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The New Divisions in Egypt's Society

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As the dust settles from Egypt's so-called "popular coup" on July 3, it has become clear that Egyptian society is deeply polarized. There is a vast gulf between those who supported the army's actions in removing President Morsi, and those from the Muslim Brotherhood who insist on the illegality of his deposition and demand his reinstatement. In the midst of this standoff, a number of activists have appeared that mistrust both sides, believing that the alternative to Islamic rule is not simply military rule. This article provides an overview of the factors leading to renewed support for the Egyptian military, suggesting considerations for those who see it as a viable alternative to the Brotherhood's rule.

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On 24 July 2013, General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, defense minister and commander-in-chief of Egypt's armed forces, appeared in front of the nation and called on people to take to the streets in support of the military's confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood. This launched a campaign that he named Egypt's war on "terror".¹ People reacted with delight, rushing to embrace the military's protective arms and rallied to support the entity that just three years ago they had fought so hard against, under President Mubarak's rule. Currently, Sisi is riding a wave of adulation, drawing comparisons between him and modern Egypt's first charismatic strongman, former President Gamal Abdel-Nasser.² Almost overnight, people have turned into "barrel-thumping nationalists"³, working with the army against Islamist groups, creating a "populist confrontation on both sides, driven by hatred."⁴

The support for Egypt's military has stemmed from growing anti-Brotherhood sentiment arising from the fumbling, sometimes embarrassing attempts to govern Egypt by the administration of deposed President Mohammed Morsi. From its inability to manage the economy to its mishandling of sensitive foreign relations challenges, the Muslim Brotherhood gave its political adversaries plenty to work with.⁵ Under Morsi's presidency, not only did police officers seem to disappear, leading to a massive increase in crime, but by late June 2013, state agencies responsible for providing electricity and gas supplies failed so fundamentally that gas lines stretched for miles and rolling blackouts became the norm.⁶ In a press conference held in the last week of June, Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, Sherif Hadarra, denied the crisis and called on Egyptians not to "listen to rumors about fuel shortages," despite remarks by government officials acknowledging it.⁷ In the same month, during a cabinet meeting to discuss the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the President's adviser for political affairs neglected to inform participants that the meeting would be televised. Not realizing their words were being broadcast on State TV, suggestions to combat this potential crisis ranged from spreading rumors that Egypt was buying military planes (to intimidate Ethiopia) to using popular Egyptian actors and sports figures to negotiate on the government's behalf. Many of those seated around the table went further to say that the dam must in fact be a secret American and Israeli plot to undermine Egypt that must be stopped. Magdi Hussein, the leader of the Islamic Labor Party, ended the meeting by saying "we must all take an oath not to leak anything to the media" – just as someone passed him a note saying that they were in fact live on television.⁸ Suffice to say, by the time the scheduled uprising came along, Egypt was embarrassed, effectively crippled, and the people had had enough.

But despite the blatant failures of Morsi, and by extension the Muslim Brotherhood, there is a clear need to be cautious about throwing support behind the Egyptian military. Actions taken by interim President Adly Mansour can arguably be viewed as being much more serious impositions than those that President Morsi was condemned for. Notably, the constitution declaration issued by the transitional government on July 8 contains all of the provisions of Morsi's constitution that Christian groups originally objected to, and makes some of those provisions even stronger.⁹ For example, Morsi's constitution guaranteed Christians and Jews the right to use their own religious laws as the "main source" in regulating their religious affairs and the selection of their religious leaders as well as their "personal status." That protection is however gone from the new declaration.¹⁰

Adly's constitution is also worrisome in that it effectively places the military above the rule of law. The March 2011 majority vote to elect a parliament before drafting a new constitution was overturned, thereby locking in a constitution before any elections could take place. This effectively straightjackets any future parliament from enacting checks and balances on military and police powers.¹¹

There are also clear indicators that by following the lead of the interim government and

the military, Egypt is heading down the same path it followed during Mubarak's era. On July 29, Adly Mansour was given the power to place the country in a state of emergency – a hallmark of Egypt under Mubarak.¹² Egypt's state security investigations service - a symbol of police oppression under Mubarak - was also reinstated.¹³

