EGYPT'S NEXT PHASE: SUSTAINABLE INSTABILITY

Michael Wahid Hanna | July 1, 2015

Two years after Egypt's July 2013 coup that ousted President Mohamed Morsi, the country is entering a new and unsettled phase in its ill-fated post–Hosni Mubarak political transition. The air of instability in the run-up to this anniversary was punctuated by the country's first major political assassination in decades, with the June 29 killing of Prosecutor General Hisham Barakat in a sophisticated bomb attack on his convoy. That attack was quickly followed by a major coordinated militant assault on Egyptian army positions in northern Sinai Peninsula on July 1, which resulted in scores of dead and injured, and further highlighted the growing threats facing the country.

However, while Egypt as a country will continue to suffer various kinds of instability, the regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi remains firmly ensconced for the foreseeable future. The irreparably fragmented state of political opposition, ferocious levels of state repression, societal fatigue, fear of state collapse, regional disorder,

and a lack of demonstrable leadership alternatives act as inhibiting factors for dissent and outward opposition and, these elements have come together to create an environment of sustainability, despite the obvious and expanding forms of instability that plague, and will continue to plague, Egypt.

Although the regime has consolidated its hold on power and continues to have the support of the state and its institutions, the immediate sense of post-coup urgency has faded and given space for internal rivalries. With these rivalries spilling into the public view for the first time, the regime is demonstrating new kinds of vulnerabilities. The regime is also facing additional challenges in light of a fragmenting and radicalizing Muslim Brotherhood, escalating anti-state violence and terrorism by militant actors, a stagnating economy, and strained relations with financial benefactors in the Gulf.

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These circumstances offer a gloomy prognosis for Egypt's immediate future, particularly as the country's ruling elite have definitively demonstrated their lack of ideas for actually governing the country. This sorry state of affairs will defer political maturity, stymie internal reform, and maintain the polarization of political life between untenable extremes. However, it would be a mistake to assume that these negative macro-indicators are indicative of regime instability.

Cohering State, Fragmenting Opposition

While the photogenic heroism of the 2011 uprising demonstrated in Tahrir Square received an outsized and understandable share of focus and attention from the media, the removal of longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak was only made possible by the fragmentation of the state and the short-lived tactical alliance among a broad-based opposition.

Most notably, when faced with the choice, the Egyptian military did not feel compelled to defend the continued rule of Mubarak and instead saw possibilities for the institution of the military independent from the future of the long-time president and former military leader. In fact, the military saw this moment of crisis as an opportunity to take a leading role in re-imposing stability, shaping a transitional political order, and defending and expanding the autonomy and prerogatives of the armed forces. Distinct from the discredited Ministry of Interior, the military was viewed favorably by broad segments of the populace, including both opponents and proponents of the 2011 uprising. While the armed forces remained a reactionary force, the interim military leadership was willing to contemplate certain limited reforms and chose not to defend all organs of the state. In some cases, the military was willing to sanction punitive steps for its former rivals within the Mubarak regime, as demonstrated by the string of

corruption prosecutions focused on the crony capitalist class that had grown alongside the rise to prominence of the former president's son, Gamal Mubarak. This controlled and incremental change pursued by the military was seen as a path to blunting popular anger and quelling mass mobilization.

In addition to its own standing as an institution, the military's decision-making was informed by the seemingly broad-based nature of the anti-regime demonstrations. In the early stages of the transition, the opposition was able to exert substantial pressure on the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in those instances in which key factions maintained a semblance of unity. But this tactical alignment proved ephemeral and allowed for military triangulation among the emerging Egyptian political class. The attempt by the military and the Muslim Brotherhood to enter into a pacted transition ensured the end of reformist efforts and earned the Brothers the enduring enmity of their erstwhile allies among the non-Islamist opposition. These differences exposed the lack of a shared political agenda among civilian political factions at a very early stage; these disputes hardened over time and came to define Egyptian politics.

The run-up to the coup and its aftermath has seen this state of affairs irrevocably reversed. In the face of a perceived common threat posed by entrenchment of Brotherhood rule and its attempt to dominate governance, capture state institutions, and fundamentally alter the orientation of Egyptian society, the state and its institutions have cohered and unified. While this perception was exaggerated, it dominated the thinking of the state and its leaders. This threat perception and convergence of interests has meant that the state has been outwardly unified and working in parallel on a common agenda, despite a lack of uniform top-down coordination in all cases.

