



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES

POLICY ANALYSIS

# The Egyptian Crisis: The Strenuous Path to Democracy

The Policy Analysis Unit, ACRPS | January 2013

The Egyptian Crisis: The Strenuous Path to Democracy

Series: Policy Analysis

The Policy Analysis Unit, ACRPS | January 2013

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Circumstances Leading to the Crisis</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Map of Forces and Coalitions in the New Political Scene</b>	<b>9</b>
The Opposition Camp	9
The Loyalist Camp	13
The “Third Way” Current	16
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>17</b>

## Introduction

Sample On November 22, 2012, Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi issued a presidential decree, also known as a constitutional proclamation, which included six articles.<sup>1</sup> Among them are: the dismissal of the General Prosecutor; reopening the investigations and trials regarding the murder and attempted murder of Egyptian demonstrators during the 2011 revolution, implicating all who held political or executive positions in the former regime; preventing the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly and the Consultative Council; and shielding the President's decrees from judicial oversight, making them final and uncontestable by any judicial authority.

This constitutional proclamation stirred a near-uprising, with the bulk of the opposition currents holding demonstrations on November 23 and November 27 in a number of locations across Egypt. These forces demanded the rescinding of the presidential decree, accusing the President of exercising dictatorship and claiming that he had turned into "a new Pharaoh". The opposition protests were met with large demonstrations in support of President Morsi outside Cairo University on December 1. As a result, the country was plunged into a severe political crisis that escalated almost to breaking point, with extreme polarization occurring between the Islamists on the one hand, and the secularists, civil society, liberals, and leftists on the other.

Confronted with the radical positions of some opposition factions who rejected the calls for dialogue, President Morsi decided to underplay the effects of the presidential decree and instead urged the Constituent Assembly to hasten the drafting of the constitution, since the decree would be automatically annulled with the ratification of the new constitution through a popular referendum. In fact, as soon as the Constituent Assembly finished preparing the proposed constitution, President Morsi put the constitution up for a popular referendum within two weeks, as prescribed in an earlier constitutional proclamation, setting the referendum date for December 15.

In response, the opposition stepped up its protests, moving its demonstrations to the *Ittihadiya* (Federation) Palace on December 4. The confrontation rapidly turned into street clashes with the use of stones, knives, and firearms following the intervention of Islamist supporters who challenged the opposition protest, leading to clashes that left

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<sup>1</sup> "English text of Morsi's Constitutional Declaration", *Ahram Online*, November 22, 2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/58947.aspx>

seven dead and hundreds injured. On December 5 in a televised speech, the President called on opposition parties to engage in dialogue, expressing his willingness to amend the controversial constitutional proclamation, especially its sixth article: "If a threat arose that endangers the January 25 revolution, the life of the nation, national unity, the safety of the homeland, or the functioning of the state institutions, the President of the Republic has the prerogative to take the appropriate steps and measures to face this threat in a manner compliant with the law". While this article may be quite broad and devoid of real legal implications, the lack of trust among different political factions provoked suspicions as to the intentions of the Muslim Brotherhood behind the introduction of such measures.

President Morsi's reaction to the protests shows that the presidency was shocked by their scale and geographic spread. Similarly, Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood and other factions, were also taken aback by the numbers of the protesters who contested the constitutional proclamation. The greatest surprise of all, however, was the seemingly coordinated stance taken by the private media outlets against President Morsi and his supporters, often shifting from a role of reporting and analyzing news, to one of mobilizing protesters.

As he made clear in his December 6 address in which he called for dialogue with the opposition, President Morsi realized that he and the country were in a deep bind. He also realized that the opposition had been successful, with the help of private media outlets, unions, and a broad spectrum of civil society and activist organizations, in isolating him within the Islamist camp, to the point where the majority of his non-Islamist advisers resigned from their positions. Eventually, President Morsi annulled the controversial constitutional proclamation and issued a new one following a long dialogue session held on December 8, with the participation of dozens of constitutional jurists, prominent public figures, and representatives from opposition parties. The new decree maintained, however, the dismissal of the General Prosecutor and the appointment of a replacement, and it also reaffirmed the date of the constitutional referendum, adding that a new Constituent Assembly would be elected if the population voted against the proposed constitution. The decree also called on the opposition to offer suggestions regarding the controversial articles in the constitution, so that these issues could be included in a "binding document," to be discussed and voted on in the parliament to be elected after the ratification of the constitution.

