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The Contradictions of the Corniche: A Walk Along the Nile on the Eve of Egypt's Presidential Election

As I stepped onto the Corniche one Monday afternoon last May, into the midday Cairo sun and early rush-hour traffic creeping along the east bank of the Nile, I took a moment to reflect on the city's contradictions and the clues they might hold for Egypt's contested political future. I had just left the country's National Archives, or *Dar al-Wathaiq* in Arabic, literally the House of Documents. I spent the morning there struggling to decipher barely legible turn-of-the-century Arabic, trying to concentrate through the gossiping of the middle-aged *Hejabi*- women archivists and the *Muezzin*'s call to prayer in a nearby Mosque. As the loudspeakers blared, a jarring computer program flashed prayer times from around the world, a further reminder to researchers that this was their moment with God.

Leaving the *Dar*, as foreign academics often defiantly shorten the official name of the place—if you succeed in obtaining 'clearance' after navigating Egypt's byzantine state security bureaucracy, then you're entitled to use the abbreviation—I could sense little of the broader uncertainties challenging the country on the eve of what could be its first legitimate Presidential election. Walking past the rusty and dilapidated gates of the *Dar*, I looked straight ahead across the Nile to the 'posh' island of Zemalek. There, on the river's edge, I could see the grand *fin-de-siècle* villas lining the Nile's west bank. Some protruded prominently into the river, with elegant gazeboes and docks resting calmly on water polluted with empty juice bottles, cigarettes and countless chemicals from factories upstream. If not for the smog clouded, Soviet-style high-rise apartment blocks occupying prime real estate on the northern tip of the island, I might have been scanning the waterfront of the *Île Saint-Louis*, or the *Île de la Cité* in Paris. No mere coincidence, it was the imperial capital of the France of Napoleon III that impressed the creator of modern Cairo, Ismail Pasha. As Governor of Egypt in the 1860s and 70s, he imported teams of European architects and engineers to *Hausmannize* Cairo, largely bankrupting the country along the way, but forging a new Paris on the Nile of which few relics remain. Zemalek is one of them.

The *Dar* bank of the Nile could not be more different. Absent from much of Zemalek, the Corniche dominates the *Dar* side of the river, regulating the ebb and flow of people and ideas in and around Downtown Cairo. As anyone who has ever lived in Cairo could attest, the Corniche is at the heart of the city and, to an extent, the country. Alexandria, Mersa Matruh—a Mediterranean-port city west of the Delta, where Rommel's *Afrika Korps* made camp during the Second World War—Hurghada and Suez, on the mouth of the Red Sea, each have their own version of *El-Corniche*, a wide strip of sidewalk often with stylish baroque guard rails that runs parallel to a sea or river. The Corniche is the Egyptian equivalent to what European and American urban planners envisioned to be new public space for the middle classes and *bourgeoisie* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Seeking to meet the demands of citizens earning higher wages and enjoying more leisure time, governments sought to erect public parks, gardens and other venues catering to these new constituencies.

At first glance, Cairo's search for green space today is no different. For a city designed to boast expansive boulevards and *midans*, squares that connect and integrate streets branching off in a number of dizzying directions—*Midan Tahrir*, of course, being the most

central and now most famous—Cairo has few public spaces aside from crowded neighborhood, *baladee ahwas*, cafés where mostly men congregate to smoke flavorful water pipes and sip slowly on mint tea. What is different—from Europe and America around the turn of the twentieth century—is the current economy of Egypt’s demographic thirst for parks and greenery and the government’s unfortunate inability to satisfy it. It is not Egypt’s emergent, tech-savvy ‘middle’ to upper class, which can increasingly afford to drive northeast to the moderately priced clubs and restaurant-chains of Nasr City, and to even more exclusive destinations in ‘New Cairo’, but the young working people of the inner-city whose pursuit of spatial and emotional freedom is most palpable.

Of the few parks in Cairo almost none are really ‘public’. Even admission to the sprawling and manicured Azhar Park, which opened to much fanfare in May 2005 in the old section of the city, costs visitors several Egyptian pounds. A token fee, perhaps, for even the most frugal foreign visitor, it represents a substantial cost for an average Egyptian earning less than \$2.50 an hour, let alone for a standard conscript in the Egyptian Army barely scraping by on just over \$100 a year. Elsewhere in the city, west of Zemalek, in Dokki and Mohandseen, for example, neighborhood gardens are cordoned off and only once have I seen a visitor in the one closest to my home. A gardener clad in the tattered remains of the blue and orange uniform of government paid workers, clipped plants and watered flowers accessible only to the eyes of a band of street kids who played soccer nearby.