In parallel, the forces of opposition that propelled forward the January 2011 uprising have fragmented irreparably. By the time of the 2013 coup, non-Islamists had come to see the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies as duplicitous, unilateralist, and self-serving. Similarly, the unbridled support of many non-Islamists for military intervention into political life and, subsequently, for its ferocious crackdown and repression of the Brotherhood, have produced enmities that are irreconcilable. Divisions among these opposition forces are now such that they should be understood as an abiding structural feature of Egyptian politics. For the foreseeable future, an Islamist-reformist opposition is simply an impossibility for Egypt.

With the state outwardly unified, and currently enjoying continuing and substantial public support despite poor governance and deteriorating security, the fragmentation of the political class is the single greatest factor in the sustainability of the current state of affairs.

Statism—and Little Else

Egypt's longstanding statist traditions have been rejuvenated and enhanced in the post-coup period. Since the very first, senior officials among the various government institutions have been keen on restoring what was widely understood as the tarnished reputation and dignity of the state. In this view, the first priority for the restoration of stability and normalcy—prior to any considerations of politics, democratization, and rights—is the restoration of the proper role of the state.

In the rhetoric of Egyptian officials and supporters of the ruling regime, it is the state itself that is the sole bulwark between potential stability and chaos. It is in this setting that the oft-repeated phrase, "at least we are not Syria or Iraq," can best be understood. The grim fate of neighboring Libya, a country lacking the basic institutional infrastructure of a state, has further

reinforced popular support for the re-imposition of state authority.

However, apart from a vigorous and at times conspiracy-addled form of hyper-nationalism, this current form of statism has proven largely vacuous, with few new ideas as to how to effectively govern the country, only a reflexive call for a strong centralized state. There is no underlying ideology or vision governing state decision-making.

This is evident in the regime's economic policy, which showed some initial promise for stabilizing the situation and improving economic indicators. In January 2015, the International Monetary Fund reported that "measures implemented so far, along with some recovery in confidence, are starting to produce a turnaround." However, following difficult but necessary steps on issues such as subsidy reform, the regime has displayed no willingness to consider broader reforms that could support inclusive and sustainable growth. In that context, Carnegie Middle East scholar Amr Adly notes that "such improvement is unlikely to solve the long-standing, structural problems that have plagued Egypt's economy and led to the erosion of support for former president Hosni Mubarak, who was ousted in 2011." Further hindered by a deteriorating security situation, the lack of a governing vision ensures a low ceiling in terms of the possibilities for positive economic change.

This economic uncertainty is further fueled by Egypt's strained relations with its Gulf allies, who have provided enormous sums of external financial assistance and propped up Egypt's economy since the military's ouster of Morsi. The embarrassing revelations of derogatory attitudes and comments toward the Gulf included in some of the now-infamous leaks from the Sisi-led Ministry of Defense have generated considerable anger among Egypt's Gulf allies, as has its unresponsiveness

to their desire to see consistent economic reforms and greater levels of policy coordination. The death of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and the ascension of his half-brother King Salman has also been accompanied by a tempering of Saudi policy on the Muslim Brotherhood. While claims of major Saudi shifts in this respect are overblown and the notion that Saudi Arabia offers the Muslim Brotherhood a pathway to domestic rehabilitation is far-fetched, Saudi Arabia's leadership is less zealous in its support for Egypt's undifferentiated and unrelenting crackdown. Recent press reports suggest that Gulf aid will decrease dramatically in coming years, although such a stance would likely be reappraised in the face of a major balance of payments crisis. Massive infusions of external assistance helped mask the lack of a competent governing vision, but these recent difficulties in Egypt's external relations may further expose the limitations of the Sisi regime.

Furthermore, the current leadership lacks the experience and background to adopt a technocratic approach to governance. The small team of military-dominated advisers surrounding the office of the presidency are relative novices with respect to high-level institutional politics and governance, and they have yet to fully grasp the mechanisms of power and the relationships between and among state institutions. This is reflective of the de-politicization of the military during the Mubarak era, when the institution of the military was largely removed from the day-to-day affairs of state. It is also reflective of the traditionally modest and circumscribed role of military intelligence—President Sisi's previous perch—within the Mubarak-era bureaucratic hierarchy and its outsized role within the current disposition.

These deficiencies have been further exacerbated by the Sisi regime's condescending attitude toward party politics. President Sisi has sought to portray his patriotic mission as one that is above the messy and unseemly fray of political life. This stance has limited the Sisi regime's ability to cultivate a political base outside of the state itself, beyond the regime's broad calls for support and its use of media propaganda to disseminate its messaging.

The Emergence of Internal Rivalry

As the crisis atmosphere of the immediate post-coup period has receded, the internal rivalries within the regime have come to the fore in previously unimaginable ways. In many respects, the emerging Sisi regime is less consolidated today than six months prior. These incipient divisions do not yet represent a systemic threat to regime sustainability, and the state remains outwardly unified against common threats and shares a broad understanding of interests. However, there are now important public signals of elite rivalries and dissatisfaction.

