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EGYPT'S NATIONALISTS DOMINATE IN A POLITICS-FREE ZONE

Michele Dunne

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About the Author

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Summary

Egypt's political scene has changed radically from the vigorous pluralism that followed the 2011 uprising; in 2015 the Islamist and secular groups that won those elections are excluded or marginalized. Nationalists associated with the military or former regime of Hosni Mubarak have retaken center stage, and rivalries within that camp have reemerged. Any parliament elected under such conditions is likely to be fractious—despite the lack of real pluralism—and might have difficulty fulfilling its constitutionally mandated role.

Echoes of the Past

- Egypt has been without a full parliament since June 2012, when the previous assembly was dissolved.
- The 2013 removal of then president Mohamed Morsi from power brought a notable revival of a specific brand of nationalism—militaristic, populist, anti-foreign—that evoked the Nasserism of the 1950s and 1960s, in contrast to the more inclusive strains of nationalism articulated during the 2011 uprising against Mubarak.
- Islamist and secular opposition forces have been mostly silenced or marginalized due to the banning of several groups including the Muslim Brotherhood, a harsh law against street protests, an electoral law that disadvantages political parties, and other measures that have undercut media and civil society.
- Nationalists have fallen into squabbling among themselves because their political rivals from other ideological trends have been mostly eliminated. Parliamentary elections have been postponed repeatedly, apparently due at least in part to President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's failure to settle these rivalries.
- Sisi's lack of interest in civilian politics is one of several reasons why there has not been a new nationalist political party formed to replace Mubarak's National Democratic Party, a major target during the 2011 uprising.
- Differences between the military and business leaders, and between the military and other security services, are on display in ways similar to those of the late Mubarak era.

Implications for the Future

- There are many parallels between the current political scene and the one that prevailed in late 2010, when elections that excluded most opposition—and yet were still corrupt and violent—contributed to growing public disgust with the Mubarak regime.
- Elections held without real pluralism are likely to produce a parliament made up of individuals only seeking personal economic advantage. Such a body might be difficult to manage and unable to provide the check on the executive branch that is laid out in the constitution, a somewhat more robust role than during the Mubarak era.
- If the parliament is fractious, or indeed if the three-year hiatus in parliamentary life continues, Egyptians' sense of ongoing political dysfunction will only increase.

Introduction

An Egyptian who fell asleep after the country's 2010 elections and awoke five years later would find the politics surrounding the parliamentary vote perhaps to be held at some point in 2015 familiar: individual pro-government candidates in close combat with each other, with opposition parties mostly formally excluded, engaged in boycotting, or marginalized by a variety of measures. Anyone who was awake during the vigorously competed parliamentary elections of late 2011 and early 2012, however, would find many differences. The Islamist parties that dominated those first elections after the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak are now mostly out of the picture. Many prominent youth or revolutionary leaders are in prison or exile. The secular opposition parties that formed after 2011 have less of a chance at winning seats than they had a few years ago due to a new electoral system, and many of them are boycotting the vote. Nationalist figures, including many from the Mubarak era, are back in the limelight.

Egypt's current politics is not exactly, however, a return to Mubarakism. One critical difference is that there is no political party currently affiliated with the president, now Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the former defense minister and head of military intelligence. Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) was dissolved shortly after the January 2011 uprising, its headquarters dramatically torched by protesters and its assets transferred to the state. Sisi has made clear that, at least for the present, he does not plan to take advantage of the upsurge in nationalist and pro-military sentiment that accompanied his July 2013 ouster of then president Mohamed Morsi to form a new political party or movement. His apparent lack of interest in, even disdain for, civilian politics has led to a chaotic environment within the nationalist camp, with different individuals and groups jockeying for position without much guidance from the top.

Egypt has now been without a full parliament since June 2012, when the previous assembly was dissolved by court order just before Morsi came to power. Elections that were to have been held in summer 2014 based on a road map put into place upon Morsi's ouster have now been postponed repeatedly, and it is not entirely clear when Sisi will relinquish legislative powers to a new parliament.

Maneuvering during the months when elections appeared imminent—until the Supreme Constitutional Court declared aspects of the electoral law unconstitutional on March 1, 2015—provided in any case an edifying glimpse of the

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current political scene. With two of Egypt's major political trends (Islamists and liberals/leftists) whittled down to a much smaller presence than they had in 2011–2012, cleavages within the third major group, the nationalists, similar to those seen during the late Mubarak era, are reemerging. When elections eventually are held, if a squabbling nationalist camp dominates the vote, the way might be paved for a fractious parliament unable to provide the check on the executive branch that is laid out in the constitution, as well as for increasing public disaffection with formal politics.

