

Egypt's New Political Order/Dis-Order

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The events of the past year in Egypt have left all of us reeling from whiplash. The only thing more stunning than the Muslim Brotherhood's meteoric rise to the heights of state power last year was the swiftness of its fall when, on July 3, General Al-Sisi ousted President Morsi after masses of citizens poured into the streets to demand his resignation. Now, with many of the Brotherhood's top leaders under arrest or on the run, and a growing number of its members being killed and injured in nearly daily confrontations with the military and police, Egypt's transition has been all but eclipsed by the fight between the Brotherhood and the "deep state".

How did the country reach this impasse, and how can it get out of it? I certainly don't claim the final word on such issues, which continue to provoke debate within Egypt and outside it. But in the brief time I have before me, let me offer a few reflections that I hope will help stimulate a wider discussion.

First, let's remember that the fall of the Mubarak regime and the holding of new elections for parliament and the presidency happened very quickly, over the course of just sixteen months. And the Muslim Brotherhood which entered the political fray after Mubarak's fall remained very much the product of the repressive environment in which it had operated over the previous sixty years. It was headed by a clique of aging veterans bonded by the tremendous sacrifices they had made on the group's behalf, including in some cases, spending ten or even twenty years in prison. And it maintained an internal culture that placed an emphasis on secrecy, unquestioning loyalty

to one's elders, and aloofness from outsiders. While such qualities helped the Brotherhood survive long years of siege with its organization intact, they arguably complicated its integration into Egypt's new democratic order. For example, when Mr. Morsi became president, neither he nor the senior Guidance Bureau members with whom he reportedly consulted on a regular basis evinced any serious inclination to share the privileges – and the burdens – of power with other groups, whether by including top secular leaders in his cabinet, forming a national unity government, or including a broader cross-section of opinion on the commission tasked with drafting Egypt's new constitution.

To be fair, the failures of the Morsi government were not all of its own making. For example, in Egypt's highly polarized political climate, with secular liberals on one end of the spectrum and Salafi Islamists on the other, it will be extremely difficult to reach a national consensus on the form a new constitution should take. Likewise, any attempt to tackle the country's gargantuan social and economic problems, no matter how creative and well-intentioned, will face the daunting task of mobilizing a bloated and inefficient bureaucracy and overcoming the ill effects of decades of systemic mismanagement and corruption. Yet the embroilment of Mr. Morsi and the Brotherhood in various partisan disputes diverted critical time and attention from easing the daily hardships of ordinary citizens and mobilizing the expertise, resources and foreign support needed to jumpstart economic growth.

Further, it is difficult to explain – let alone justify – the hubris with which Morsi and the Brotherhood squandered numerous opportunities to alleviate the tensions that led up to the current crisis. For example, they could have formed a more inclusive government when the cabinet was reshuffled this May, or, in the face of mass protests in the streets and the mounting

threat of military intervention in June, chosen the responsible course and agreed to schedule early presidential elections.

While the Brotherhood bears much of the responsibility for its own demise, the implacable opposition the Morsi government faced from Mubarak appointees in the “deep state” as well from hostile rivals in the secular camp, jeopardized Egypt’s transition as well. Some analysts go so far as contend that judges, businessmen, military and security officials, media magnates and other powerful figures associated with the old regime knowingly conspired to block Morsi’s actions at every turn. While it is hard to evaluate the veracity of such claims, there is no doubt that chronic low-level hostility from other power centers in Egyptian society made Morsi’s task of governing more difficult.

What, to my mind at least, has yet to be adequately explained is General al-Sissi’s betrayal of President Morsi, with whom he appeared to have reached an accommodation that served the interests of both sides. That is, the military appeared willing to allow the Brotherhood to exercise its electoral mandate as long as the Brotherhood respected the military’s autonomy. Why al-Sisi reversed course is unclear, but to claim that he was merely “responding to the people’s will” is disingenuous, not least because the new interim government answers only to himself. But I think it’s fair to say that the military’s intervention reflects the deep unease with which the officials of the “deep state” carried over from the Mubarak era viewed the Brotherhood’s rapid ascent to power. Having long viewed the Brotherhood as a threat to national security, they may never have fully come round to seeing it as a legitimate political actor. In addition, with Morsi as president, the Brotherhood’s business networks may have started to encroach on the military’s turf. More broadly, the Egyptian military appears to have

little tolerance for the unruly and disruptive consequences of allowing citizens to freely organize and express themselves in a society marked by deep class and cultural divides. Here too, the habits of mind formed during Egypt's long years of authoritarian rule continue to cast their shadow over developments today.

So is there any way out of the current impasse? One interesting feature of the Brotherhood's response to Morsi's ouster – which, in an otherwise very bleak picture, affords some shred of hope – is that they have emerged as the country's greatest sticklers for democratic procedure. The Brotherhood and “Anti-Coup Alliance” it is part of, have denounced al-Sisi's intervention not just as a coup against Morsi but against the Constitution and the people's will. Indeed, they claim, the new interim government is nothing but a form of window-dressing for the resurrection of the “deep state” and the counter-revolutionary forces associated with it. The Brotherhood has been remarkably consistent in framing its actions as a defense of democratic principles. Further, while calling on its supporters to engage in mass civil disobedience, it has insisted that they stick to a strategy of non-violence. The Brotherhood's demand for the restoration of “constitutional legitimacy”, though clearly laced with considerations of self-interest, opens the door for it to rejoin the political system if the military retreats and elections for a new civilian government are held.

Unfortunately, however, the prospects for the opening of a process of national reconciliation devoid of military influence are very bleak right now due to continued intransigence on both sides. As Samuel Tadros of the Hudson Institute recently commented, at best, this is all a game, with each side acting strategically to maximize its leverage in negotiations that are soon to start or are currently underway behind closed doors. Yet whatever

its motivations, the escalation of rhetoric and behavior on both sides of the conflict will make its resolution more difficult. Whether out of arrogance or self-delusion, both the military and the Brotherhood are acting as if they get to call the shots without accommodating their opponents. It strikes me as willfully obtuse if al-Sisi believes he can crush the Brotherhood's protests by force without causing a massive loss of life and an outpouring of sorrow and outrage that will set the country back for years. Likewise, the Brotherhood's quixotic fixation on Morsi's reinstatement and its claim that the public stands firmly behind that demand, flies in the face of the enormous anti-Morsi protests that millions of Egyptians took part in on June 30 . [The pro-Morsi camp claims that the actual numbers were in the thousands, not the millions; ongoing disputes over the numbers involved in the protests on both sides suggest that size matters]. Finally, the progressive Islamist and liberal wings of Egypt's democratic movement have never been more divided. Islamists like Abd al Mun'em Abu Futuh who openly criticized Morsi when he was in power have rallied to his side, while some of the country's leading secular liberals are in the curious position of backing the very security establishment they have long condemned for violating human rights. In sum, many of the very figures on both sides of the Islamist-secular divide who one might have expected to push for national reconciliation have instead been sucked into the vortex of partisan conflict.

To conclude, all of the country's main political actors must act more responsibly if Egypt is to avoid a descent into widespread violence and chaos. In particular, al-Sisi and his henchman must be persuaded to return to their barracks; the Brotherhood and its allies must find a way to stomach their losses and accept a less hegemonic role in the political process; and the secular liberals who have profited from the Brotherhood's defeat must stop gloating and extend a hand to

any Islamists willing to join them. In sum, the behavior of all of Egypt's key players is in dire need of a sharp course correction. If they continue to battle for state power and remain heedless of the consequences of their actions, the greatest casualty will be Egypt itself.