

## Can Egypt unite?

Contributed by Daniel Brumberg  
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### Foreign Policy

As Mohammed Morsi prepares to become Egypt's first democratically elected president, he will have to decide who he really is: a political unifier who wants one "Egypt for all Egyptians" as he said shortly after he was declared president, or an Islamist partisan devoted to the very proposition that he repeated during the first round of the election campaign, namely that "the Quran is our constitution."

This is not so much an intellectual choice as it is a political and practical one. Morsi's greatest challenge is to unite a political opposition that has suffered from fundamental divisions between Islamists and non-Islamists, and within each of these camps as well. If his call for a government of national unity merely represents a short-term tactic for confronting the military -- rather than a strategic commitment to pluralism as a way of political life -- the chances of resuscitating a transition that only days ago was on life support will be very slim indeed.

Egypt's fractious political opposition has been an advantage to the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to this point. If it fails to unite, the prospects for meaningful change will remain excruciatingly low. The record of transition from autocratic rule is fairly clear: opposition solidarity is a necessary if insufficient condition for extricating militaries from the realm of civil political life. The record also shows, however, that such unity is hard to achieve when oppositions are divided by fundamental identity conflicts.

Such conflicts have long been a boon to the leaders of the Arab world's "liberalized autocracies." These semi-authoritarian systems survived not merely by brute force, but also by giving both Islamists and non-Islamists protection and patronage and then playing off one against the other. In Egypt, vestiges of this divide and rule strategy persisted well after Mubarak's downfall. Hopes for defusing a long legacy of political fear mongering in Egypt rested on negotiating "credible guarantees" that assured all key groups that a democratic polity would protect individual and group rights.

While almost all Egyptian political forces have made mistakes, it is important to be clear: the strongest opposition forces had a special burden to reassure those who had the most to fear from a democratic outcome. Some Brotherhood leaders grasped this basic logic, some proved tone deaf, while still others -- such a Dr. Essam el-Erian-- promised political inclusion while asserting in the same breath that secular leaders are irrelevant to Egypt's future.

Such mixed messaging was to be expected. The Brotherhood sought to retain credibility with their base while reaching beyond it. Moreover, they had to pay special attention to the military since it held almost all the cards. Non-Islamists were quick to accuse Islamists of colluding with the SCAF, a behavior that they asserted was hardly new. But placating the military was a popular sport in Egypt's liberalized autocracy, where the line between opposition and collusion had always been blurred. Thus it was hardly surprising that well after Mubarak's fall both Islamist and non-Islamists turned first to the military and then only after that to themselves. Old habits not only die hard, they are sustained absent a significant incentive to jettison them.

The incentive to accommodate stemmed from the mutual perception of both the generals and the Brotherhood that their interests would be best served by avoiding conflict. Brotherhood leaders assumed -- as did many Western scholars -- that Islamists would never get the chance to mobilize an electoral majority sufficiently large to compel the military to cede authority to the parliament. Thus their best strategy was to seek modus vivendi with the SCAF and see where that would take them. However, this calculation only fed non-Islamists' suspicions, thus setting the stage for a series of collisions.

The first such occasion was in the March 2011 referendum on a package of constitutional amendments that defined the timetable for the transition. Predictably, the campaign quickly degenerated into a shouting match. Non-Islamists worried that holding parliamentary elections first and then writing the constitution would not only give electoral victors the means to impose an illiberal constitution, but would do so under the umbrella of the military. But because the referendum provided no alternative course of action in the event of its rejection, Islamists credibly argued that the only way forward was a yes vote. Determined to prevail, some Islamists accused their rivals of being anti-Islamic, while not a few non-Islamists warned that a yes vote would lead to a fundamentalist Islamic state. With neither side listening to the other, and in the wake of a 70% yes vote that some Islamists declared was victory for Islam itself, the seeds of massive distrust were planted and well watered.

This situation escalated after the SCAF issued a new constitutional declaration that went far beyond the few

amendments voted for in the March 2011 referendum. Fearing an Islamist-SCAF deal, and dismayed by the courts' failure to hold military and security officials accountable for the violence during and after the January 2011 uprising, revolutionary groups remobilized in Tahrir Square. The ensuing repression of the protestors felt like Groundhog Day. Exposed to the bullets and blows of the security forces, non-Islamists bitterly recalled those early days of the January 2011 revolt, when MB activists joined the protestors only after their efforts seemed to be paying off.

For their part, Brotherhood leaders argued that the protestors were wasting valuable time and energy confronting a regime whose powers could only be attenuated by moving as quickly as possible to parliamentary elections. If this calculation offended young revolutionaries, it was not unreasonable. In the classic "moderate/radical" split that has figured in so many transitions, the Brotherhood played the role of opposition moderates. But in Egypt, the crucial missing element was coordination between the radicals seeking full scale revolution and the moderates trying to negotiate with elements of the old regime.

Splits within the Islamist and non-Islamist camps did little to heal the breach. While a positive sign of political diversification, efforts at ideological bridge building by secular and Islamist youth were not sufficient to create a "third alternative" capable of defusing the increasingly polarized atmosphere. No less than Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who had long called for dialogue, warned that Islamists were "hijacking" the revolution. Responding to such claims, leftists such as Hossem El-Hamalawy held that while we should "not stop exposing the hypocrisy of...the Muslim Brethren leadership...we should not give up trying to attract...those (youth) in the Muslim Brethren who are sincerely pro-revolution." Hamalawy's call for cooperation made sense. During the first nine months of the post-Mubarak period, young MB leaders -- as well as some veteran activists such as Dr. Abdel Monem Aboul Fotouh -- were expelled from the organization or saw their efforts to create alternative Islamist groups undermined.