Echoes of Nasser in Today's Nationalism

Egyptian nationalism over the last century evolved from a territorially defined consciousness with a pharaonic component in the 1920s, to one with a more clearly defined Arab and Muslim identity in the 1930s, to one with layers of anti-colonialism and anti-elitism after the 1952 Free Officers Movement. That group abolished the monarchy and established a republic that would later be led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, the military president who transformed Egypt's polity, economy, society, and international orientation.¹ While his successors Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak tried to refine and update the sense of Egyptian nationalism in certain ways—an Egypt at peace with Israel, for example, and attempting to attain global economic competitiveness—neither was as successful as Nasser had been in capturing the public imagination.

At the time of the January 2011 uprising, there was an attempt to invent a new form of nationalism—or perhaps to revive an older form, one that evoked the 1919 revolution against British colonialism more than the 1952 movement.

It at least briefly united Muslims and Christians, Islamist and secular activists, women and men, poor and rich, young and old.²

But that more inclusive form of nationalism, however appealing, proved brittle and quickly broke down during the rough-and-tumble politics that followed the removal of Mubarak. As early as March 2011, young and secular activists accused the Muslim Brotherhood of colluding with the military to engineer a transition timetable (prioritizing elections over constitution writing) that favored the older, well-organized Brotherhood over newer political groups. Summer 2011 saw an outbreak of Muslim-

Christian violence, October brought nationalist justification of the killing of Christian protesters at Egyptian state television's Maspero building in Cairo, and in mid-2012 sexual assault and harassment of women spiked, exposing rifts within the society that the initial goodwill of the revolution had failed to bridge in any lasting way.

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When Egyptians came under extreme stress after the political roller coaster of 2011–2013, the Nasserist brand of nationalism quickly reemerged, with its strains of militarism, populism, and anti-foreign sentiment. The few months following Morsi's removal in July 2013 saw an astonishing resurgence of that nationalism, including a cult of personality around Sisi that evoked the days of Nasser. Not only did Egyptians produce trays of chocolates, cupcakes, and Ramadan lanterns emblazoned with the then defense minister's portrait, but Sisi was in fact widely compared to Nasser, and posters of the two side by side appeared throughout Egypt. There was a significant wave of nostalgia for Nasser, including a Ministry of Culture plan to create a museum from the home of the former president, whose legacy had been rather downplayed during the Mubarak years.

There are several striking parallels between the way that Sisi in 2013 and the Free Officers (of whom Nasser was one) in 1952 used a certain brand of pro-military, populist, anti-foreign nationalist sentiment to garner public support for taking power. In each case, the argument was that military figures had to take extreme measures—namely, seizing power from unpopular civilian rulers—to save the nation from the threat of imminent chaos. Sisi had to act, the argument went, to prevent the escalating demonstrations against Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Morsi from turning into a civil war; the Free Officers had to take control in light of escalating tensions with the British occupiers. Both military leaders succeeded in portraying the civilians they overthrew, at least to a significant part of the Egyptian public, as serving foreign agendas rather than the national interest. Sisi characterized Morsi and the Brotherhood as pursuing a pan-Islamist, non-Egyptian policy agenda and of being in league with Qatar, Turkey, and—however counterintuitively—the United States, while the Free Officers had portrayed King Farouk as the corrupt servant of the British.

Sisi and Nasser each made extensive use of government-controlled media (and in Sisi's case, privately owned media sympathetic to him) as well as popular culture to glorify themselves and the military while vilifying those they had overthrown and their foreign backers. The pro-military song “*Teslam al-ayadi*” (May those hands be safe) went viral in 2013, while several other similar songs vied for public attention. And both leaders, sensitive to being accused of carrying out a coup against civilians, used media and culture to reinforce the narrative that the regime change was another revolution, which carried out the will of the people.³

Sisi and Nasser were able to build public support and maintain it at least for a time, despite the fact that the post-coup eras of 2013 and 1952 each brought about extensive political oppression and human rights abuses. Indeed, one must reach back to the Nasser era to find parallels to the level of abuses under Sisi: hundreds killed during demonstrations, thousands of political prisoners, intimidation of media and civil society, and broad restrictions on political pluralism.⁴ The fact that they were able to build support in strikingly similar ways

more than a half-century apart suggests that there remains a significant well of nationalist sentiment in Egypt to be tapped at times of perceived national emergency.⁵ It also indicates that there is a particularly pro-military brand of nationalism that is widely (although certainly not universally) shared.