## Circumstances Leading to the Crisis

President Morsi's constitutional proclamation issued on November 22 was an attempt to hasten the transitional period that began with the resignation of President Muhammad Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011. This seemed especially urgent after it became clear that the Constituent Assembly would probably be dissolved by the Constitutional Court, as happened with the first Constituent Assembly on June 14, 2012 under the pretext that it did not represent the entirety of the Egyptian people.<sup>2</sup>

Morsi's view was that the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly would push the country into a new crisis that would further prolong the transitional period, constituting a failure for the President, moreover one affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. More importantly, such a decision would have wasted six months of genuine social debate taking place within the Assembly, resulting in a consensus over most of the articles of the constitution. A political settlement with the military establishment, which would never have handed over power to the elected President had it not secured its status in the new constitution, was also reached through this process. Abolishing the Constituent Assembly would thus not only have risked the prolongation of the constitutional vacuum; it would have also meant a return to square one, re-igniting the confrontation between the various political forces. These factors shed light on why the decree that shielded the Constituent Assembly was necessary, preventing its dissolution at the hands of a Constitutional Court that was appointed under Mubarak, and which is dominated by the character of the former regime.

The first anniversary of the Muhammad Mahmud Street killings on November 19, 2011, an event that saw protesters being killed as they were demanding the restructuring of the Ministry of Interior and the prosecution of those responsible for the deaths of protesters during the 2011 revolution, surprisingly was met with limited clashes. Morsi seized this opportunity and issued then the constitutional proclamation, whose first

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<sup>2</sup> Following the formation of the Constituent Assembly, a complaint was filed at the Supreme Administrative Court contesting the legality of the Assembly; the Administrative Court postponed ruling in this case several times (June 26, September 4, October 9, and October 16, 2012), then decided to forward the case to the Supreme Constitutional Court, which was to rule on the constitutionality of the formation of the Constituent Assembly on December 2. The court was widely expected to dissolve the Assembly, and was prevented from doing so by the controversial proclamation and the besieging of the courthouse by Muslim Brotherhood supporters.

article decreed the reopening of the trials of those accused of murder, and whose third article dismissed the General Prosecutor. Those two measures were among the demands of the revolutionary forces. Morsi, however, used the opportunity also to include articles shielding the Constituent Assembly and the Consultative Council from the power of the judiciary.

President Morsi ultimately failed in endowing the presidential decree with a popular character, since the opposition was already prepared to take to the streets to protest the decree. This was especially true following a lengthy massive media campaign against the Constituent Assembly, waged by private media outlets typically funded by businessmen who are fearful of the new regime, a number of whom had had close relations with the fallen regime. It should be noted here that the private media was generally biased in favor of the opposition, while the government media remained balanced in its coverage of the ongoing crisis in Egypt.

The roots of the current crisis can be traced back to rising tensions that have accumulated over more than a year, which witnessed legislative elections bringing an Islamist majority (Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists) to both houses, the People's Council and the Consultative Council. Despite the dissolution of the People's Council, this state of tension escalated with the victory of Morsi in the Presidential elections and his exclusion of the Military Council in August 2012, an action which was also a longstanding revolutionary demand. This gave Morsi constitutional control of both the legislative and the executive branches, and provided him with more legal and political maneuvering room.

The steps taken by the President since his rise to power have reaffirmed the fact that, ultimately, the Egyptian president represents the majority party. Morsi has dealt with the major political challenges of his presidency—the formation of the cabinet, the appointment of a presidential team, and the November 22 decree—based on the political choices and priorities of the majority, rather than leading the country through the transitional period from a multi-party approach. The President proceeded in this fashion despite the fact that he had agreed, prior to the second round of the presidential elections, to reaching agreements with revolutionary and other political forces regarding the constitution, the cabinet, and the fulfillment of the revolutionaries' demands. This commitment was made in exchange for receiving these forces' support in the second round of the presidential elections against Ahmad Shafiq, the candidate of the Mubarak regime—a support that Morsi critically needed.

