

The Real Danger for Egyptian Democracy

THOMAS CAROTHERS AND NATHAN J. BROWN | NOVEMBER 12, 2012

Western observers worried about the fate of Egypt's attempted democratic transition are closely watching the new Muslim Brotherhood-led government for any signs that it will impose an illiberal Islamist straitjacket on the country. It is true that the Brotherhood's intentions regarding a number of sensitive social and political issues remain uncertain and that clashes between the Brotherhood's vision for Egypt and some liberal values will surely occur. Yet the greater danger for Egypt's fledgling democracy likely to arise from the Brotherhood's new ruling position is not Islamist illiberalism but rather dominant party overreach. In other words, the bigger concern is the creeping but ultimately extremely corrosive array of political temptations and tendencies that seize a popular party after it sweeps into power following the ouster of a dictator, inherits the reins of a state long molded by absolutist rule, and faces only a fragmented opposition.

Such a warning would likely seem wildly premature to the Brotherhood's ardent supporters. After all, the movement's presidential candidate, Mohamed Morsi, barely eked out a victory in June. And the Brotherhood's political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), hardly achieved a crushing legislative majority in last year's parliamentary elections. The alliance it led assembled an electoral list that won a 38 percent plurality in elections for the lower house and because its candidates did very well in individual districts its total share of the seats in parliament neared 45 percent—an impressive performance to be sure, but hardly an indication of an assured permanent majority. And that parliament was subsequently dissolved by court order.

Yet there are still worrying signs and they do not just concern the Brotherhood's intentions, but also the new landscape of political power. Egypt currently has only two nationally

elected bodies—the presidency and the weak upper house. The Brotherhood controls both. In Egypt's politicized professional associations, Brotherhood slates have also done well. In the Constituent Assembly, the body tasked with drafting a new constitution that was named by the now-dissolved parliament, FJP members and their backers are in the driver's seat. The president has near-absolute powers. The impending new constitution as well as deeply ingrained habits of executive preeminence will ensure that the presidency remains the dominant presence in Egyptian political life. And just as worrying is the potential opposition—a mix of politically inexperienced Salafi parties and a jumble of non-Islamist parties, leading personalities, and amorphous activist networks. Unless future elections in Egypt are dramatically unlike those of the past year, the Brotherhood may easily be able to parlay its central, unified place in the middle of the political spectrum into an inevitable role in any future leadership.

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Indeed, the Brotherhood so far shows signs of being less concerned with its civilian rivals and more focused on establishing its position vis-à-vis actors within the Egyptian state. President Morsi's firm early handling of the Egyptian military, which took many observers by surprise, was just one sign of this. A slower and less certain dance with the judiciary is now occurring, with some indications that a *modus vivendi* is emerging between the new president and various judicial actors. And the state-owned media has reverted to type by falling behind the president.

Thus far, the Brotherhood can hardly be accused of throwing its weight around. It did pack the Constituent Assembly with more of its deputies than its critics liked. But the FJP position that the identity of the drafters should bear some relation to election results was not unreasonable. Morsi assembled a cabinet that is more technocratic than ideological and has so far used his authority to issue decrees sparingly. High-level appointments (for positions such as provincial governors) have included Brotherhood members but not been dominated by them.

The Brotherhood's critics—who charge the organization with behaving like the now-disbanded National Democratic Party of Hosni Mubarak—are engaging in hyperbole. Egypt will continue to see competitive elections. The threat is not “one man, one vote, one time” but the monotony of fair but repeated electoral victories for the FJP. Over time, such a pattern could well be unhealthy for Egypt.

LEARNING FROM OTHER PLACES

South Africa provides a worrying example of the ills that can result from an overconfident and ultimately entrenched dominant party. The African National Congress (ANC) rode into power almost twenty years ago on a wave of popular legitimacy and high hopes, and has kept winning election after election. Yet despite an initially favorable configuration of forces, including a stellar first president, good intentions by many in the party's senior ranks, a relatively capable state, and a public eager to embrace change, the picture today is more about what the *Economist* recently called “South Africa's sad decline.” The country is politically and economically adrift, plagued by

extremely high levels of inequality and unemployment, systemic corruption, angry workers, a disastrous educational system, and growing political interference in legal matters.