A Political Landscape Very Changed Since 2011

Egypt's political scene in 2015 is nearly the opposite of what it was in 2011–2012. The Islamist parties that made the strongest showing in the votes held between November 2011 and January 2012 have been sidelined. Nationalist figures, including some from the Mubarak era who were mostly absent in 2011 and 2012, have retaken center stage. The public spaces used in the past for mobilization, especially by secular opposition movements, have been constricted to a large degree. And a new electoral law has stunted the growth of political parties.

The most obvious difference is that the previously dominant Islamist parties have been either outlawed or greatly weakened in terms of their ability to garner public support and funding. The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, which headed a small coalition that won nearly half of the seats in the two houses of parliament during the last election, was banned in August 2014,⁶ thirteen months after Morsi's removal and nine months after the Brotherhood was declared a terrorist organization by the interim military-backed government. Most of the party's leaders, including party head and parliamentary speaker Saad el-Katatni, are in prison, and several of them face multiple convictions and even death sentences.

Others with Islamist leanings, such as the Wasat Party, the Watan Party, and the Building and Development Party (all of which initially sided with the Brotherhood against the coup), have faced legal challenges to their continued existence, and some of the party leaders are in prison. All three announced they would boycott elections planned for 2015. The Nour Party, the strongest of several Salafi political parties that burst onto the scene after the uprising and one that sided with the military against Morsi, plans to participate in elections when they take place. But it is not clear whether Nour can replicate the one-quarter of seats that its coalition gained in 2011–2012.

The bottom line is that instead of a plethora of Islamist parties running and capturing three-quarters of the electorate as occurred in 2011–2012, there is now only one active Islamist political group, the Nour Party. It is not entirely clear whether the Nour Party's backing of the coup against Morsi hurt its support among Salafis, who apparently did not vote in large numbers in either the January 2014 constitutional referendum or the May 2014 presidential election, or whether it will benefit electorally from its position as the last Islamist party left standing. But Nour in any case suffers from a climate in which all Islamists

are treated as security risks, many Islamists have been swept up in mass arrest campaigns, and the foreign funding and social welfare organizations on which Islamists have typically depended to build constituencies are under intense scrutiny. The minister of social affairs dissolved by decree some 380 nongovernmental organizations allegedly affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood during February and March 2015 alone.

Many of the secular movements and activists that rose to prominence in the post-uprising climate and were opinion leaders, whether or not they actually ran for office, have also been imprisoned, exiled, or harassed. Mohamed ElBaradei, founder of the Dostour Party, and Ayman Nour, founder of the Ghad Party and a former member of parliament, each went separately into self-imposed exile due to differences with the interim government in 2013. The Strong Egypt Party, headed by former Muslim Brother Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh (who was considered a serious contender for the presidency in 2012), has resisted being damaged or discredited by the strong currents of polarization sweeping the country, but the party has largely been sidelined in the current political game. The April 6 Youth Movement, an important force behind the 2011 uprising, was banned in April 2014 on accusations of espionage. April 6 co-founder Ahmed Maher and several other prominent youth activists, such as Ahmed Douma and Alaa Abdel Fattah, were convicted of violating a new anti-protest law passed by decree in November 2013. Amr Hamzawy, founder of the Egypt Freedom Party, a former member of parliament, and one of the most prominent liberals in the Arab world, faced a travel ban based on a statement on Twitter and has been informally barred from appearing on national media.

Instead of the Islamists, youth activists, and liberals who became household names in 2011, the main actors in the current political drama are figures from the Mubarak era; some were in prison or out of favor in 2011, whereas others never left the scene. Former president Mubarak and his two sons, Alaa and Gamal, were released from prison in January 2015; although none of them is expected to return to politics for the present, many of their former associates will do so. Ahmed Ezz, the steel tycoon and former NDP secretary-general who was among Gamal Mubarak's closest associates, was freed from prison in August 2014 and is trying to run for office again, although he faces legal obstacles. Other well-known figures from the Mubarak era who have played prominent roles recently include former presidential candidate and retired general Ahmed Shafiq, who headed the Egyptian Front Coalition for the postponed elections; retired military intelligence general Sameh Seif al-Yazal, who headed the For the Love of Egypt coalition; and two former officials who attempted to build coalitions but failed to gain broad support, former prime minister Kamal el-Ganzouri and former foreign minister and Arab League secretary-general Amr Moussa. Even among politicians who consider themselves part of the secular opposition, older figures active during the Mubarak era have taken the place of the new post-2011 faces: the venerable Wafd Party (founded in 1919)

and activist Abdel Gelil Mostafa of Kifaya (a protest movement founded in 2004) announced they would head electoral coalitions.

