44.28	43.07
Giza	74.48	39.43	28.60	6.17	10.28	59.72	66.33
Alexandria	67.12	34.84	31.31	6.00	11.40	57.48	55.63
Beheira	87.71	35.38	38.95	8.70	3.69	58.58	75.47
Kafr al-Sheikh	87.92	30.22	33.97	13.12	0.69	55.41	67.60
Damietta	82.77	31.14	38.58	4.53	3.38	56.02	64.42
Daqahliya	79.71	33.34	27.85	10.60	2.46	44.38	55.19
Gharbiya	78.82	33.36	29.30	15.65	5.97	37.04	47.87
Menoufiya	86.74	36.73	18.98	18.65	2.91	28.61	48.75
Sharqiya	86.64	36.83	23.60	12.28	5.21	45.73	65.95
Qalubiya	81.00	37.47	27.64	7.89	6.60	41.72	60.62
Beni Suef	87.47	40.75	33.97	10.08	3.43	66.50	84.84
Fayyum	90.25	44.95	33.38	2.17	3.58	77.76	89.43
Minya	76.63	41.40	24.96	5.14	12.14	64.42	83.19
Assyut	73.46	37.08	22.76	3.67	19.52	61.52	76.09
Sohag	78.65	26.71	26.28	5.88	15.80	58.24	78.82
Qena	86.08	29.39	20.54	7.48	2.01	55.67	84.68
Luxor	81.52	36.90	15.78	11.06	12.99	46.90	76.63
Aswan	76.63	33.79	23.70	7.80	9.25	51.93	76.65
Port Sa'id	70.79	32.66	20.69	13.89	9.65	45.76	51.13
Isma'iliya	77.89	38.19	27.63	7.40	6.65	54.25	70.03
Suez	78.83	26.84	45.55	4.63	8.37	62.74	71.07
North Sinai	86.24	37.02	20.44	5.74	1.64	61.51	78.30
South Sinai	66.93	42.53	0.00	16.66	11.17	49.70	63.43
Red Sea	63.38	35.69	0.00	9.69	17.01	49.37	62.64
Al-Wadi al-Gadeed	90.94	19.64	55.70	4.00	7.47	63.38	87.34
Marsa Matrouh	92.41	14.46	67.79	6.78	1.75	80.12	91.66
Total	77.27	36.40	27.05	8.91	8.63	51.73	63.96
Mean	79.77	34.47	27.55	8.63	7.97	54.77	69.51
Stand. deviation	8.38	6.01	12.93	4.12	5.51	11.38	13.52

Table 3. Voting by Governorate in Constitutional Referendum 2011, Legislative Elections 2011-2012, Presidential Election 2012, and Constitutional Referendum 2012 (standard scores*)

	2011 Const Yes	PJP	Nur	Wafd	Block E	Mursi 2012	2012 Const Yes
Cairo	-2.01	0.69	-0.88	-0.29	2.23	-0.92	-2.11
Giza	-0.63	0.77	0.05	-0.60	0.42	0.44	-0.25
Alexandria	-1.51	0.08	0.24	-0.64	0.62	0.24	-1.11
Beheira	0.95	0.16	0.78	0.02	-0.78	0.33	0.48
Kafr al-Sheikh	0.97	-0.61	0.43	1.09	-1.32	0.06	-0.15
Damietta	0.36	-0.47	0.75	-0.99	-0.83	0.11	-0.41
Daqahliya	-0.01	-0.14	0.00	0.48	-1.00	-0.91	-1.14
Gharbiya	-0.11	-0.14	0.10	1.70	-0.36	-1.56	-1.73
Menoufiya	0.82	0.37	-0.63	2.43	-0.92	-2.30	-1.66
Sharqiya	0.82	0.37	-0.30	0.89	-0.50	-0.79	-0.28
Qalubiya	0.15	0.48	-0.02	-0.18	-0.25	-1.15	-0.71
Beni Suef	0.92	0.97	0.43	0.35	-0.82	1.03	1.22
Fayyum	1.25	1.60	0.39	-1.57	-0.80	2.02	1.59
Minya	-0.37	1.07	-0.21	-0.85	0.76	0.85	1.09
Assyut	-0.75	0.42	-0.36	-1.20	2.10	0.59	0.53
Sohag	-0.13	-1.13	-0.12	-0.67	1.42	0.30	0.74
Qena	0.75	-0.73	-0.52	-0.28	-1.08	0.08	1.21
Luxor	0.21	0.39	-0.86	0.59	0.91	-0.69	0.57
Aswan	-0.37	-0.07	-0.30	-0.20	0.23	-0.25	0.57
Port Sa'id	-1.07	-0.24	-0.51	1.28	0.30	-0.79	-1.47
Isma'iliya	-0.22	0.59	-0.02	-0.30	-0.24	-0.05	0.04
Suez	-0.11	-1.11	1.25	-0.97	0.07	0.70	0.12
North Sinai	0.77	0.41	-0.53	-0.70	-1.15	0.59	0.70
South Sinai	-1.53	1.24	-1.97	1.95	0.58	-0.45	-0.49
Red Sea	-1.96	0.21	-1.97	0.26	1.64	-0.47	-0.55
Al-Wadi al-Gadeed	1.33	-2.19	1.96	-1.12	-0.09	0.76	1.42
Marsa Matrouh	1.51	-2.97	2.82	-0.45	-1.13	2.23	1.77