The broad political and intellectual diversity of the presidential team, including the President's aides and advisers, was not the result of an agreement with political powers, but rather the personal initiative of a majority-wielding President. However, this diversity was of no help to him during the recent crisis. If anything, it became a burden and a source of pressure with the resignation of most independent advisers, which showed the Egyptian presidency in an unfavorable light and depicted this presidency as a representative of a single rather than plural political current. Similarly, the formation of the cabinet was neither based on an understanding with other political forces, nor on specific programs and mechanisms that could safely lead the country through the transitional period and establish the institutions of a democratic state.

There is no doubt that the "rule of the majority" is a democratic practice, but only after an agreement is found regarding the principles of the democratic system and the rules that regulate the political institutions. It is this understanding that created the necessary trust for all political actors to consent to the rule of the majority party—resting upon the knowledge that the ruling party cannot change the rules that have been established and agreed upon. In this sense, the initial agreement does not compel the consensus of the entirety of the population, but rather an understanding among the main currents and political actors in the nation. This agreement cannot be founded by a single party, even if its representatives had garnered a majority in the first post-revolutionary elections. In the Egyptian case, an understanding must be struck at least among the main political currents that supported the Egyptian revolution. The lack of such an agreement between these factions has led to the reshuffling of cards on the political scene and to the infiltration of the revolutionary camp by counter-revolutionary forces.

The President of the Republic is expected to represent the entire national society, regardless of the size of the majority that brought him to power. The goal of the President during the transitional period is to establish the new government, which cannot be built by the majority alone, as it requires a consensus among the revolutionary forces. On the other hand, opposing every action that the President takes, up to the point of adopting the slogan "get out" in the face of an elected President is also an undemocratic practice which threatens to lead the country into chaos. Any rational person can conceive the significance of bringing down an elected regime in Egypt, in the aftermath of a democratic revolution, through the pressure of the streets. In such a scenario, what would happen if other forces assumed power, and whether the

Islamist parties would acquiesce, remain open questions. Elections must remain the only gateway to power in a democratic system.

There is a difference between the “electoral majority” that is required to rule and the “constitutional majority”, which makes the practice of ruling possible and allows it to be acknowledged by other factions in the political arena. The transitional period must therefore be used to cement such a majority, which is a shared national goal, and not just to indulge in political competition and squabbles. Needless to say, a wide gulf exists between the perspective required to lead a transitional period—which involves major tasks, not the least of which being the fulfillment of the goals of the revolution through a consensus with the revolutionary political factions—and the perspective of a President who behaves as a majority leader and who decides upon his own initiative whom to include in the power establishment.

Since the aspirations of the transitional period can be summed up in the fulfillment of a national goal—a safe passage through the process of democratic transition and the establishment of institutions, laws, and tools that will protect the democracy—it is essential to reach agreements and understandings with the main social and political forces in Egypt.

However, the political mentality that has governed the performance of the President since his accession to power, as well as that of the Muslim Brotherhood in general, has been based on the notion that the President represents the majority party, and that the inclusion of other political and social groups was not part of a partnership strategy for the transitional period, but rather simply the result of an initiative by the Brotherhood. This political behavior, coupled with the fact that the revolution removed the former President but maintained his regime and bureaucracy, has permitted the remnants of the fallen regime to tamper with the balance of power between the various revolutionary factions, with the purpose of inciting disorder.

The political forces of the opposition (leftist, nationalist, liberal, and others) that have gathered under the umbrella of the National Salvation Front have adopted a political behavior similar to that of the Muslim Brotherhood. Energized by the results of the first round of the Presidential elections—which showed a decline in the popularity of the Islamists—these forces entered into a mode of total opposition to the Islamist current. Significantly, these opposition forces have committed the same mistake as the Muslim Brotherhood, forgetting that the conditions of the transitional period differ radically from the conditions of the democratic process under a political system with fully-formed

democratic institutions. A knee-jerk attitude began to characterize the political approach of the opposition, having neglected a clear plan for the transitional period. Such a plan could have determined their points of agreement and disagreement with the policies of President Morsi and his political current.

The absence of a clear program by the opposition was among the factors that pushed President Morsi and his political current toward monopolizing power, as they feared that the objective of the opposition would be to undermine him. This fact was reinforced by the multiplicity of factions within the revolutionary camp, and the wide variety of their goals, agendas, and political ambitions. It appears that the political behavior of these forces was governed by the “one-point program” of preparing for the coming elections, whether legislative or presidential. The claim that Egypt has entered into a protracted electoral campaign since the announcement of the presidential election results may hold a good amount of truth.