Spaces for Protest, Expression, and Mobilization Now Restricted

One of the reasons why older, more established figures are in the public eye now more than younger, newer ones is that the public spaces used by the latter—especially the streets and media—are now closed to them. In the decade leading up to the 2011 uprising, Egyptians had slowly developed a culture of protest, holding increasingly large and significant street demonstrations related to grievances about labor, public safety, human rights, or political freedom. But the November 2013 anti-protest law mandates jail sentences and other penalties for those participating in any demonstration not approved by the interior ministry, penalties that have been applied selectively but broadly enough to make the point that protesting is now extremely risky. Recent developments have brought home the fact that the cost of protest can be quite high: during February 2015

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alone, Ahmed Douma was sentenced to life in prison, Alaa Abdel Fattah was given five years, and leftist Shaimaa al-Sabbagh was shot to death during a small wreath-laying protest in Cairo. For young Muslim Brotherhood supporters, merely showing up at a pro-Morsi march risks charges of publicly supporting a terrorist group, and thousands have been imprisoned or killed.

Broadcast and print media were also spaces that gradually opened to a plurality of new voices from 2003 onward, and especially after 2011, but they snapped shut quickly in 2013. Almost all Islamist media, including satellite television stations and newspapers, were shut down immediately at the time of the coup. Government-run media adopted a sharply nationalist, pro-military, anti-Brotherhood, and anti-opposition tone, and privately owned media outlets either scurried to jump on the bandwagon or closed down. There was a general change of the guard in broadcast media, with a number of extremely popular figures such as satirist Bassem Youssef, talk show host Yosri Fouda, and news anchor Reem Maged—all associated with liberal secular views—driven off the air. There is now only one Arabic-language newspaper, *al-Shorouk*, that publishes some opposition views; online sources make a few more opinions available, but those that are in English are accessible only to elite Egyptians.⁷

The Internet-savvy elite are also the only Egyptians who have much access to social media platforms (especially Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter), which have emerged as a virtual battleground between those seeking to prove the perfidy of one party or another. While young activists, particularly liberals, showed a great deal of ingenuity in devising social media campaigns to

publicize regime abuses and capture public attention between 2004 and 2013, since the coup they have been on the defensive. Still, some campaigns have impact, such as the YouTube film showing the killing of Shaimaa al-Sabbagh, distributed by Askar Kazeboon (*The Military Are Liars*), which provoked enough of a public outcry to compel a government investigation and the arrest of a riot police officer.

New Electoral Law Limits Chances for Political Parties

Another important difference in the current political setup, which will profoundly affect any parliament elected, is a changed electoral law that strongly favors independent candidates over political parties. While some aspects of the new law that had been decreed in 2014 were declared unconstitutional in March 2015, so far the basic electoral system remains in place. This system came as a major blow to the secular political parties, many of which supported the removal of Morsi and hoped they would benefit by the Muslim Brotherhood's exclusion from formal politics. Only 21 percent (120 out of 567 seats) of the new House of Representatives, a body that will replace Egypt's upper and lower houses, will be chosen on the party-list system (in which voters choose a list of party-selected candidates rather than an individual candidate) as compared to 66 percent of the last assembly. Moreover, the new electoral law mandates that if a list wins 51 percent or more of the votes, it takes all the seats in that district, rather than distributing the seats among lists proportionally as the previous law did. Thus smaller, less well-funded parties—and most of the secular opposition parties are not well funded—have even less of a chance than they would if the party-list seats were to be distributed proportionally. They will almost certainly win fewer seats in the new assembly than they did in the previous elections, when secular liberal and leftist parties won 29 percent of seats.

In the new House of Representatives, 74 percent (420 seats) will be elected individually as compared to 33 percent last time. (The president will appoint the remaining 27 seats, up from ten seats previously.) Political parties are allowed to put up candidates for the individually elected seats, but they will find it much more expensive and logistically difficult to run hundreds of different races than to run the smaller number of slates that was required for the party-list arrangement.

The new system also restores a quota for women (56 seats), which had been instituted in the latter days of Mubarak's presidency but was jettisoned after 2011. And it adds a quota of 24 seats for Christians, sixteen for youth, and eight for people with disabilities.

Rather than parties, the system favors individual candidates who believe they have strong support in a particular district, such as members of wealthy landowning families or captains of industry. In past elections, the Muslim

Brotherhood was also relatively successful in running for individual seats because it was well funded and able to select candidates such as doctors or businessmen with strong records of social welfare activities. That will not be the case in the present environment, in which any candidate declaring or even hinting at Brotherhood affiliation might face prosecution on terrorism charges.