El-Corniche, by contrast, allows everyday Cairenes an escape from the crowdedness of the city, free of charge. Its atmosphere at all hours is almost always festive, resembling any neighborhood block party, with popcorn and cotton candy vendors catering to the young couples strolling arm-in-arm. The Corniche is in many ways Egypt’s lone democratic thoroughfare, linking distant parts of the city and rendering the Nile, with no exaggeration, accessible to all. For Cairo’s young people, or *shabbab*, it exudes an extra layer of seduction, a unique part of the city where single men and women can mingle away from the watchful gaze of prying parents and neighbors.

For all of this fairness, or even egalitarianism, the democratic character of the Corniche is at times tested. Walking south from the *Dar*, I pass Cairo’s imposing Conrad Hotel and World Trade Center complex. The Corniche walkway on the opposite side of the road is temporarily closed for construction, and so pedestrians are forced to walk on the non-Nile side in front of the Conrad. Like the gardens in Dokki and Mohandseen, a low-hanging set of black chains separates the complex from the public. Vigilant plain clothes police and security personnel, fitted with ear pieces and walkie-talkies, intimidate any potential pedestrian violator of the barrier. The Egyptians and foreigners entering the complex are dressed smartly in suits and ties and allowed to come and go as they please. Everyone else is afforded no such luxury, forced to manage speeding oncoming traffic in the street instead of safely mounting the trade center’s pavement.

These socio-economic intrusions, or ruptures in the otherwise uniform ‘character’ of the Corniche are themselves contradictions. They say much about Egyptian society and provide a particular insight into the fluid state of Egyptian politics. Situated to the north of the *Dar* but still along the Corniche, stands the boldest symbol of Christian power in the country. The Nile City Towers illustrate how religion is inexorably intertwined with Egypt’s changing political and economic landscape. Nile City is a massive twin tower corporate complex that easily resembles any of the skyscrapers featured in Fritz Lang’s futuristic 1927 film, *Metropolis*. They represent the northern-most point of Cairo’s stylistically chaotic

skyline and dictate the upward views of nearly everyone in this part of the city; from workers in the surrounding industrial, *Boulaq* neighborhood, to evening diners across the river at Zemalek's chic *Sequoia* restaurant and lounge, to fire-breathing Salafi preachers in the Mosques of the *Imbaba* district north of Mohandseen. Erected in the early 2000s by the Orascom Construction company, the building branch of the Orascom Group, by far Egypt's largest private sector company, the towers serve as the headquarters of numerous multinational firms operating in the country, from banks to large management consultancies, including McKinsey, to the Orascom Group, itself. With wider interests in telecommunications, tourism and, in the aftermath of the January 25th Revolution, television, the Orascom Group is in many ways *the* private sector in Egypt. Yet, its founders, executives and major shareholders are Coptic-Christians, scions of the eminent Sawiris family who over the years have seen their fortunes in Egypt, much like the fate of the mass of their co-religionists, rise and fall.

Following Egypt's last Revolution, the Neguib-Nasser led *coup-d'état* in 1952 that destroyed the country's woefully corrupt monarchy, Onsi Sawiris, the patriarch of the family and founder of its diverse businesses, faced the prolonged specter of nationalization for his small but growing company. Nationalization under Nasser finally came in the early 1960s. Managing to re-locate to Libya, Onsi only returned to Egypt in 1977, on the eve of the Camp David Accords and the beginning of a new, *albeit* flawed era in the country's economic history. Today, it is Onsi's eldest son, Neguib, who plays the role of public spokesman for the family and, to a degree, of Egypt's approximately 10 million Copts. Respected by many but not all, he is outspoken and often his worst enemy. Following the events of January 2011, many looked to Neguib to assume a leadership position in the Revolution, and to perhaps bring his pedigree and extensive commercial experience to the table as a member, even a Minister, of any incoming government. What followed is a common story to anyone who has paid a modicum amount of attention to Egyptian politics over the past year, but is still little known outside of the country and circles of expatriate Egyptians keeping a pulse to the tune of the streets.