This may explain the exaggerated campaign by the opposition currents against the President, who has been in office for less than 120 days, and who has spent most of this time studying the political map, striking a political settlement with the military establishment, and regaining Egypt’s influence in the foreign policy domain.<sup>3</sup> The opposition has nonetheless refused to acknowledge the accomplishments of the new President, going so far as to interpret positive decisions taken by the President as simple measures done solely to improve and embellish the image of the Muslim Brotherhood. A predicament lies in the fact that the Egyptian opposition parties act as if they are at the end of the process of democratic transition, and not at its beginning. They act as if the only function of the opposition is to oppose, and that the only purpose of the majority is to impose its will. Competition between political parties has overcome the shared national responsibility of making the democratic transition succeed—in fact, this goal has been largely abandoned.

As a result, the work of uprooting the old regime and disassembling its centers of power—arguably a feat that should have been easily performed by the revolutionary forces—has become entangled in party competition; a consequence of the fact that the revolutionary forces did not ascend directly to power, but through elections that took place after a period of rule by the Military Council. Thus, all the past agreements that

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<sup>3</sup> Egypt’s influence is particularly visible when it comes to Syria and Palestine. Following Israel’s attack on Gaza in November 2012, Egypt played a crucial political role in support of Gaza.

were struck between the revolutionaries in Tahrir Square became subject to competition among the political parties.

Even the complex and peaceful manner adopted by the presidency, in the pursuit of disassembling the old regime, manifested itself in varying and sometimes contradictory mechanisms. Three main methods have been used: decisive action, gradual purging, and containment. At times, the relationship with the former regime required a decisive rupture, as was the case with the Military Council, the recent decree dismissing the General Prosecutor, and the neutralization of the Constitutional Court. In other instances, gradual purging was adopted, such as the first attempt of the President to remove the General Prosecutor by appointing him Ambassador. The third method, the continuation and simultaneous containment of the institutions of the old regime, can be seen in the relationship with the Ministry of the Interior and the police forces. These institutions have been employed by the new government, but without restructuring. No measures have been taken aiming at changing the relationships between the Ministry of the Interior and either its agencies or the citizens, and no internal shuffle has taken place within the Ministry in order to sever the loyalties that link the Ministry's senior cadre to the former regime and to the interests that it represented. The behavior of President Morsi on this front is worthy of criticism; however, objectivity would also dictate the necessity to also laud his achievements.

The political and constitutional crisis in Egypt has belied the claim, often repeated by skeptics of the revolution and democratic transformation that the revolution has provided the Islamists with absolute power. In fact, it has been proven that the revolution has reinforced the power of everyone—Islamists, secularists, liberals, and leftists—after the fall of despotism. It has become clear that the main winner of the revolution was pluralism, which has appeared on the political scene and is getting stronger. Those who have preemptively written obituaries for the Egyptian Revolution, claiming that it was confiscated by the Islamists, are wrong: nobody expected that the secularists and the liberals would be so strong and organized in Egypt, to the point of defying Islamists through popular demonstrations and challenging them in the street. One must remember that no party is capable of eliminating the other: the Islamists are incapable of eliminating the liberal and civic forces, and the secularists cannot do away with the Islamists.

## Map of Forces and Coalitions in the New Political Scene

The current crisis witnessed by Egypt is arguably the most dangerous one facing the country ever since the revolution, not only because it targets the democratically-elected institutions, especially the presidency, which until the upcoming parliamentary elections remains the most important institution. It is also dangerous because the crisis has reshuffled the coalitions within the political arena, providing the remnants of the deposed regime, as well as some foreign states that have opposed the revolution since its beginning, a greater role in the ongoing political duel through financing and mobilization.

This crisis is also highly threatening because, following an end of polarity between the military and the civilians, a new polarity arose between the Islamists and the secularists. Avoiding such polarizations during the period of democratic transition is therefore critical.

### The Opposition Camp

One of the main outcomes of the transitional period and the influence of the private Egyptian media has been that large sections of the Egyptian urban middle class have taken a radical position against the Muslim Brotherhood. This stance surprised everybody, including the opposition, when protesters filled Tahrir Square on November 27; these large numbers also encouraged the opposition to adopt an uncompromising position.