Liberals appear to have joined in a public amnesia about the abuses and scandals of that brief period in 2011 after Mubarak's ousting, when Egypt was under direct military rule - the forced virginity tests of female protesters, Coptic Christian demonstrators shot by soldiers or run over with armored vehicles, the videotaped stripping and kicking of a female demonstrator who became known as the Blue Bra Woman.¹⁴ Omar Hamilton, a leader of the Mosireen Media Collective, drew attention on Twitter to ironic contrasts he noticed on the streets of Egypt, like Egyptian soldiers deployed next to a mural dedicated to the activist Mina Daniel, who was killed by troops during the notorious Maspero massacre of 2011.¹⁵

Under the new government, the Security Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) has seen renewed acknowledgement for their pivotal role in maintaining stability and security in Egypt. Today, the same policies and institutions that played a major role in bringing about the 2011 revolution are being reconstructed, aborting and undoing Egypt's democratic transition.

But as explained by Esraa Abdel Fattah, co-founder of the April 6th Youth Movement, "When terrorism is trying to take hold of Egypt and foreign interference is trying to dig into our domestic affairs, then it's inevitable for the great Egyptian people to support its armed forces against the foreign danger."¹⁶ On July 27, with the support of civilians enamored by Sisi and his populist rhetoric, SCAF cracked down on pro-Morsi protestors with extreme violence, killing over 100 people and injuring 1,500.¹⁷ This came without a word of protest from the liberals and leftists who in 2011 had stood side by side with the Muslim Brotherhood to demand that the generals relinquish power to civilians.¹⁸

As hundreds of thousands of Egyptians rally in response to calls for support from rival political factions around the army and the Muslim Brotherhood, a small group called the "Third Square" has emerged that voices their opposition to both sides in the country's ongoing political crisis.¹⁹ Activist Firas Mokhtar states "the Third Square is an attempt to bring Egyptians together and put an end to the polarization of society, which is split between those on Tahrir Square (Military supporters) and those at Rabaa Al Adawiya Mosque (Muslim Brotherhood Supporters)."²⁰ Led by the Strong Egypt Party and leftist groups such as the Revolutionary Socialists, those in the Third Square believe that neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor the felool (remnants) of the old regime have the right to claim political legitimacy. They assert that Egyptians should have more options than simply religious fascism or military rule, calling instead for a civil state.

But this movement has yet to gain significant support, and its numbers pale in comparison to the hundreds of thousands that rally in support of the Muslim Brotherhood on one side and the military on the other. Many dissenters are also sitting back and mocking both sides from afar, on various online platforms.²¹ The common conception within this minority opinion is that Egyptians have been fooled into thinking that the interim government and its military force provides a viable alternative to Brotherhood rule when arguably, the military will simply undo the democratic process that the 2011 revolution instigated and worked so hard to achieve.

Therefore, with many Egyptians and international actors demanding reassurances that the military does not intend to govern in the long run, the transitional government quickly jumped to tentatively schedule elections for 2014. The roadmap includes plans for structural reform, seeking investments in infrastructure projects, privatizing certain state-owned companies, and generally offering greater opportunities for the private sector to

compete and invest.²² But these promises have been made many times before and the fear now is that the imposition of a “cookie-cutter” transition with a rapid succession of elections will do nothing to build consensus and establish the ground rules of politics, which is the only way to achieve democratization and stabilization of the country.²³

The situation in Egypt is volatile and rushing into elections now, with the population so divided, could prove to be just as problematic as the 2011 elections that brought the Muslim Brotherhood into power. As noted by Nathan Brown, an expert on Egypt's constitution at George Washington University, the roadmap repeats many of the mistakes of the post-Mubarak process. "It was drawn up by an anonymous committee, it was issued by executive fiat, the timetable is rushed, the provisions for consultation are vague, and it promises inclusiveness but gives no clear procedural guidelines for it."²⁴ Despite the thrill of nationalist fervor, Egypt now needs to take a critical look at the possible reasons and motivations that drive the military forces. Realistically, the resentment of Islamist rule should not be used as an excuse to throw support behind the same generals who were the power behind six decades of authoritarian rule that ended with the overthrow of Hosny Mubarak.

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