Military, Political Islam, and the Future of Democracy in Egypt

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ABSTRACT *Egypt's democratization efforts require domestic and international considerations: Domestically, the country must focus on the economy at the expense of the military's political role: While military involvement in politics is crucial to democratization, improvements in this area represents an outcome, not the cause, of the process. Discussions should concentrate on protecting lower- and middle classes, generate prosperity and create common ground between democracy and class interests. At the international level, Egypt requires countries to support democratization efforts and condemn extra-democratic actions. Meanwhile, the prominence of Islamists causes concerns for Western governments with regard to the Peace Treaty and Israel's security.*

When Hosni Mubarak was ousted from power in February 2011 in what became one of the defining moments of the Arab Spring, a furious public discussion ensued about the character of the soon-to-be-drafted Egyptian constitution. For many, the new constitution had to guarantee the privileges of democracy to all societal groups involved. As part of these discussions, a popular idea, especially among secular opposition groups and those close to the military, was whether the "Turkish model" should define the parameters of the Egyptian path to democracy. The "Turkish model" was shorthand for the "guiding" role that the Turkish military assumed since

1923. In this role, the military would, in principle, stay out of politics while when the fundamental values and principles of the state were threatened, the military would undertake its constitutional sanction to intervene to set things "right." The Turkish military utilized this power on numerous occasions since the 1950s.

In the midst of these discussions on the role of the military in the impending Egyptian democracy, Mohamed Morsi – one of the top leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood – assumed the presidency in June 2012. Morsi came to power on the heels of the first democratic elections in Egypt in decades, following Mubarak's ouster. At the

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time, nobody anticipated the series of decisive actions Morsi would take in the months following his inauguration. Arguably the most significant of Morsi's actions was the dismissal of Field Marshal Tantawi – the defense minister – and Lieutenant General Sami Enan, chief of staff of the armed forces. This unprecedented move against the military by a civilian authority whose power solely rested on electoral support provoked conflicting reactions from different corners of Egyptian society. Perhaps the most striking of these reactions came from the Muslim Brotherhood. In January 2013, a former top Brotherhood leader boasted, "It took you [Turks] twenty years to solve the problem of civil-military relations, but we did it in two years."[1] Later in the same year, the Egyptian military removed Morsi from power, forcing the Muslim Brotherhood to face one of the worst crackdowns on its organization since the 1950s. Additionally, Field Marshal Sisi took over the presidency, suspending the constitution, which had been drafted merely a year prior.

This brief but intense episode of Egyptian politics in the last two years shattered any appearance of a genuine democratic transition. The initial euphoria surrounding the removal of Mubarak from power gave the impression that Egypt was headed toward a bright democratic future. Yet, the structural problems of Egypt were largely bracketed. It was assumed that with Mubarak's departure most problems of Egypt would disappear, as if the whole political, economic, and military structure that

enabled Mubarak to rule for such a long period of time was immaterial. As it turns out, the presumed rupture with the old regime and the military never materialized.

Egyptian Military and Politics

The military's ouster of President Morsi in Egypt was neither exceptional nor unexpected. The Egyptian military is a rational actor with its own organizational interests and aims to protect and fulfill these interests with the means at its disposal. The military also has a distinct ideological outlook on how things should work in Egypt and a strong distaste for political Islam. The combination of these factors resulted in a serious challenge to democratization.

Military interventions in the Middle East have been categorically different than military interventions elsewhere. While in most other regions, the military steps in to secure one specific outcome (usually using the military coup for personal ends, leading to personalistic authoritarian regimes), the military in the Middle East is set apart by the material and ideological interests it upholds as an organizational entity. This is a deep-rooted phenomenon in the Middle East. Beginning with the Committee of Union and Progress' (CUP) first military coup in 1908 in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire, the region has since received more than its fair share of military interventions. Throughout the 20th century in the Middle East, the military

Supporters of ousted Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi show Morsi's portrait and posters with the four finger symbol during a demonstration against the military backed government.

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directly intervened in the politics of countries like Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Oman, Syria, and Turkey.

The Egyptian military obtained control of Egyptian politics when the Free Officers, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, assumed power in 1952. During this initial phase, the military was in direct control, running the day-to-day governance of the country. However, the defeat in the 1967 War changed the dynamics of military-civilian relations. The military withdrew from daily governance, moving to a deeper and less conspicuous control of the country, all the while making sure that they still held onto the strings. Since then, the Egyptian military has remained behind the scenes, only publically intervening in politics on a limited basis. The fact that all post-independence presidents had military backgrounds helped greatly.

As the head of the executive branch, the president is in a position to facilitate the institutional influence of the military through the various levels of state hierarchy. Perhaps because the presidency fulfills such a critical role for the continuity of Egypt's military-controlled regime, the discussions revolving around the successor of Hosni Mubarak produced heated debates in the years leading up to the revolution in 2011. While Hosni Mubarak favored his son, Gamal Mubarak, to succeed him, top leaders of the military were opposed to it, partly because Gamal Mubarak lacked a military background.