The opposition is characterized by its determination to prevent the use of the state apparatus to impose religious dictates upon citizens, as well as its fear of the monopoly of power in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood. The opposition coalition derives its legitimacy from its diversity, its siding with the revolution and its values, and its close relationship with the youth and new social groups emerging in Egypt's new political landscape. It also enjoys the support of most private media outlets, including independent newspapers and benefits from its position outside of the government, having the luxury to criticize those in power. All of the above are good reasons of why it should have shared the responsibility of decision-making during the transitional period. This group, however, lacks intellectual and political coherence in questions of domestic and foreign policy, and is in need of strong and cohesive institutions to support it. It also lacks the ability to mobilize at will. At present moment, the opposition coalition is united by its resistance to the Muslim Brotherhood's monopoly on power. This means

that the Muslim Brotherhood's ability to control the government has turned into a weakness rather than an advantage. On the other hand, the infiltration of the opposition current by businessmen and media representatives from the remnants of the old regime will prove to be one of the coalition's major weaknesses, even if it now appears to be a strong point.

Perhaps surprisingly, the opposition leadership, in particular Muhammad al-Baradei, Hamadein Sabahi, and Amr Musa, are not in agreement over the main domestic and foreign policy issues— starting with the question of Palestine and the Camp David agreement to the debate over the role of the public sector in the economy. These forces do not possess organized political cadres rooted in Egyptian society, which makes their popularity dependent on the adoption of the slogans that are raised by the protesters in the street. This may explain the opposition's desire to boycott dialogue and to reject political compromises, which signals a crisis within their own ranks. They remain incapable of organizing real parties that can contain the forces of protest and structure them within political organizations with a popular base. This may also explain why the opposition parties were incapable of restraining some protesters from using violence and torching the offices of the Freedom and Justice Party and the Muslim Brotherhood or from attacking some state institutions. The opposition leadership was also late in condemning the use of violence.

The opposition's desire to ride the anti-Brotherhood mood, and to stoke it when it wanes, has led it to take nihilistic positions against the traditional allies of the Brotherhood, such as the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas. Some opposition figures have gone so far as to call for American intervention, or for the intervention of the military. It is also clear that the opposition camp is composed of some forces that support the Palestinian resistance and oppose the Camp David Accord from a pan-Arab perspective, while other opposition factions stand against any resistance, promoting an isolationist position for Egypt while supporting the peace treaty with Israel. Nevertheless, political competition and animosity have succeeded in uniting these factions against any action taken by the President, even if these decisions would have otherwise been supported by some within the opposition, had it not been for these tactical considerations.

The new development in the current crisis consists in the strong stand taken by the private media empire in favor of the protesting street and against the presidency. The media was also joined by syndical organizations, such as the Egyptian Judges' Association, which were formed under the former regime and are threatened by purges

at the hands of the new rulers. Both of these domains have been infiltrated and tamed by Egyptian capitalists who benefited from the strong market-friendly policies that were adopted by Mubarak during the last third of his rule. This, however, does not mean that the Brotherhood does not also include alliances with clear neoliberal leanings, which might in the end constitute a threat to development in Egypt. The difference is that the Brotherhood's neoliberals rose from within the shadow economy, since they did not have access to facilities and credit due to their troubled relationship with the former regime. These businessmen, however, did benefit from the large amount of savings of the Egyptian people and the scale of the Egyptian market. The former regime's neoliberals, on the other hand, rose on the back of privatization and institutional corruption, which was spearheaded by the "new guard" who promoted the project of "bequeathing" Egypt's presidency to Jamal Mubarak. In the later years of Mubarak's era, this group infiltrated all the institutions of the state, including the judiciary.

The neoliberals who benefited from the policies of the former regime fear the loss of their interests and are seeking a settlement, at the least possible cost, with the new government. The current problem facing this neoliberal elite is that Morsi has his own economic interest group, which emerged within Egypt's shadow economy. As a result, the capitalists who were loyal to the former President have gone to those who actually needed them: the leftist, liberal, and secular currents, in addition to their traditional allies among the remnants of the former regime.<sup>4</sup> What is certain is that this coalition, formed during the crisis, is a mere transitory conjunction of interests, and it is fated to end once the capitalist elite strikes a deal with the new regime in order to protect its interests—be it with the current President or any future President in need of these allies.