In early April 2011, Neguib formally entered politics and created a new party, *al-Masreen al-Ahrar*, or the Free Egyptians. Staunchly secular while promoting pro-market liberal economic policies, the party appealed to Egyptian professionals working in the tech and financial services sector, leading commercial families, millions of Christians and skeptical young Muslims, including one *Hejabi*-wearing woman from the working-class neighborhood of Sayeda Zeinab, whom I know well from frequent language exchanges. She admires Neguib Sawiris, even after he tweeted a now notorious picture, or *karicatoria*—caricature—of Mickey Mouse covered in a *niqab* last June. The image alienated many Muslims, far more unforgiving than my language partner, who accused Sawiris of Islamophobia and called for boycotts of his *Mobinil* cellular phone service company. The damage might have been repaired but Sawiris and his party never missed an opportunity...to miss an opportunity. They waited until mid-August to form an alliance with the other competing secular parties, two socialist groups, in a last ditch effort to salvage the parliamentary elections from becoming a complete Islamist landslide.

The new liberal-Egyptian bloc, or *Kutla-Masriyya*, was too little too late, but nonetheless presented a more or less unified secular front against the Brotherhood and Salafis. Still, Sawiris and his party disappointed. Instead of forcefully promoting their 'economic' brand and insisting on their *ahitrahm*, or respect, for Egypt's Islamic heritage, they refused to engage in necessary but unsexy retail politics and recruited uncharismatic

candidates incapable of doing so. An exception was a Muslim *Qur'anic* school teacher whom they tapped to compete in Zemlek and its surrounding neighborhoods. He ultimately prevailed in a second-round vote with his Brotherhood opponent, a rare appearance for *Kutla* in a run-off, let alone a clear win against an Islamist candidate. This was to be one of only several bright spots. Over three rounds of voting straddling the new year, Sawiris' party performed abysmally, scarcely winning 15 seats of the 498 contested for the new *Majlis a-Shaab*, or people's parliament.

The death knell, however, had come earlier. In November in Toronto, as pitched street battles raged in the heart of Cairo between riot police and youth protestors trying to march on the Interior Ministry, only minutes from *Tahrir* Square, Sawiris spoke before a crowd of enthusiastic supporters and expatriate Copts at the Canadian International Council. Before speaking courageously about the exodus of one million Iraqi Christians following the 2003 American invasion, church burnings across Egypt since the Revolution and the thousands of young Egyptian migrant workers who struggle each year to reach European shores, he remarked carelessly on his 'fanaticism for scotch' in the evenings and how his wife prefers to dress in 'St. Tropez' style gowns. The words were anathema to the mass of Brotherhood and Salafi supporters, who soon copied the comments and unabashedly took them out of context in new youtube videos opening with verses from the *Qur'an* and dubious Arabic translations of Sawiris' impeccable, University of Chicago-cultivated English.

I thought of these videos as I walked the Corniche. I remembered how it was my old roommate, a self-professed 'former' Salafi from a small village in the Delta, who began forwarding them to me on facebook last November. Facebook struck me as an odd mode of communication for Brotherhood sympathizers, Salafis and Sawiris-haters. I asked my roommate, who like millions of Egyptians is now constantly connected to his facebook homepage and who had recently watched David Fincher and Aaron Sorkin's, *The Social Network*, if he knew anything about facebook's wiz-kid creator. 'His name is Zach, right?' retorted my roommate. 'No,' I said politely, 'his name is Mark Zuckerberg and he's Jewish'. 'Oh my God, oh my God', my roommate exclaimed, quickly googling Zuckerberg and coming across his Wikipedia-Arabic page which, unsurprisingly, revealed how Zuckerberg had been bar-mitzvahed. As my roommate continued reading, I wondered how many, or rather how few of Egypt's more than 10 million facebook users know the creator of the site is Jewish.

I noticed by now that my roommate had logged onto to his village's facebook page. After the Revolution, thousands of villages across Egypt started their own facebook pages. They quickly morphed into places where people could write in with their daily woes, domestic issues, their difficult marriage prospects and various moral conundrums. My roommate, himself open-minded and more excited at the irony of his recent discovery than anything else, posted a brief paragraph about Zuckerberg and a link to the Wikipedia site. Almost immediately, concerned villagers began voicing outrage and demanded a *sheikh's* opinion on this: could they still use facebook? Was using facebook tantamount to contributing to the '*lob-al-yahud?*', a common catchphrase among many of Cairo's cab drivers and others readily attributing 'protocol'-like powers to America's 'Jewish lobby'. For any foreigner living in Egypt whose Arabic is competent enough to break out of the country's many protected expat bubbles, Egypt's 'Jew-fixation' is unmistakable. It manifests itself in informal conversations about the state of Egypt's economy, dominates Cairo's annual Book Fair in Nasr City, where every third book, it seemed, dealt exclusively with either Jews or Zionism, appears in swastikas around Cairo, including ones spray-painted on a wall in front

of the now-abandoned Abbasiya synagogue, as well as one large black one directly across from my apartment, and stifles what should be an honest discussion about Israel and its American supporters.

