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World / Middle East

US observer: Comparing Egypt with China

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Editor's note: Peter Hessler is a staff writer at the New Yorker magazine, and a contributing writer at National Geographic. He is the author of four acclaimed books about China. In October 2011, Hessler and his family moved to Cairo, which provided him a good chance to closely observe the turmoil and revolutions happening in this Middle Eastern country in the past three years. Here he shares his unique perspective on the differences between Egypt and China.

Living in Egypt has changed my perception of China. I think I have a better understanding of how essentially stable the Chinese system is. I'm not saying this in terms of whether it's good or bad – I'm simply noting that the Chinese system is quite stable and the system is deep-rooted.



File photo of Peter Hessler

Egypt is a country where the government has been weak for a very long time. You see very little evidence of government services in most parts of Cairo, and when you travel to villages in Upper Egypt, the politics are essentially tribal. It reminds me that in China, even in a tiny village, there was a great deal of government activity. The villagers were very clearly connected to the larger political systems and issues of the country. It's not like that in most parts of the developing world.

I think I also have a greater understanding of how hard it is to change a place. The Egyptian revolution has been a great failure. The current government is more repressive than the government of Mubarak, but most Egyptians are tired of the fight and they accept it. I've come to realize that what we witnessed was not really a revolution. It was a series of coups – first against Mubarak, and then against Morsi.

With regard to China, you can examine the strength of the state and see both negatives and positives. Because the state is strong, and power is quite deeply entrenched, whenever significant changes do come, I think they are more likely to succeed, because the Chinese have a significant political foundation, and they have the experience of living in a functional state.

Living in Egypt also makes me appreciative of the educational system in China. There are of course enormous flaws, but in terms of basic education, it's quite impressive. This is one of the core problems in Egypt. This country has an illiteracy rate of more than 25 per cent. I know some people here, who are naturally very smart, but they can't read, because they never went to school and there are no other resources for them to learn. I didn't know people like that in China.

In the end, I don't expect the Egyptian model to apply to China. I don't expect China to experience a grassroots revolution, or a collapse of the old system. My sense is that changes in China are more likely to be subtle, incremental, and coming from the top. But of course the other lesson of Egypt is that it is very difficult to predict these things.

The author has published four books related to China, which include "River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze", "Oracle Bones", "Country Driving: A Chinese Road Trip" and "Strange Stones: Dispatches from East and West".

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