In this complex environment, smaller political parties and individuals banded together in electoral lists or coalitions in order to improve their chances in the elections that had been scheduled for March–April 2015. Among the twelve most prominent lists that registered, at least three-quarters were nationalist in orientation. The principal lists as of March 2015 were the For the Love of Egypt nationalist grouping headed by Sisi confidant and retired military intelligence general Sameh Seif al-Yazal, the Egyptian Front Coalition led by retired air force general Ahmed Shafiq (more of a Sisi competitor than supporter), another pro-Sisi list called the Independence Current, and the Egypt's Awakening Coalition made up primarily of liberal and leftist parties (such as the Social Democrats) that formed after the uprising. The Nour Party had planned to run on its own, while several other groups that had initially considered running independently—notably the Wafd Party and the Free Egyptians Party formed by billionaire Naguib Sawiris—later signed onto the For the Love of Egypt coalition. These large coalitions had planned to contest the 120 party-list seats, and some had also promised to coordinate—that is, not to compete—in races for the 420 individual seats, although it was not clear if such promises would have been fulfilled.

Echoes of Mubarak-Era Politics

While the politics of 2015 have little in common with those of 2011–2012, they show much overlap with those that prevailed during the parliamentary races held just prior to Mubarak's overthrow, in November and December 2010. And in fact, the recent rollback in pluralism and liberties resembles in some ways a dynamic that played out in the latter years of the Mubarak era.

The 2010 elections took place in an atmosphere of tightened political space and were dominated by parties and candidates close to the government, in contrast to the more pluralist (but not fully open) elections held in late 2005. Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated independent candidates (at that time, the Brotherhood had not yet been allowed to form a party) won some 20 percent of the seats in 2005, whereas in 2010 many Brotherhood candidates were disqualified and the remaining few faced significant restraints on campaigning. As has been the case in 2015, many secular opposition politicians chose to boycott the 2010 elections, a strategy advocated at the time by Mohamed ElBaradei's National Association for Change, which had collected more than 100,000 signatures for an online petition calling for political liberalization.

Another similarity is that media freedoms, which had been gradually expanded between 2003 and 2010, were rolled back before the 2010 elections. The methods the Egyptian government used at that time included inhibiting satellite channels' ability to broadcast live events such as demonstrations, restricting the use of aggregate text messages, and forcing the firing of several prominent journalists. Those techniques look quite tame compared to what the government has done in the media sphere since 2013. The forced closure of nearly all Islamist media outlets as well as many international media offices including that of Al Jazeera, the arrest of and violence against many journalists, and the widespread harassment or replacement of broadcasters, hosts, and editors suspected of sympathy with the democratic agenda of 2011 have transformed the media space into one with precious little pluralism. The Committee to Protect Journalists rated Egypt among the top ten jailers of journalists in 2014.

There is another intriguing similarity between the politics of 2015 and 2010: a lack of cohesion or discipline within the nationalist, pro-government political camp. In 2010, the National Democratic Party still existed but was undergoing significant internal troubles related to the struggle over who would succeed octogenarian president Hosni Mubarak. During the two previous parliamentary elections, the NDP had performed relatively poorly. In 2000, it had won only 38 percent of seats outright, far short of the two-thirds supermajority needed to control any revisions to the constitution. Those who beat the NDP candidates were largely independents who were themselves nationalists but had lost out in the selection of candidates within the party. The NDP had been obligated to take back these black sheep to secure its majority.

The NDP's poor showing in 2000 gave Gamal Mubarak an opening to reform and modernize the party. Gamal, a banker, had spent several years working in London and was inspired by changes in the Labour Party under then UK prime minister Tony Blair.⁸ Under Gamal's influence, new members of a business elite interested in expanding foreign investment moved to the fore within the NDP, often causing tensions with the older party elites, made up in many cases of members of the country's old families with long-standing ties to the military-security apparatus. Gamal and his coterie formed a new Policy Secretariat and tried to revamp the ruling party with policy initiatives as well as slogans designed to appeal to a broad audience, such as "for you," "new thinking," and "citizens' rights first." Such efforts were something with which the NDP, primarily a vehicle for access to and distribution of government patronage, had never troubled itself before. Gamal and his supporters also went to battle with the old guard in the party over nominations for the 2005 parliamentary elections, demanding fresh faces and younger candidates. Yet in the end, they did no better than the old guard, winning outright only 34 percent of seats, and once again the NDP was forced to take back party renegades who had run as independents.