Back on the Corniche, all of this seemed secondary. Sure, Egypt's once-thriving Jewish community is no more, a victim of combined Nasser-era xenophobia and unnecessarily antagonistic Israeli policies, but could the same happen to Egypt's Copts? No, I tell myself repeatedly. But on the Corniche I pondered how vile elements of Egypt's Islamist social media community provoked the killing of 28 Coptic protestors last October, only a ten minute walk from the *Dar* south along the Nile, in front of and around the Maspero state media building. Maspero proved, tragically, how the Corniche could in an instant become violent. I witnessed this, first-hand, on a Thursday morning this past February when I, too, cavalierly strolled past Maspero.

The previous night I had been working out at a local gym near my apartment. The establishment was relatively new and at that time I was only one of a handful of foreign members. The trainers loved speaking to me, which mainly entailed practicing their limited English and disproportionately reciting words like dumbbell, fly and flat bench. Suddenly the gym froze. Everyone cocked their heads toward the largest television monitor. Crowds had stormed the pitch of what moments earlier had been a peaceful and largely uneventful soccer match between the famed Cairo club, *Al-Ahly*—Africa's 'Club of the Century'—and its less colorful Port-Said opponent, *Al Masry*. Watching the events live, I mistakenly assumed the crowds were celebrating a victory at the end of the match. Seconds later, as the images of bloodied, bandaged fans and *Al-Ahly* club personnel seeking refuge in the stadium's besieged tunnels unfolded, the reality of the violence became all too apparent. One trainer threw up his arms and cried, 'there are people in this country with no education, no culture...they're just brutal.' Few spoke and when I left the mood was forbidding.

The next day I decided to walk to the *Dar* from the *Nasser* metro station in Downtown Cairo. I usually cab it to the *Dar* but at the time I was on a brief, irrational boycott of Cairo's fleet of black and white cabs. I had been locked in a white one earlier in the week and extorted for a higher fare. The driver, a young-twenty something with short cropped, dyed-orange hair, dressed in an all-green puma jump suit, tapped my wrist as he sped along the streets of my neighborhood before I finally relented and agreed to pay up. My boycott was silly because this was the one frightening experience out of hundreds of cab rides I've enjoyed in Cairo with decent, honest drivers, guilty perhaps only of simplifying the nuances of American foreign policy and unable to distinguish between Jews and Zionists.

I walked underneath the 6 of October Bridge overpass, reached the concrete Ramses Hilton Hotel and then turned right to walk up the Corniche. As I approached Maspero, a crowd of hardcore *Ahly* supporters, or *Ultras*, were gathering in front, staring down a guard of Egyptian military police. The police stood behind a barrier of barbed wire, outfitted with tan camouflage uniforms and armed with M16 assault rifles which they pointed menacingly toward the river. The crowd, a mix of middle-aged and young men, both bearded and clean-shaven wearing jeans and stained *galabiyyas*—the traditional, full-body length gown worn by rural men and the urban poor across Egypt—waved the *Ahly* flag and shouted *la-ilaha-ila'allah*—there is no God but God. A few young teens noticed me and shouted *agnabee*, or foreigner, but I passed the crowd unharmed and continued on my way toward the *Dar*. The passage could easily have turned out differently. I was lucky, but so for that matter was the guard of military police. They were spared a split-second decision that might have forced

them to open fire, what would have inevitably touched off a new wave of police-protestor violence in the country.

