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## The Future of Egypt and the Riddles of History



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By [Ben W. Heineman Jr.](#)

"History is being made." So say the people, the commentators, and the policy makers in Egypt and around the globe.

But, of course, "history" itself is no clear guide, and indeed offers many imperfect analogies for consideration as presidents and people--participants and observers--seek their bearings.

After more than 10 days of revolt, Egypt is at a cross-roads with great uncertainty. Long-standing fear of repression has turned to wide-spread anger and dramatic protests which have brought those with political, economic and military power to the negotiating table.

-- Will the ultimate result be a new and repressive dictatorship "of the people" as occurred after the French Revolution in 1789, the Russian Revolution in 1917, and the Iranian Revolution in 1979?

-- Will the ultimate result be the suppression of the uprising by the military in overt or subversive forms, as occurred in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, China in 1989, or Iran in 2009, despite the "tolerance" of the protests thus far by the Egyptian military?

-- Will the ultimate result be, as historian [Simon Schama reminded us recently](#), like the European revolutions of 1848, "when autocracies appeared to accept parliamentary government only to summon the cavalry and the artillery from the barracks a few months later.....[for] authoritarian restorations."

-- Will the ultimate result be like the transformation of Warsaw Pact nations to constitutional democracies--with varying degrees of freedom--following the fall of the Wall in 1989?

-- Will the ultimate result look like Turkey, with its Westernizing rejection of the Sultan and the Caliph by Ataturk after World War I, followed in this decade by a democratic nation that, under Erdogan, looks both East to Islam and West to the EU and the US?

The answer, of course, is that we don't know. Yet fragments of these incomplete historical analogies--and others as well--are doubtless helping to shape (either as goals or as fears) the uncertain future that those in Egypt are trying to negotiate and policy-makers and opinion leaders outside Egypt are trying to influence.

There are many reasons we don't know. For example, the protesters appear to come from a broad swath of Egyptian society--poor and rich, Islamist and secular, professional and day laborer--and, at this moment, are united by anger at the past but may divide over the arrangements for the future. The military itself, as recent news stories drawn from Wiki leaks materials indicate, is divided in its loyalties to the top Egyptian military political leadership and its views about future reform. And, of course, many with current economic power must worry about a new government pursuing those who became rich through corruption.

So, the protesters gather not just in the shadows of the buildings surrounding Tahrir Square, but also in the shadow of history--of many histories. Not too far away sits the Great Sphinx of Giza, a monumental sculpture more than three millennia old. It has looked down on all this history with its impassive face and dead eyes.

But it is not speaking.

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