What went wrong? The ANC progressively developed the full range of unhealthy habits of dominant parties imbued with a sense of historic destiny and facing only disorganized, divided opposition. The central problem has been the step-by-step conflation of the ruling party with the state—party loyalists gradually taking over powerful positions throughout the economic, political, legal, and social institutions of the country. The effacement of the divide between the party and the state undercuts economic reforms, substituting inefficient crony capitalism for market dynamism. It sucks the air out of political and social life, smothering honest debate and pressures for positive reforms under a thick blanket of self-interest and conformism. It numbs the legal institutions, weakening the crucial checks on power in established democracies.

The ANC manages to keep winning elections not just because of its continuing mantle as the national liberator from apartheid but also because its monopolistic grip on key levers of power allows it to co-opt potentially influential opponents, steer state resources to itself, and manipulate public opinion. Although the country still enjoys a reasonable amount of open space for debate, the political mechanisms for real change are clogged and atrophying. This fortress-like dominance has hurt the country and the party. The ANC has descended into a complacent political machine consumed by endless jockeying for power in the upper ranks and shamed by the rise of mediocrity to the top.

The ANC might seem like an extreme example given the current diversity in Egyptian political life, but that is true only if the focus is on what the ANC is today rather than what it was at the end of apartheid. A different but also troubling example is Turkey. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have led Turkey on a notable path of economic growth over the past ten years, winning three consecutive elections in the process. Egyptian FJP leaders might actually like analogies of their party with the AKP, and indeed, there are some limited signs of Turkish

tutelage in Egypt. But the attractiveness of the Turkish path is diminishing.

Turkey's economic success is shadowed by ominous political portents. Once heralded as a model Islamist democrat, Erdogan today exhibits worrisome authoritarian tendencies. He tolerates little opposition, lashing out at critics and questioning the legitimacy of any dissenting voices. Press freedom is curtailed. The EU Commission's 2012 Progress Report on Turkey highlights "recurring infringements" of fundamental rights.

In a reversal that is especially instructive for Egypt, an Islamist oriented party in Turkey that once had to fight for its political place against an anti-democratic "deep state" of security institutions has ended up taking on the habits and mindsets of the very people and institutions it struggled against. Turkey's democratic troubles are not due to Islamist illiberalism on the part of the AKP, but rather the habits of political overreach and arrogance common to dominant parties everywhere, no matter what their ideological or religious stripes.

AVOIDING THE SAME FATE

Of course South Africa and Turkey are examples of dominant party deterioration over many years. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is still only in the first phase of its time in power. But looking at what happened in these other cases over time is useful to clarify possible pitfalls ahead. Already President Morsi and his team face a range of institutional choices that raise fundamental issues about the shape of the Egyptian state and potentially the relationship of the Muslim Brotherhood to it.

The Brotherhood shows some awareness of the dangers. It has asked movement leaders who take a prominent political role to step down from their Brotherhood positions. The Brotherhood has always insisted that it is about more than politics and that political power is a means and not an end in itself. The movement continues to stress its role in charitable, missionary, educational, and religious work; its leaders wish to resist becoming a political machine. Were the Brotherhood to become merely a sluggish and bullying dominant party, it would have failed its founders.

But how much will they be able to resist forces sucking them in that direction? Already the movement's lifeblood as well as its most able and imaginative members appear to be shifting their attentions over to the FJP. Young members seem to spend much of their time talking politics and there are reports that the Brotherhood is changing its internal curriculum—what members are asked to read and discuss—to emphasize political themes. It is likely that the FJP will begin to attract members who are motivated not simply by Brotherhood ideology but by the desire to be on the winning political side and perhaps also to obtain secure state employment.