If the Corniche reflects the challenges to Egypt's Copts and liberal Muslims, the legacy of the Maspero violence and massacre of the *Ultras*, it also provides a window into the influence of outside forces in Egypt. And none more so than the straight flow of cash from the oil rich countries of the Arabian Gulf. The presence in post-Revolution Egypt of Qatar, the small island-Gulf nation and host of the 2022 World Cup is most pronounced. It, unlike Saudi Arabia—which shut its Embassy in Cairo and closed its Consulates in Alexandria and Suez, in response to increased protests against the Kingdom, themselves triggered by the arrest and sentencing to twenty lashes of a prominent Egyptian human rights lawyer in Jiddah early in May—has managed to successfully negotiate Egypt's new political and economic climate. Whereas relations between the Saudis and Brotherhood, for instance, remained chilled following the Revolution, Qatar welcomed the Brotherhood's chief political strategist and soon to be Presidential candidate, Khairat al-Shater, in an official visit to Doha last March. Financially, Qatar has left a firm footprint in the form of a \$430 million investment in the country, showcased nowhere more ostentatiously than on a prime vantage point along the Corniche, minutes south of the *Dar*.

I pass the spot almost every day upon leaving the archives. When not dodging falling chunks of concrete that ricochet off the roofs of passing cars and minibuses—the site exemplifies Egypt's perilously lax building and safety code standards—I sometimes glance up at the half-finished, mammoth-scale structure and the large white banner of *Qatari Diar* emblazoned near the top-most crane. *Qatari Diar* is the real estate development arm of Qatar's powerful sovereign wealth fund, the Qatar Investment Authority. With assets of more than \$60 billion, the firm owns the famed Harrod's department store in the Knightsbridge section of London and is the majority stakeholder of the large UK supermarket chain, Sainsbury's. The 'Nile Corniche project', according to *Qatari Diar*'s lead consultant, QPM, a Qatari project management consultancy mainly involved in building resorts in the most volatile corners of the Middle East—according to QPM's website they currently have projects pending in the Sudan, Syria and Yemen—is vast. It occupies 9,360 square meters of the Conrad side of the Corniche and will eventually comprise two towers, an L-shaped south tower and a twin north one, complete with 60 hotel suites, 102 'luxury hotel serviced apartments' and a penthouse—presumably reserved for visiting Qatari *sheikhs* and leading Gulf dignitaries. All of this wealth flows into the country along the Corniche. It is almost wholly unregulated and seen as something of a necessary evil if Egypt's economy and dangerously weak currency is ever going to stabilize. Critics, no doubt, are more readily aroused by government sabre rattling over 'unlicensed' funding from American and European NGOs to Egyptian pro-democracy advocates and watchdogs, a vicious scandal that rocked Egypt's *body-politic* last February and March.

I continued south along the Corniche trying to make sense of all this. Egypt's presidential race was now in full swing. Overnight a giant banner of the Brotherhood's new, second-choice candidate, Muhammad Moursi—their first choice, Shater, had been disqualified on account of his former criminal record—had been strung up on Mussadik Street, the wide boulevard that serves as the border between the Dokki and Mohandseen neighborhoods of the west bank of the Nile. I noticed that a number of posters near my apartment for Aboul al-Fatouh—the 'moderate' Islamist candidate and former Brotherhood activist who split from the organization over its indecisiveness during the Revolution—had been torn down while those of Amr Moussa—Mubarak's former Foreign Minister and ex-

chief of the Arab League—had been graffitied with the Arabic word, *falool*. *Falool* roughly means ‘remnants’ and it refers to the perpetrators of the crimes of Egypt’s *ancien regime*. It is a piercing accusation here heavily laden with connotations of corruption, excess and injustice. Elsewhere in Cairo elaborate posters and signs tacked onto the rear windows of taxis and expensive private cars alike have enveloped the city. Now it is nearly impossible not to notice an ad for Moursi, Moussa, Fatouh or Ahmed Shafik—a former Air Force commander and Prime Minister whose campaign slogan, ‘actions not words’, is an almost comical parry of the widespread understanding that Shafiq is uncharismatic and unable to think on his feet—the four main presidential candidates, anywhere in Cairo. They are draped from crowded high rise apartment buildings and half-finished cement structures in the depressed slums, or *ashwaiyat*, that go on for miles surrounding the city in all directions, to the villas and modern ranch style homes that dot the expat heavy hubs of Maadi, Zemalek, 6 of October City and New Cairo. Even torn clippings and stickers of what was until recently the ever present face of Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, the Salafi lawyer and leading favorite for the Presidency until Egypt’s election commission deemed him ineligible, remain.