It would be somewhat misleading to reduce the Egyptian military solely to its formal institutional and political role. As in many other countries in the region, the military in Egypt operates in a complex web of social,

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economic, cultural, and political relationships. Military control owes its durability and stability to less apparent and more structural elements of the state and society. As an example, the military represents an engine of modernization. For many Egyptians, the military is the most modern sector of the society, as it is supposed to know what modernization entails, what sacrifices need to be made to this end, and what would be the safest path to modernity. The military, especially in the early years of independence, was the only entity with a sophisticated organizational capacity to undertake large-scale developmental projects. This conviction was accompanied by a mindset in which the military was the only organization capable of realizing the ultimate goal of modernization – as civilians were perceived to lack a similar capacity. Consequently, the generals assumed a self-proclaimed authority to rule in an authoritarian fashion. In the absence of military guidance, modernization remains an elusive quest, according to this perspective.

Although less discernible than overt political control, a public perception

that privileges the role of the military in modernization gives the generals leverage on critical decision making processes. Public support for the military is consistently high and does not waver in the face of situational factors. For example, during the wave of anti-Mubarak demonstrations in Egypt, the military was seen as being allied with opposition groups. Often times, the military was even applauded in Tahrir Square. Ironically, the military had been completely interconnected with the Mubarak Regime since he took power back in the 1980s. This should have obviously disqualified the military as an ally in the minds of the demonstrators. However, the public's deep trust in its military accounts for this seeming contradiction.

The military also commands an extensive presence in the Egyptian economy, perhaps as "the single most important economic entity."[2] According to various reports, the military controls over one-third of the entire economy. This vast military presence in the economy ties intimately with how broader economic policy is determined. Since the early days of independence, military generals called for an economic policy that would put Egypt en route to economic development. For the most part, this translated into statist economic policies, thereby allowing the military to control economic resources ranging from military supplies, production of household equipment, and tourism to even making bread.

When Anwar Sadat introduced his economic opening policy (infitah) in

the early 1970s, it had two vital implications for the military's control of the economy. First, military-controlled industries and companies were clearly set aside as untouchable; they were exempted from all economic liberalization and privatization reforms. In practice, this meant that the generals would be able to retain the primary source of their power in Egypt, and this was critical to maintaining their influence on Egyptian politics. But, this also meant that the economic opening policy was destined to fail right off the bat. Significant chunks of the economy (controlled by the military) were excluded from foreign and domestic competition, and would continue receiving subsidies and incentives. Furthermore, the military could dodge their competitors with access to easy and cheap state financing. Second the generals arose as one of the major beneficiaries of the *infitah* (economic opening) policy. When Sadat's *infitah* policy encouraged domestic and foreign private investment in Egypt throughout the 1970s, the generals positioned themselves as middlemen available for consulting or as the representatives for foreign and domestic companies interested in making investments in Egypt. This was, in fact, a mutually beneficial arrangement because these companies would have easier access to state provided incentives, subsidies, or credit.

The military's economic benefits also extended to an absence of civilian oversight over the military budget. This is, indeed, a good indicator of how the military exercises its power in the formal institutional structure through informal channels. Specifically, even though the parliament has constitutional oversight power over weapons procurement, to date, the parliament has not used it, never even questioning, inquiring, or challenging how the generals expend their budgetary allocations.

How does the military get away with such a wide set of economic interests and ventures when poverty and inequality rage in Egypt? Indeed, some opposition groups voiced serious criticisms of the existing economic structure (in the post-infitah period) and many economic policies, the Muslim Brotherhood being among the most vocal of these critics. Primarily, these criticisms concerned the corruption and the role of the state elite, including high-level military officers, in the continuation of cronyism in economic relations. In the face of these criticisms, the military usually prefers to conduct business behind close doors rather than act publically. This tendency to keep a low profile is one of the reasons why the Muslim Brotherhood miscalculated the military's true stance on its policies and actions when Morsi won the Presidency, leading to the erroneous conclusion that they were able to solve "the problem of civil-military relations" in such a short period of time. Another way the military has been able to contain potential outburst of public criticism against its economic power is the way the military's economic involvement is framed. Economic development has posed one of the fundamental challenges for Egypt since independence. The military's

involvement in the economy by way of becoming active in most industries is couched largely in terms of gains in productivity, efficiency, and overall prosperity. Analogous to the modernist and progressive aspect of the military, as discussed above, the military frames its economic interests as the nation's interests.

These different dimensions of the military's ubiquitous presence in the economy, society, and politics of Egypt allows the military to embody the combination of the values and aspirations of a great many Egyptians. In other words, the military occupies a moral high ground, remaining aloof to potential criticisms, making challenging the military on the grounds of misconduct or corruption virtually impossible – it appears to be a lost cause.