The power of the opposition camp increased when it was joined by a major force within the judiciary: the Judges' Club. The club represents a union that used to be the judiciary's tool against the Mubarak regime especially after the Judiciary Independence current (headed by Judge Zakariya Abd al-Azeez) managed to control all of the Club's

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<sup>4</sup> This was asserted by Dr Muhammad al-Baradei, head of the Dostoor Party, in an article in the British *Financial Times*, where he wrote: "Ironically, the revolutionaries who got rid of Mr Mubarak are now supported by members of his old party, united in opposition to the vague 'Islamic Project' that Mr Morsi and his supporters want to make of our country". Mohammad ElBaradei, "Morsi has Left Egypt on the Brink," *Financial Times*, December 3, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/247950f0-3b2f-11e2-b111-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2EYUYO7Ym>.

seats in 2005, despite the massive pressure exerted by the regime against the judges. Under the leadership of Abd al-Azeez, the Club formed the Judges for Egypt movement, which played a major role in exposing the electoral fraud during the 2005 and 2010 elections.

However, the regime was capable of containing the Judges' Club in the years preceding the January 25 Revolution, as part of a broader assault on all state institutions in preparation for the "bequeathing of power" project, which culminated in the rigging of the 2010 parliamentary elections. The new leadership of the Judges' Club stood against the revolution in Egypt since the first day of protests, and after the revolution, the political attempts to remove the Club's President, Ahmad al-Zind, were unsuccessful due to the moral stature that the judiciary enjoys within Egyptian political society.

By tracing the changes in the Egyptian judiciary, it becomes clear that the regime was able to dominate the judiciary's political institutions, such as the Constitutional Court, which is presided by politicians rather than jurists.<sup>5</sup> The same goes for the Judges' Club, which has shown its bias by refusing to supervise the constitutional referendum despite the later annulment of the presidential decree and the ending of the dispute between the presidency and the judicial establishment. One pocket of resistance remained: the Judges for Egypt movement. This was however later accused of leaning toward the Muslim Brotherhood. The Judges' Club, headed by al-Zind, manipulated the traditional sensitivity of the judges regarding their independence and their rejection of the interference of the executive branch, and led the majority of Egypt's judges to oppose the presidential decree.<sup>6</sup> This took place despite the fact that the dismissal of the General Prosecutor was among the demands of the judges, and that the new General Prosecutor, Talat Abdallah, is one of the symbols of the judiciary's independence and had been among the activist judges who were exiled by the Mubarak regime to Kuwait, under the pretext of the judiciary exchange program.

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<sup>5</sup> For a further discussion, see the interview conducted by *al-Masry al-Yawm* with judge Hisham al-Bastwisi, November 23, 2012, <http://today.almasryalyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=361568>.

<sup>6</sup> This sensitivity can be clearly felt in the interview conducted by We Are All Khaled Said with judge Tariq al-Bishri, who rejected the presidential decree and described it as a violation of the judicial institution, demanding that the cleansing of the judiciary should happen from within. Some opposition currents accuse al-Bishri of being a sympathizer with the Islamist current.

<http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=491815294201673&set=a.104265636289976.2684.104224996294040&type=1>.

The camp opposing the President includes the majority of youth, revolutionary, and protest movements such as the April 6 Movement, *Kifaya* (Enough), the activists of We Are All Khaled Said, and the youth protest groups demanding both the rights of martyrs and the accountability of the murderers of the protesters. The presence of these groups within the opposition camp provides it with a significant moral and media advantage. Despite the general perception that suggests that these groups are similar, there exists a significant difference between them revealing two distinct currents.

The first current includes the youth who are anti-Muslim Brotherhood, mainly a result of the positions taken by the Brotherhood during the transitional period, and which came to be seen as an alignment with the army. This specifically includes the youth who participated in the events of Mohammad Mahmoud Street, and the events of Maspero, and whose calls for protection from the violence of the security forces went unanswered by the Muslim Brotherhood. This current also includes a number of youth groups and public figures with secular ideological leanings who fear the hegemony of the Islamists, especially the forces led by the Kifaya movement.

The second current is mainly composed of the April 6 and the We Are All Khaled Said youth movements, in addition to the Ultras and the new youth groups that have emerged after the revolution. Such groups do not hold a specific negative stance against the Islamists, in fact, they largely voted for President Morsi during the second electoral round against Ahmad Shafiq. These are non-ideological movements that coalesce around specific issues, which is why they united in a common stance against the presidential decree and against the constitutional referendum.