The further fragmenting that these struggles produced came at an especially inauspicious time: by November 2011 members of the SCAF were floating proposals for retaining the military's powers and prerogatives. But with parliamentary elections coming up, the MB mostly refrained from commenting and instead concentrated on the campaign rather than confronting the military. The scale of the Islamists' victory in those elections redefined the entire stakes of the transition. With the MB taking 45% and the Salafis 25% of the seats, the fears of both the military and the non-Islamists escalated. After all, both had assumed that elections would produce a fragmented parliament, one in which the Islamists would not have sufficient seats to control next crucial stage in the revolution: the formation of a 100-member constituent assembly charged with writing a new constitution.

It was precisely because this assumption proved incorrect that the struggle over the assembly became so heated. Confronting the possibility of an Islamist-controlled parliament, in late fall 2012 the SCAF created an "advisory council" comprised of leaders from the Islamist and non-Islamists camps. Most groups on both sides agreed to play ball. But when the election results were finalized, the SCAF pushed to have the council play a role in selecting the constituent assembly, thus bypassing the parliament. Sensing a clear bid to undercut them, Brotherhood leader El-Erian warned that "the military wants to delay or disturb the composition of the assembly, " and that "no people can support this now."

At this point, the onus was on the MB to guarantee non-Islamists enough seats to reassure them that they would have a real say in the drafting of the constitution. El-Erian promised as much in early January 2012. But when the MB selected an assembly that gave Islamists a strong majority, it inflamed the fears of the other trends, and an Egyptian court suspended the newly constituted assembly. In the ensuing months Islamists and non-Islamists MPs pursued fierce negotiations, a contest that the SCAF tried to influence by holding meetings with non-Islamists to discuss their concerns. By April an agreement was reached to split the assembly 50/50. But when Islamists then proposed to include in the "non-Islamist" category groups such as the Wasat Party (which many non-Islamists asserted were Islamists) the agreement fell apart. The matter was not settled until the second week of June 2012. But by the time assembly finally met on June 18, the High Constitutional Court had moved to partly or completely dissolve the parliament. To add injury to insult, many non-Islamists members of the assembly boycotted its opening.

The High Court's decision entailed a last ditch effort by ancien regime apparatchiks to prevent Islamists from taking democratic control of both the presidency and the legislature. In retrospect, the Brotherhood might have been far better off avoiding such a complete -- and thus threatening -- victory by negotiating an agreement with non-Islamists to field a consensus presidential candidate such as Fattouh. But having expelled him from their ranks, and determined to court the Salafi vote, the Brotherhood pursued no such agreement. As for non-Islamists, they too were hardly in a mood for compromise. So, the non-MB vote split between Fattouh, Hamdeen Sibbahi and Ahmed Shafiq. Paradoxically, while the first round suggested that at least fifty percent of the voting electorate preferred an alternative to the Brotherhood, the splitting of the non-Islamist vote produced a Morsi-Shafiq run-off.

During the first round of elections Morsi did little to reassure non-Islamists. As a conservative by nature, he repeatedly proclaimed that the "Quran is our constitution and the Shariah is our Guide" during his nation-wide campaign. To be fair, Fotouh's courting of the Salafis only made matters worse by alienating non-Islamists. But even if he had resisted such populist maneuvers, it is unlikely that the outcome would have been different. By May 2012, the opposition was in tatters.

"Regrets, I have a few," goes the old Sinatra classic. In the second round of elections, Morsi tried to win over non-

Islamists and thus repair some of the damage for which he himself was responsible. The impetus for such belated bridge-building multiplied ten fold with the High Court's June 14 decision, and even more so three days later, when SCAF issued supplementary constitutional amendments to protect its powers at the expense of the once powerful presidency. His efforts, combined with the alienating prospect of a victory for Ahmed Shafik and the restoration of the former Mubarak regime, allowed the Brotherhood's candidate to win by a sufficiently large margin.

The key to the next phase will be whether Morsi learned the right lessons from this turbulent record. Morsi must now make a genuine and sustained effort to include those in the opposition who fear that he is either insincere or incapable of mobilizing his closest allies in the Muslim Brotherhood behind a pluralistic political agenda. The creation of a government of national unity will go some way toward reassuring non-Islamists, as will Morsi's decision to resign from the Muslim Brotherhood and its Freedom and Justice party. Seeking to reinforce this message, in his late night TV address he promised an "Egypt for all Egyptians," one in which "national unity is the only way forward."

He will need such unity in what promises to be a very long struggle. In the coming weeks Morsi will either have to push back against a military that refuses to rescind its recent proclamation or to endorse compromises such as leaving the current parliament intact and reelecting only a third of its members. And even if such an accommodation does become possible, Morsi will have to sell it to the wider populace without being accused of betraying the revolution. That very balancing act could split the opposition yet again. Finally, there is the question of the non-Islamist opposition, particularly its secular revolutionaries. Suspicious of a stronger rival that was not averse to reaching its own accommodations with the military, non-Islamists will have to overcome their deep social, economic and political divisions if they are to carve out an effective role in Egypt's evolving political arena.

That role will be to push for the very constitution for which prominent non-Islamists such as Mohamed El-Baradei once pleaded. The prospects for achieving real democracy will hinge on securing basic constitutional rights for all Egyptians. For this reason, the boycott of the Constituent Assembly must end, its members must get down to business, and the military should allow them to reach consensus without its guidance, interference or even its well-meaning assistance. That, and not simply the election of a new President, will help decide Egypt's fate.

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