The FJP's opponents are unwittingly abetting the process. By shrill rhetoric and refusal to compromise, they are fueling a sense of grievance among some FJP cadres. When boycotts, conspiracy theories, and questioning of election results become the stuff of normal politics there is little room for give-and-take. When the opposition pins its hopes first on generals and then on judges (as non-Islamist actors in Egypt have done), there is little room for electoral competition. And the absence of clear rules or traditions in the Egyptian political system—regarding which positions are political and which are not, the bounds of political discourse, and the basic rules of presidential behavior—will make for almost constant sniping and suspicions.

It is crucial therefore that observers watching Egypt's unfolding political transition, whether within Egypt or from the outside, bear the South African and Turkish examples in mind. The much-discussed concerns of possible Islamist constriction, such as on women's rights, religious freedom, and educational policy, all merit close attention. But however high-minded the Brotherhood leadership might be, or whatever liberal concessions can be wrung out of them, problems will remain because of the movement's political weight. Democracy's prospects depend on Egypt escaping dominant party malady. Signs of the blurring of the party-state line, such as the migration of senior Brotherhood officials into state-protected areas of the economy or into influential nonpartisan positions such as senior judgeships, should sound alarm bells. Signals that key state institutions—particularly the military and the security apparatus—are overly submissive to the Brotherhood should

spark concerns. And diminished space for independent civil society organizations, the use of the state bureaucracy to produce electoral victories, and the absence or smearing of opposition voices in state-owned media would also indicate that democratic deterioration is beginning.

Not every misdeed is a disaster. The exact rules for where the line should be drawn between the party and the state in different economic, political, legal, and social institutions are rarely clear, rendering scrutiny of this vital issue complex and difficult. But troubling signs can be detected early with a sufficient degree of attention.

When new political forces come to power after a dictator falls, it is natural to give them the benefit of the doubt as they feel their way through the complexities of governance. Yet as occurred in the case of South Africa, the benefit of the doubt can easily be taken too far and breed laziness or blindness on the part of outside observers. Thrilled with the end of apartheid, most Western observers were uncritical of the ANC for far too long, well after signs of serious trouble became apparent. Doing a favor to the ANC turned out not to be doing a favor for South Africa as a whole.

The same mistake should not be made with Egypt, even as the United States and other Western countries offer support to the new Egyptian government and try to help it succeed. It is vital not to forget about both independent civil society and political opposition groups. A strong independent civil society and a capable, assertive opposition are the most effective potential antidotes to the dominant party malady. This does not mean that outside aid for civil society and party development in Egypt should take on a pro-oppositional cast. It will do neither civil society nor the opposition any good if they are seen to be instruments of Westerners taking political sides. And sensitivities in these domains are especially high in Egypt, as evidenced by the ongoing legal case against Western democracy activists and Egyptian NGOs. But it does mean that Western governments seeking to support Egyptian democracy should go beyond sounding the alarm on any apparent early signs of growing party-state conflation and on key rights issues. They should make it a priority to address civil society and political party development issues with the new government and keep looking for ways to offer assistance on a whole range of areas

such as constitutional reform, electoral system development, judicial strengthening, public interest advocacy, human rights, and other related areas.

Here Western governments in general and U.S. diplomats in particular will have to tread a very careful line. An overly enthusiastic embrace of the new leadership will communicate the wrong signals if it includes going easy on any early signs of political overreach. But an overly solicitous concern for the non-Islamist opposition might reinforce its worst tendency to look for a nondemocratic force to save it from its own people. Egyptian political leaders have already shown signs of being unforgiving, suggesting that if the United States does manage to find the right mix, it will come under fire from both sides.

In other regions of the world with new or established democracies, this task is not so hard. The United States deals with other political systems through their institutions rather than simply cutting deals with powerful potentates, it has contacts with both government and the opposition, it builds links between societies and not just between groups of top officials, and it speaks up clearly when governments violate rights or otherwise constrain democracy. And that might be the best path forward now: to deal with Egypt as if it is the democracy it wishes to become.

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