*Standard scores facilitate comparison across data sets that have different averages and statistical distributions. They allow us to gauge the relative degree to which voters in each district stand out from the rest of the electorate by supporting candidates and initiatives in a particularly strong or weak manner. For example, voters in Fayyum governorate were among the leading supporters of the FJP and then Muhammad Mursi. Minufiya voters were exceptionally loyal backers of the Wafd and then Ahmad Shafiq. And voters in Cairo were unusually critical of both constitutional referendums.

Table 4. Voting for Party Lists in the Legislative Elections 2011-2012 and for Mursi in the Presidential Election 2012 (Nile Valley, percent)

	FJP	Nur	Wafd	EB	Mursi
Cairo 1	39.45	15.36	6.23	23.50	39.06
Cairo 2	35.65	11.31	5.76	26.22	45.81
Cairo 3	39.94	14.52	14.67	18.33	35.27
Cairo 4	40.48	19.35	7.32	13.14	51.07
Giza 1	41.09	29.10	7.80	10.52	61.52
Giza 2	37.83	28.12	4.60	10.05	57.98
Alexandria 1	34.41	29.85	6.40	16.02	57.52
Alexandria 2	35.32	32.96	5.55	6.15	57.45
Baheira 1	35.69	40.01	8.78	4.38	61.24
Baheira 2	34.66	36.47	8.51	2.08	54.77
Damietta	31.14	38.58	4.53	3.38	56.02
Kafr 1	29.83	38.92	12.16	0.00	57.76
Kafr 2	31.12	22.40	15.36	2.30	50.14
Minufiya 1	34.00	22.33	11.15	6.14	29.50
Minufiya 2	39.18	15.96	25.41	0.00	27.58
Gharbiya 1	28.67	29.73	13.79	7.40	35.62
Gharbiya 2	37.59	28.90	17.33	4.69	38.32
Qalubiya 1	35.67	23.35	10.96	4.98	35.22
Qalubiya 2	38.26	29.52	6.54	7.32	44.75
Daqhaliya 1	30.43	26.91	11.45	2.62	45.07
Daqhaliya 2	38.72	29.01	11.80	2.10	52.15
Daqhaliya 3	32.22	27.95	8.73	2.58	37.80
Sharqiya 1	37.99	26.55	10.53	6.68	45.71

Sharqiya 2	35.54	20.80	13.95	3.81	45.75
Fayyum 1	44.89	29.06	3.58	2.26	74.79
Fayyum 2	45.05	40.03	0.00	5.61	82.59
Beni Sueif 1	39.47	35.00	11.42	0.00	64.96
Beni Sueif 2	43.17	32.02	7.54	9.93	69.38
Minya 1	46.29	22.25	3.81	5.67	64.95
Minya 2	35.77	28.09	6.68	19.59	63.78
Assyut 1	39.77	20.84	3.73	20.31	59.54
Assyut 2	32.57	25.96	3.57	18.19	64.83
Sohag 1	28.42	29.33	4.65	15.96	59.26
Sohag 2	22.70	19.14	8.75	15.41	56.15
Qena 1	32.62	21.88	8.91	0.00	55.76
Qena 2	26.03	19.16	5.99	4.10	55.47
Luxor	36.90	15.78	11.06	12.99	46.90
Aswan	33.79	23.70	7.80	9.25	51.93

Figure 1. Vote for FJP lists 2011-2012 and for Mursi 2012.
(Pearson's $r = .2628$).

Figure 2. Vote for Nur lists 2011-2012 and for Mursi 2012.
(Pearson's $r = .5111$).

Figure 3. Vote for Wafd lists 2011-2012 and for Shafiq 2012.
(Pearson's $r = .6903$).

Figure 4. Vote for the 2012 Constitution and for Mursi.
(Pearson's $r = .8169$).

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