This broad diversity in fact constitutes the strength of the opposition camp, making it easier for the private media to wage a ferocious campaign against the pro-Morsi camp, which succeeded in disorienting the President and swaying Egyptian public opinion against him.

### The Loyalist Camp

The Egyptian President is supported by all the forces of political Islam in Egypt, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as receiving the tacit support of the Army. The latter was most probably consulted by the President before he made the decision to put the constitution up for referendum and before issuing the presidential decree that started the current crisis. This camp is characterized by its superior ability to mobilize, as well as its organization, internal cohesion, and its widespread presence both in the Delta and

in Upper Egypt. It also benefits from free publicity emanating from hundreds of thousands of mosques and religious centers that typically adopt the political line of the President and encourage their followers to follow suit, often framing the political debate in terms of "good" and "evil". This Camp holds great influence over public opinion in the form of dozens of religious channels that have attracted a large audience after years of diligent work. This current is also strengthened by the fact that it is the President's camp, in addition to controlling an absolute majority within the Consultative Council and the Constituent Assembly. The Islamist current also has a very strong presence within many professional unions, such as the unions of journalists, lawyers, doctors, and so on. It is widely believed that this current has a following within the judicial establishment (the Judges for Egypt movement) and the Army.

Its weakness however lies in its inability to generate a discourse that is reassuring to large segments of society in Egypt who are concerned with the limiting of freedoms and the Islamization of the state and society. In fact, the populist discourse of the Brotherhood often leads to alienating the neutral public, the forces of the center, and the youth of the revolution, and has led it to create enemies among the liberal, leftist, and secular currents due to badly planned moves and speeches as well as party competition. Such discourse also confirms the fear shared by many as to its commitment to democracy, through the rhetoric that it uses among its supporters, which differs from the rhetoric used when addressing the general public. The matter is further aggravated by the Salafist pressure within the Islamist camp toward the imposition of further religious rules and the curtailing of civic freedoms. Furthermore, this current lacks sufficient qualifications and experience to manage the affairs of the state, as has been made clear by the practices of the People's Council, the Consultative Council, and the presidency.

Contrary to the notion propagated by the opposition that this camp is a single bloc, the alliance between the Islamists took place at a critical juncture when they felt that they were facing a common existential threat, as Islamists. In fact, only weeks prior to the crisis, as some secular groups were also beginning to protest, the Salafists took to the streets to oppose the new constitution, which they called "the secular constitution".

The unity of the Islamists is reinforced by their feeling that the other side wishes to exclude and isolate them, which also increases political polarization. During this last crisis, even the Islamists who rejected the constitution, under the pretext that it was not compliant enough with Sharia law; have stood behind Morsi, as well as those who disagree with prerogatives of the military in the new constitution. In addition, the

Salafist current, which had previously shown a readiness to strike a deal with Ahmad Shafiq, the former regime's candidate during the presidential elections, has supported Morsi. These alignments show that all these factions perceive themselves as being targeted in their very existence, which groups them together despite their many differences.

Ultimately, the power of this current derives from its ability to mobilize large masses particularly in the countryside, in Upper Egypt, and within the urban slums surrounding Egyptian cities, locally termed "irregular neighborhoods". These sectors represent the majority of the Egyptian people. Indeed the massive power of mobilization that the Islamists enjoy cannot be underestimated, which may be why the upper middle class and the upper class decided to align themselves with the opposition, although it may be inaccurate to generalize in this regard. This camp is also distinguished by the power of its leadership and their ability to influence and direct their supporters. The agreement among Islamist leaders was translated into an agreement among the supporters of these factions, unlike the opposition in the street, which includes a large number of middle class and non-affiliated supporters. The opposition's agreement at leadership level, however, does not mean that the base is homogeneous and harmonious.

The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties have used their power of mobilization to good effect, calling upon their supporters to demonstrate in a show of support for the presidential decree as soon as it was issued. That resulted in the "million-man march" of Tuesday, November 27 in the Nahdat Misr Square, which was a response to the ongoing opposition sit-in in Tahrir Square. This march was preceded by various protests by Islamist forces in front of state buildings and institutions, such as the demonstration in front of the general prosecution headquarters in support of the dismissal of the General Prosecutor and the besieging of the Constitutional Court on December 2, preventing the functioning of the court and the issuing of decisions against the Constituent Assembly and the Consultative Council.