Back on the Corniche, however, the largest banner I saw was a Pepsi advertisement featuring a smiling Lionel Messi, the diminutive Argentine striker for Barcelona whom many consider to be the best footballer in the world. I stared at the Messi banner as I mounted the steps of the 26 of July Bridge, heading west across the Nile to Zemalek. The bridge was named to celebrate the day in 1952 when Egypt’s last King, Farouk, obese and no longer the sympathetic young monarch he once was when he assumed the reins of the storied Muhammad Ali dynasty in the spring of 1936, was deposed. I walked past a makeshift tea stand, with the combined smell of urine and incense wafting through the air, and continued onto the bridge steps. A shoe cleaner greeted me with a kissing noise and motioned to his tools. I declined politely and headed up toward the bridge, evading motorcyclists who mounted the sidewalk, a common shortcut city riders take to circumvent Cairo’s labyrinth of always crowded and improvised traffic lanes. I passed blonde European tourists uncomfortably navigating the space between their Egyptian observers while middle-aged policemen in crisp new white-khaki summer uniforms spit sunflower seed shells onto the curb. A young boy threw empty soda cans into the water as his black-gown wearing mother looked on in laughter. Displeased fishermen shot the couple disparaging looks. The ripples frightened the fish and spoiled their catch.

I descended the steps into Zemalek. An old *Saidi* man—*Said* refers to upper Egypt, the vast southern regions of the country that include the once bustling tourist destinations of Luxor and Aswan—in a faded gray *galabiyya* slept silently in front of a pharmacy. Ads for Viagra were plastered on the door while the latest durex condoms were racked neatly on a shelf on the counter, *haram*—or not kosher—no doubt, in a Muslim country where birth-control is still very much subject to intense criticism and debate. Walking along Zemalek’s main drag, I passed stylish young Egyptians with recently trimmed afros, thick-framed black glasses, tight jeans and *lacoste* sneakers. I turned right and eventually reached a string of foreign owned cafes and restaurants, including the island’s increasingly lauded bagel place, owned jointly by a Ukrainian woman and her Egyptian husband with a blonde haired blue-eyed son named Omar. The couple met in Brooklyn before re-settling, or upgrading to Zemalek, Cairo’s more rugged version of Manhattan.

I finally caught a cab and headed back to my neighborhood on the west bank of the Nile. My driver, it turned out, was a mechanical engineer who had spent nearly a year in Japan in the mid-1990s. He was hired by the Egyptian government, he explained

nostalgically, to study ‘non-explosive’ technologies with his Japanese counterparts. Now he was sweating it out in Cairo’s oversaturated cab sector. The bane of the developing world, I thought, an oversupply of well-qualified technicians struggling in an economy incapable of integrating them. As we maneuvered slowly through the Mohandseen rush-hour traffic, Japan must have seemed a long way away. *Masr habak*—Egypt loves you—he told me sympathetically, after I apologized repeatedly for dragging him into the heart of Cairo’s busiest neighborhood at the least opportune moment.

When I arrived on my street, I bought a water bottle from my neighborhood kiosk. Thousands of almost identical candy stands that also sell soap, toilet paper and an assortment of other low-end household items exist all over Egypt. After exchanging the common pleasantries, I noticed a new face. A friend of one of the regulars, he told me he was a student of Oriental languages at a local university. He showed me his university ID and I saw that he studied Hebrew, a curious but probably thankless course when all of Egypt’s bright young students are pushed into the quantitative disciplines. Engineering, of course, being foremost among them. They asked me what I thought of the elections. I said I wasn’t sure and didn’t know whom I would vote for if given the opportunity. They asked me whom I would suggest. *Mumkin* Abou al-Fatouh—maybe Abou al-Fatouh I proffered? *Bass huwwa Ikhwan*—but he’s Brotherhood, they shot back. *Tub, mumkin Amr Moussa*—okay what about Amr Moussa? He’s *falool*, they said sullenly. They pressed me further: do we have a choice?

The choice is unclear. What is clear is that the Revolution has moved beyond *Tahrir* Square. A skeleton of its former self, it no longer monopolizes the intellectual airwaves over Egypt’s political soul, the way it did in late January 2011 and for much of the remaining year. True, the incoming President will have to pacify *Tahrir*. If not coveting entirely the hold-outs of its beaten and many disaffected patrons, he cannot afford to alienate them completely. He must, however, win over the Corniche, convincing its diverse demographic constituency to buy into a new system in which education, transparency and economic opportunity become uncontested national priorities. He must, in other words, overcome the contradictions of the Corniche and create a new social contract. Egypt’s future as both a legitimate leader of the Arab world and guarantor of the fragile welfare of its own 82 million citizens depends on it.