International Setting

The coup in Egypt did not occur in isolation from the international setting. The military, aware of the stance of many international actors, found both implicit and explicit support for its actions. The U.S.' role in this phase is most instructive. Just as the first Obama administration demonstrated hesitancy in its support for Mubarak's removal from power until it was all but assured, the second Obama administration actively supported the ouster of Morsi from power. According to an Al Jazeera report, the U.S. government "bankrolled" anti-Morsi opposition groups: "Activists bankrolled by the programme include an

exiled Egyptian police officer who plotted the violent overthrow of the Morsi government, an anti-Islamist politician who advocated closing mosques and dragging preachers out by force, as well as a coterie of opposition politicians who pushed for the ouster of the country's first democratically elected leader, government documents show."[3] In order to be able to continue military aid to Egypt, American officials shied away from using the term "coup" to describe what occurred in Egypt. The American position towards the coup can be partly explained by its relations with Israel and maintaining the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty. Islamists, with the decline of Mubarak's stronghold on power and his final ouster, expressed the idea of revising the Peace Treaty with Israel. By contrast, the military is fully in support of the treaty and rejects any discussion of it. Hence, Israel's security played a key role in determining American response to the coup.

Major American news sources, both conservative and liberal, also welcomed the coup with an aura of exuberance. Likewise, the European Union failed to express criticism of the military's actions when pressured by the media on various occasions. Interestingly enough, the Gulf countries rushed to the aid of Egypt days after the coup with amounts ranging between $8 and $12 billion.[4] While the Gulf countries generally have shown a lack of support for Egyptian democracy and their rescue package for the military government is consistent with this position, albeit trou-

blesome, the West's inconsistency of actions and discourse is more problematic. This inconsistency has the definite potential of distorting how democracy is viewed within Egypt.

Political Islam and Democracy

Islamists are also an important part of the picture as it relates to democratic prospects in Egypt. For decades, Islamists were criticized for not endorsing democratic rules and being bent on ending democratic governance In Egypt and beyond. Often, this was framed around the idea of "one man, one vote, one time" with no real world evidence to support it. Yet, virtually each time Islamists won free elections, they were forcibly removed from power or prevented from gaining power in the first place. In Algeria (1991), Turkey (1997), Palestine (2006), and Egypt (2013), the same outcome recurred. The critical point here is not that Islamists were unable to take office, which is problematic in and of itself, but rather, it was how most Western countries reacted to free and fair democratic elections in the Middle East along with staunch seculars in these Middle Eastern countries. Rather than condemning extra-democratic interventions, many Western countries chose either to remain silent or to publically support such interventions, undermining the credibility of frequent calls for democracy from the West.

Overall, the discrepancy between action and discourse on democracy on the part of the West does not bode well for democracy in the region. Perhaps more critically, Islamists are increasingly being pushed into a choice between ideology and democracy. Faced with adversity even at this very basic level of democratic participation, Islamists will inevitably and increasingly have a harder time committing to democracy. On the one hand, there is democracy, which many Islamist groups seem to endorse at some level; groups like the Muslim Brotherhood view it as a useful conduit to promote their ideologies, much like many other political parties. On the other hand, democracy appears as an ideologically

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loaded concept. It is monopolized by some Western countries and invoked whenever it is convenient for these countries, along with a prescription as to how it should work. Such a conception is, needless to say, inaccurate. Yet, historically, democracy as a Western *and* ideologically loaded concept epitomizes the West's relationship to the Muslim world since the colonial times, according to Islamist ideology.

As the most popular political group across the region, Islamists' relationship to democracy is a key component for the prospect of successful and

sustainable democratic experience. The removal of the Muslim Brotherhood's government and the ensuing crackdown on the group, therefore, is likely to delay the true emergence of democracy in Egypt's near future.

Prognosis

Democratization efforts in Egypt need a two-pronged approach – one domestic, and the other international. On the domestic side, the focus must be on the economy, but not necessarily on the political role of the military, as many would argue. While the military's involvement in politics is crucial to any democratization effort, we must bear in mind that it is the outcome of democratization efforts, not the cause. The military occupies such a prominent economic, social, and political role in Egypt partly because civil society is profoundly weak. This should not come as a surprise. Careful efforts on the part of the military ensured protecting its own economic interests, while simultaneously undermining policies that carried the prospect of a strengthened civil society, economically and politically. The most vivid example is the unique way that the *infitah* (economic opening) policy has evolved since the early 1970s. Hence, real discussions should revolve around ways to improve the lot of the middle and lower classes, creating prosperity, and creating socioeconomic group(s) who will view democracy as being a vital element to their socioeconomic interests. If we could draw a single lesson from the rise of democracy in the West, it should be that the economy is of utmost importance.

On the international side, Egypt desperately needs consistent support of the democratic process and a condemnation of extra-democratic gestures. Two issues, to be specific, complicate the materialization of consistent international support. The prominence of both the Muslim Brotherhood and the more conservative Salafists in new Egyptian politics is a concerning development for many in the West. The popularity of Islamists brings up the second complication: the Peace Treaty and security of Israel. Neither domestic nor the international factors are short-term fixes for the democratic woes of Egypt. Long-term problems demand long-term solutions. ●

Endnotes

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