The important background to the events of June–July 2013 was the fragmentation of the state in the face of the 2011 uprising and the absence of centralized governance throughout the transitional period, which eroded the mechanisms of state functioning and simultaneously enhanced the autonomy of individual institutions. This devolution of authority was then furthered through the constitutional drafting process, which formalized the autonomy of key state institutions. Writing during the ill-fated 2012 constitutional drafting process, George Washington University professor Nathan Brown noted that even then, "state actors want[ed] freedom or, more precisely, autonomy. They wish to know that they will be able to govern their own affairs, make their own judgments, appoint their own members, select their own leaders, and spend their budgets freed of the heavy hand of presidential control that weighed so much on them in the past."

Institutional interests and corporatist attitudes are now a key factor in decision-making. Despite the ascendance of President Sisi and his sizable popular support, he is not yet in a position to govern in the centralized manner that typified the late Mubarak period. The result is that the regime does not operate as a coherent whole, notwithstanding broad agreement among senior leaders with respect to orientation and goals. Major decisions and institutional reforms require the expenditure of political capital by President Sisi, and such potentially bruising internal fights are often seen as unnecessary distractions during this period of consolidation. With respect to any one major issue, President Sisi could likely push through a decision, but the absence of such progress is reflective of current regime priorities.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup that ousted President Morsi, the crisis atmosphere and the convergence of interests of key actors created high levels of elite cohesion, even though in private many expressed reservations with respect to military ascendance. Despite their lofty perch, however, the armed forces have been—and remain—quite reliant on the other key organs of the state.

The whole-of-state approach used in the ouster of Morsi and during the aftermath has meant that the entire state apparatus as well as its outside supporters have been key cogs in the attempt to re-engineer repressive stability. This reliance on institutions, in particular the Ministry of Interior, the General Intelligence Service (GIS), the public prosecutor, and the judiciary, constrains the ability of the presidency to exercise unfettered authority over any of these institutions and has bred an aversion to institutional conflict.

While a certain amount of communication and coordination among the institutions of the state does occur, outside observers should not assume that the institutions are tethered to a top-down decision-making process. The various institutions of state share common views and assumptions, but individuals within these institutions still have wide latitude to exercise authority in many instances. This has clearly been the case with the public prosecutor and the judiciary, which have at times made decisions that created foreign relations problems for the regime. The al-Jazeera English case, in which journalists were convicted of terrorism-related charges, is the most high-profile example of this phenomenon, which escalated without top-level authorization. However, continued cooperation among the organs of state is highly valued by the regime, which limits the appetite of the executive branch to unwind decisions that it does not agree with.

Despite the regime's hunger for state cohesion, Egypt recently has seen the first public signals of elite rivalries and dissatisfaction. Notably, throughout the period of interim military rule under the SCAF, and even during the truncated period of Muslim Brotherhood ascendance, the SCAF and the military were highly disciplined and did not allow internal deliberations, divergences, and rivalries to be litigated in public. Two key outliers to this military cohesion should now be noted, however.

The first is represented by the leaks from the Sisi-led Ministry of Defense. Among regime insiders and high level foreign diplomats and officials, it is now accepted that the source of the leaks is a former high-ranking military officer. Despite this knowledge, the regime is limited in its ability to deal with the leaks, the substance of which has been much less damaging than the existence of the leaks themselves. Any attempt to forcibly deal with the leaks would now draw attention to the much more damaging fact of a division within the military establishment. But the fact of the leaks represents the most serious instance of intra-military

tensions for many years. It also potentially suggests some degree of vulnerability for President Sisi among those factions of the armed forces who have not benefited from Sisi's ascension. A similar concern could also apply to the GIS, where a major purge of the personnel seen as being close to its deceased former head and longtime Mubarak enforcer and confidante, Omar Suleiman, has taken place.

The second departure is the now-public antipathy toward former general and cabinet minister Ahmed Shafik, who was narrowly defeated by President Morsi in the 2012 presidential run-off elections. While Shafik's close relationship with Mubarak has attenuated his links to the military, the hostility of the security establishment to Shafik and his political ambitions, and its willingness to air its grievances through its favored media channels, is notable. As an independent, established, and potentially uncontrollable figure with the backing of his own political infrastructure, Shafik is now viewed with suspicion. The press campaign to discredit Shafik and the blocking of his return to Egypt from the United Arab Emirates are clear signs of elite division.