The fact that Egyptians are polarized around two divergent political and intellectual positions is the most dangerous aspect of the Egyptian crisis. This situation threatens Egyptian society to break down into opposing "identity groups," which would make democratic pluralism, based on agreed-upon constitutional principles, nearly impossible.

## The “Third Way” Current

The ongoing crisis has created a third, centrist current that rejects the polarization between the Islamist camp and the secular camp. This current includes a number of neo-Islamist parties that support the civic character of the state, such as the Strong Egypt party led by Dr Abd al-Munim Abu al-Futuh, the Center party which is an offshoot from the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Egyptian Current party, which is led by a number of youth who seceded from the Brotherhood and who had previously established the Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution. This current also includes a number of liberal parties, headed by the *el-Ghad* party (the Tomorrow Party) led by Ayman Nur, in addition to a number of independent intellectuals, judges, and professors.

Generally speaking, this current rejects the constitutional proclamation and the promulgation of the constitution without a broad consensus, but it also perceives the general behavior of the opposition as irresponsible, and it protests against the presence of former regime remnants among the ranks of the opposition. This third current seeks to bring about political settlements by proposing political initiatives, the latest of which was a call for dialogue launched on December 7. The promoters of the middle way have also attempted to mediate between the two battling camps.

The main weakness of this camp, particularly when it comes to the Strong Egypt party and the Center party, lies in its fear of losing supporters by taking stances that the opposition radicals may view as supportive of the presidency and the Islamist current. The third way is also criticized, albeit less intensely, by the Islamist side for refusing to align with it. This current, which has defined itself since the beginning as centrist, is damaged by the current state of polarization.

Often, the third current attempts to deflect the criticism of the opposition regarding its alleged closeness to the Muslim Brotherhood by taking stronger stances against the presidency and the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result, the head of the Strong Egypt party, Abd al-Munim Abu al-Futuh, has attempted since the beginning to voice strong criticism against the Muslim Brotherhood, especially when they attacked the protests outside the Ittihadiya Palace in an attempt to disperse them—despite the fact that majority of those killed belonged to the Islamist current, as it was later revealed. Abu al-Futuh did not criticize the opposition with the same intensity when its supporters torched the offices of the Freedom and Justice party and attempted to break into the presidential palace. Nonetheless, many analysts believe that this current is instrumental for Egypt at this stage, as it constitutes a bridge between the two camps.

## Conclusion

What is currently taking place in Egypt is an indispensable debate over principles, and constitutes a case study on democratic transition that is worthy of examination to derive lessons that could prove useful to other countries and contexts. This debate, however, has turned prematurely into a form of party competition, as the revolutionaries have not yet settled on a new constitution that expresses the agreements of Tahrir Square and the January 25 Revolution. In fact, the battle over the constitution began immediately after the first elections and the crystallization of political parties and political life in post-revolution Egypt.

Throughout, the Muslim Brotherhood has acted like a majority party that is attempting to consolidate its position in the power structure after the elections. This is a legitimate attitude from a democratic perspective; however, it becomes irresponsible during a transitional period that aims at building democracy on the basis of consensus. Conversely, the behavior of the forces that immediately turned into an unwavering opposition in the face of any action by the presidency has also been based solely on considerations of party competition.

The existence of a majority party faced by an opposition that rejects all its decisions is a characteristic of “democratic life” but is ill-suited for the transitional period. During democratic transition, national responsibility requires that all major social and political currents participate in the building of democracy and making the transitional period succeed. Agreeing on a democratic constitution is one of the most important signs of this success, whereas passing a constitution with a party majority cannot be viewed as a success. The endorsement of the constitution should have the support of a broad majority that goes beyond that of a single political current. The majority of the social and political forces must be included in the consensus, because a constitutional majority is not the same as a political majority and must be much broader.

What Egypt needs today is to subordinate its legitimate, necessary, and healthy party competition to the requirements of the critical national task at hand: building democracy and agreeing upon its principles.

The most dangerous aspect of the ongoing party competition is the attempt of the battling political forces to drive Egyptians into a state of polarization between two camps. This irresponsible behavior by the political parties threatens to prevent the success of the transitional period and to undermine political pluralism, which can only

thrive within an atmosphere of social cohesion, as well as a political and legal system that enjoys the consensus of the main political and social forces.