By the November 2010 parliamentary races, tensions in Egypt were rising sharply due to the sense of an impending presidential succession; Mubarak was

well over eighty and facing the end of his fifth six-year term in 2011. While much of the business community had pulled behind Gamal as his father's putative successor, there were widespread rumors that the military-security establishment was dissatisfied.⁹ At the same time, this uneasy elite coalition of military and business was facing threats from growing anti-government protests expressing various grievances related to labor, government services, police brutality, and lack of political freedom. The government's response was to tighten down political controls. In 2010, new measures were introduced to ensure an NDP victory, such as disqualification of many opposition (especially Muslim Brotherhood) candidates,¹⁰ restrictions on traditional and social media,¹¹ and other steps that led some secular opposition parties to boycott.

At the end of the day, the NDP got the decisive victory it sought—86 percent of seats, in addition to another 12 percent won by party renegades who ran as independents—but the victory turned out to be a Pyrrhic one. Although the competition was almost entirely within the pro-government elite, the elections were marred by widespread reports of ballot-box stuffing and vote-rigging as well as violence.¹² The parliament convened in mid-December amid protests, and the idea that the elections were stolen became one of several specific grievances—along with the corruption of major business figures associated with Gamal and the police brutality demonstrated by the killing of an Alexandria youth named Khaled Said—that provoked the January 25, 2011, “day of rage” that ultimately led to Mubarak's removal two weeks later. Protesters vented their anger at the Mubarak family, the police, and the crony capitalists, putting their faith in the military (seen as above the political fray) to remove Mubarak without much violence and to guide the country toward a democratic transition.

Will There Be a New Nationalist Party?

Since the 1950s, each Egyptian president has had a political party or organization that has helped to deliver voters to the polls when needed, as well as to ensure that parliament functioned more or less as a rubber stamp for legislation and constitutional amendments originating from the executive branch. Nasser abolished the political competition that existed before the 1952 Free Officers Movement and established a single party, which was first called the Liberation Rally, then the National Union, and later the Arab Socialist Union. His successor, Anwar Sadat, divided and later abolished the Arab Socialist Union, establishing the NDP in 1978, which Mubarak maintained until he fell from power. Although limited pluralism was permitted from Sadat's time onward, many structural and legal impediments meant that no party other than that of the president—which positioned itself as a centrist, nationalist party—could realistically hope to achieve power via the ballot box. Since the brief democratic experiment from 2011 to 2013 was aborted, it is as yet unclear whether

there will be one or more new political parties to carry the nationalist agenda forward in formal politics.

There are at least two significant and interrelated factors that inhibit the emergence of a new nationalist party now. First, continuing rivalries among several groups within nationalist circles, especially between the military and business community—each having significant economic interests—are not easy to overcome. Second, President Sisi has shown little appetite for, even a disdain for, civilian politics so far, which makes sorting out competing interests in the nationalist camp all the more difficult.

The mid-2013 ouster of Morsi saw a strong rallying together of nationalist forces, including the military, the internal security and intelligence forces, the business community, as well as civilian officials and NDP politicians from the Mubarak era. But maintaining unity among those competing for scarce resources—the military versus big business, for example, or the military versus internal security forces—is not easy, particularly in a situation in which there are no longer any serious, non-nationalist political competitors.

Competition between the military and the business community was much discussed in the latter years of Mubarak's time in office, when the businesspeople connected to Gamal Mubarak began to emerge as new centers of power, including in the NDP. When the uprising came in 2011, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that took power after Mubarak's overthrow was quick to sacrifice several businessmen who had attained high positions in the government or party, including not only NDP secretary-general Ahmed Ezz but also former prime minister Ahmed Nazif, former finance minister Youssef Boutros Ghali, and former trade minister Rachid Mohamed Rachid. Most were closely associated with Gamal's program of private sector-led growth, which alienated the military due to its significant privatization of public sector companies and alienated the public due to the enormous income disparities it created.

Now there are signs that Mubarak-era rivalries, or new versions of them, are reemerging along with Mubarak-era politics. Sisi's efforts to raise taxes on wealthy businessmen, as well as to press them to make voluntary contributions to nontransparent development funds such as *Tahya Masr*, have led to increasingly obvious tensions between the military and the *feloul* (remnants) of the Mubarak era. Ahmed Ezz's declaration of candidacy, which was followed rapidly by his disqualification for lack of adequate financial disclosure, set Egypt abuzz with the possibility that the new parliament would harbor new centers of power apart from the military. Ahmed Shafiq, who is considered closer to the business community than most military officers and perhaps also close to the internal security forces, has remained in exile in the United Arab Emirates due to corruption cases since his failed presidential bid in 2012. In preparation for the elections that were to have been held in March–April 2015, he headed an electoral coalition that, while nationalist, was not necessarily

