

EGYPT'S SECULAR POLITICAL PARTIES: A STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AND INDEPENDENCE

MICHELE DUNNE AND AMR HAMZAWY

Secular political parties in Egypt have always been caught between an overbearing state and a largely Islamist opposition. The brief, chaotic political opening from 2011 to 2013 offered them unprecedented opportunities, but the violence and intense polarization that followed the military coup have put them under more pressure than ever. Formal politics in Egypt is now a tightly controlled game in which no real independence is allowed, but some secular parties might reemerge as contenders should there be another opportunity for free competition.

State Pressure

- In classifying Egypt's secular political parties, the usual right-to-left spectrum is not particularly useful. It is more instructive to arrange parties based on their relationship with the state—from those formed only to support the state to those that continue to vigorously oppose the state.
- Many secular parties were founded with the goal of being true political competitors but have lost their independence along the way.
- The state has long been undermining secular parties with assiduous campaigns to discredit, co-opt, corrupt, or internally divide them. Such efforts occurred throughout the presidency of Hosni Mubarak and resumed after the 2013 coup.
- Today, even secular parties that supported the coup and President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi have come under attack after trying to preserve any modicum of independence, such as resisting joining the pro-Sisi bloc in Parliament.

Desperate Measures

- Secular parties have done at least as much harm to themselves by taking desperate and often unprincipled actions to merely survive.
- Between 2011 and 2013, secular parties were so concerned about pushing back against the seemingly unstoppable electoral victories of Islamists that they invited the military to intervene in politics, ending the brief democratic opening.
- Several secular parties applauded the 2013 coup and have remained silent about the mass killings that followed, abandoning any pretense of defending the values they claimed to represent. Even still, they are being pressured to show blind allegiance to the state.
- Other parties have criticized human rights abuses and military rule and have boycotted formal politics since the coup.
- Despite the many ways in which secular parties have been discredited—and have discredited themselves—in the eyes of citizens, some of them still hold enough ideological appeal and organizational vigor to potentially share power should Egypt experience another political opening.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michele Dunne is the director and a senior fellow in Carnegie's Middle East Program, where her research focuses on political and economic change in Arab countries.

Amr Hamzawy is a senior fellow in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a professor at the American University in Cairo. Follow him on Twitter @HamzawyAmr.

CONTACT

Tara Medeiros
Deputy Director of Communications
+1 202 939 2372
tmediros@ceip.org

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, India, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

© 2017 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

The Carnegie Endowment does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented here are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.

CarnegieEndowment.org



@CarnegieEndow



facebook.com/
CarnegieEndowment