President Sisi has shown little appetite for, even a disdain for, civilian politics so far, which makes sorting out competing interests in the nationalist camp all the more difficult.

strongly pro-Sisi. While other senior business figures, such as Free Egyptians Party founder Naguib Sawiris and the many businesspeople on the For the Love of Egypt list, were more overtly supportive of Sisi, they might well have agendas of their own and hope to shape or constrain legislation according to their interests. Well before the Supreme Constitutional Court declared parts of the electoral law unconstitutional in March 2015, an unnamed source told *Abram Online* that Sisi was “apprehensive” about the influence of businessmen in politics and was considering finding a reason to postpone the elections due to the “growing possibility of the hegemony of businessmen over parliament.”

While it is always difficult to sort out the complicated web of interests that make up nationalist circles in Egypt, it is impossible to do so without clear leadership from the top. President Sisi so far has not wanted to put his fingerprints directly on any political grouping, leading to an ever-changing kaleidoscope of rumors that one politician or another—at one point Amr Moussa, then Kamal el-Ganzouri—would get the nod to form Sisi’s authorized party or electoral list.

When Sisi finally did hold his first meeting with political parties in January 2015, after having been in power effectively since July 2013 and president since June 2014, he made a suggestion that flabbergasted the party leaders: rather than competing, they should unify in a single list, which Sisi would be happy to support. Some dismissed the idea as impractical at best, while others remarked anonymously afterward that they did not see the purpose of elections if they followed the president’s suggestion. (Sisi apparently showed no receptivity to party representatives’ requests to lift the draconian anti-protest law put into place in late 2013 or heavy restrictions on the funding of civil society organizations, which have caused the activities of many to grind to a halt.) When it

became clear that Ganzouri’s coalition—presumed at the time of the meeting with parties to be the closest to Sisi—could not unify all forces according to Sisi’s suggestion, Ganzouri suddenly dropped out of the elections as candidates began deserting him in droves to join the new For the Love of Egypt grouping headed by Sameh Seif al-Yazal.

A president who was truly committed to building democracy in Egypt might eschew party politics, but that is hardly a credible explanation for the behavior of a president who has curbed political liberties as extensively as Sisi has. Sisi

might be refraining from organizing the nationalist political sphere openly and directly because he prefers to keep potential allies and rivals guessing as well as competing for his favor, but the reason might go deeper: he seems to have little use for civilian politics. Although he moved forward with some alacrity to execute the parts of the post-July 2013 road map that involved writing a new constitution and holding presidential elections, he repeatedly postponed parliamentary elections, apparently a low priority. He turned a deaf ear to the repeated pleas of political parties, including those in the nationalist camp, not to put in

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place a new electoral system that would greatly diminish the chances of parties by making the vast majority of seats open to individual candidates.

Sisi might well feel that he does not need a new political party at present because he already has one: the military. Since the July 2013 coup, the military has functioned in a much more overtly political way than it has since the 1950s. Even during the period of SCAF rule, from the fall of Mubarak in February 2011 to the installation of Morsi in June 2012, military leaders were at pains to say that theirs was purely a transitional role and they were eager to be out of politics. But in January 2014, the SCAF took the remarkable step of nominating Sisi for the presidency, just as a political party would do. Sisi frequently praises the discipline and efficiency of the military as opposed to that of civilians; he remarked, for example, that the country would be far more prosperous if civilians woke up as early in the morning as soldiers did and that the military should be the leading engine of economic development. Although Sisi was careful not to use the military overtly for mobilization during his presidential campaign, he did announce his candidacy wearing his beige and brown camouflage uniform. And the pro-military song “Teslam al-ayadi” reportedly played pervasively outside polling stations, where army tanks kept watch.

Implications of a Politics-Free Zone for Elections, Governance, and Stability

George Ishak, a veteran secular opposition politician who had supported the ouster of Morsi, remarked that since the election of Sisi as president, Egypt has been in a “politics-free period.” Pluralism, as well as freedoms of expression and association, has been curtailed so sharply as to create a sense that political life, which seemed to begin in early 2011, has again abruptly ended.

The near-total exclusion of Islamists, the boycott of elections by many of the newer secular parties associated with the 2011 revolution, and the extensive restrictions on media as well as street mobilization set up a situation in 2015 remarkably similar to 2010. Electoral competition was not totally absent in 2010, but the contest took place almost exclusively among individuals within the nationalist camp rather than between parties with substantively different ideologies or programs. And in fact, differences among nationalists became sharper and more evident than ever, perhaps due partly to the fact that there was no need to unify against competitors from the Islamist or secular opposition camps. The 2010 elections were notoriously corrupt and violent, although it is unclear whether the vote-buying, ballot-box stuffing, and physical coercion were actually greater than in previous races or just more thoroughly documented and publicized due to the use of social media.

Whether similar scenes will play out in future parliamentary elections remains to be seen. When eventually held, the races will undoubtedly be chaotic; nearly 7,000 candidates had registered for the elections that were

scheduled for March–April 2015, seeking parliamentary seats (not to mention parliamentary immunity from legal prosecution) and competing with each other without even a veneer of party discipline. It is certain that elections held under such conditions would further build the sense of grievance among Islamists (who still resent the dissolution of the previous assembly in 2012, not to mention the removal of Morsi) and young revolutionaries, but whether the public more broadly would share the sentiment is unclear. Although it was initially mostly members of the politically active elite that protested the 2010 elections, those elections became part of a broader narrative of NDP perfidy (along with economic inequality, corruption, and human rights abuses) that ended in Mubarak's removal a few months after the vote.

For any new parliament elected under current conditions, even though there would be little if any real opposition presence, the 567-seat assembly might be chaotic due to the lack of cohesion in the nationalist camp. Even if one or more of the nationalist coalitions (especially the For the Love of Egypt coalition believed to be close to Sisi) gained many seats, it would not necessarily function as a voting bloc once within the assembly. There were several major lists in the 2011–2012 elections, but each party and individual member went his or her own way once the parliament was seated. Once the new assembly is in place, the question of a ruling nationalist party is likely to resurface, although the electoral law makes it difficult for deputies to change party affiliation once elected.

Such lack of cohesion within the parliament may hold short-term advantages for Sisi, who would not have to worry about well-organized opposition in the body, but it could become problematic for him as well. Under the 2014 constitution, the parliament has somewhat more power than it did in the Mubarak era. Any member may question or interpellate a cabinet minister, including the prime minister, and the parliament may vote by a simple majority to withdraw confidence from a minister or the entire cabinet. The parliament votes on the draft state budget, although the military budget is exempted from real scrutiny as it is included as a single line item within the overall state budget. The parliament may override a presidential veto of legislation by a two-thirds vote. And the president may only dissolve the assembly after approval through a public referendum, a limit Mubarak did not face after 2007 amendments to the constitution.

If a parliament elected under current conditions were made up primarily of individuals eager to curry favor with the government, it might well rubber-stamp the many controversial laws decreed by Sisi and his predecessor, interim president Adly Mansour. It seems unlikely that an assembly without cohesive voting blocs would be able to take advantage of the expanded powers offered in the constitution, which in theory would enable it to provide something of a check against the power of the executive branch. But the Sisi government might also struggle to get new legislation through such a body, made up of hundreds of individuals, each wanting something in return and few subject to party discipline.

Another question for the future is whether President Sisi will eventually discover a use for civilian politics—that is, the need to build or at least to bless a nationalist political party, movement, or machine that can mobilize public support when he needs it. It was somewhat surprising that he did not discover such a need following his election to the presidency. Although Sisi was elected by an enormous majority (97 percent) of those who voted, the lack of a political machine to mobilize voters meant that initial turnout was weak—denting the narrative of his immense popularity—and authorities declared an extension of voting for an unprecedented third day. In fact, there were reports at the time that old NDP figures were eager to publicize the weak turnout in order to demonstrate to Sisi that he could not succeed on his popularity alone and needed their help.

Despite the somewhat uncomfortable circumstances of his election, Sisi has so far preferred to remain above the fray, perhaps believing he has little to gain and something to lose if he tries to organize the nationalist political sphere, which would involve sorting out many disparate interests. When Sisi met with political parties in mid-January, he reportedly warned them that if the Egyptian people did not feel well represented, then they might revolt against the new parliament. In the end, spreading out the blame for what will most likely be ongoing and perhaps intensifying security as well as economic difficulties might be the purpose that political bodies will serve in Egypt for the present.

Notes

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- 2 See Juan Cole, “Christians and Muslims ‘One Hand’ in Egypt’s Youth Revolution,” *Informed Comment* (blog), February 11, 2011, www.juancole.com/2011/02/christians-muslims-one-hand-in-egypts-youth-revolution.html.
- 3 Brand, *Official Stories*, 53.
- 4 Michele Dunne and Scott Williamson, “Egypt’s Unprecedented Instability by the Numbers,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 24, 2013, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/24/egypt-s-unprecedented-instability-by-numbers/h5j4>.
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- 7 For more on Egyptian media, see Rasha Abdulla, “Egypt’s Media in the Midst of Revolution,” Carnegie Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2014.
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