The press recently has also witnessed unprecedented public attacks against the Ministry of Interior that could not happen without some form of top-level cover and official sourcing. Whether these attacks simply represent scapegoating for deteriorating security conditions or are a sign of more serious institutional conflict is unclear at the moment. Political party leaders, including pro-Sisi and pro-military figures, are also now voicing public unease with the presidency's active hostility to political party life. Finally, tensions between segments of the elite business community and the military are likely to continue, with longstanding mutual suspicions at the core of this distrust.

Importantly, however, the circumstances surrounding the meteoric rise of President Sisi make it particularly unlikely that the component parts of the state could easily disassociate themselves from the presidency, no matter how much friction may currently exist. This is particularly the case with respect to the armed forces, which directly and publicly supported Sisi's candidacy. As a result, the senior ranks of the armed forces are inextricably linked to Sisi in terms of their public profile. The regime is populated by military officials in key decision-making positions, and this has further enmeshed the institution of the military with the presidency. Furthermore, the esprit de corps of the armed forces remains high and there have been no serious instances of military refusal to follow orders, despite the increasingly fraught situations facing the military. As such, the near-term prospects for the destabilization the regime via forms of internal military dissent are very slim.

While in sum these signals are reflective of a more contentious atmosphere within and among the regime's centers of authority, the institutions of the state continue to hold a collectivized view of the threat environment and their future fate. This view will only be reinforced by the continuing and increasing levels of anti-state violence and terrorism, which will curb the extent of in-fighting and public division.

Muslim Brotherhood Failure

The strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood to frontally challenge the state has failed unequivocally. While the Brotherhood retains its robust base, the collapse of non-ideological soft support has left the group far more isolated than at any time in their recent history. The Brothers have also experienced severe levels of repression that have hindered the ability of the organization to function in its traditionally rigid top-down fashion. With many senior leaders either imprisoned or in exile, decision-making authority has devolved and fragmented. This has also exposed the hidebound organization to bottom-up pressure

on generational lines, with many among the younger cadres presenting a more militant line and a more flexible understanding with respect to the legitimacy of anti-state violence.

These radicalizing trends have proven difficult for the Brotherhood to respond to, as its leadership faces countervailing pressures. On the one hand, the Brothers have spent decades normalizing their domestic and international political standing, largely overcoming their past endorsements and employment of political violence. This reputation is now clearly at risk, despite their oft-repeated mantra that "our peacefulness is stronger than their bullets."

The shifting Brotherhood approach to violence is dictated by a fairly consistent decision-making calculus, which has prioritized organizational unity and coherence above all else, while maintaining an unwavering belief in their popular support. This has previously led to foolhardy and reckless risk-taking, as exemplified by the defiant approach of President Morsi to the threat of military intervention following the massive anti-Morsi street demonstrations of June 30, 2013.

Although the military at the time was seeking license to directly intervene into Egyptian political life, the coup was not inevitable. Even at that late stage, conciliation from Morsi in the form of agreeing to early elections or a popular referendum on the continuation of his rule would have averted an outright coup and preserved the Brotherhood's hard-fought political gains. Instead, the Brothers chose to risk everything in an all-or-nothing gambit that has propelled the current, ongoing backlash.

The Muslim Brotherhood's decision against conciliation was driven by a fear of organizational fracture if concessions were made following the coercive steps taken by the military, and was based on the unfounded assumption of continued and overwhelming support for the Brotherhood among the public. In private conversations with Brotherhood leaders in spring 2013, they treated the notion that their unilateralism and incompetence were eroding their public support and standing as the wishful thinking of out-of-touch urban elites.

These same considerations remain central to the thinking of the organization, despite failed recent attempts by old guard leaders to moderate the trajectory of the Brotherhood. Instead, the Brotherhood's public statements have explicitly endorsed the legitimacy of all forms of resistance against the repression of the regime, opening the door to further radicalization.

A unilateral, sectarian, and radicalizing challenge to the state is out of step with the national mood. This is particularly so as the Brotherhood strategy proceeds in parallel to the actions of more militant actors and appears to understand such violence as a necessary ingredient to their efforts to bring about regime failure. In this sense, the Muslim Brotherhood will be tainted by militant actions, even if they are not the responsible party.

While these developments are dismaying on their face, they are also a recipe for further Brotherhood failure. Rising levels of violence and public perceptions of Brotherhood complicity will further buttress support for unrelenting repression and curb the possibilities for any course corrections on the part of the regime. Strengthening the impulse for a more militarized conflict ensures maximal collateral damage in the context of an unwinnable struggle. In isolation, Brotherhood support for a more confrontational stance with respect to the Sisi regime will not represent a critical mass of opposition sufficient to force the fall of the regime. For the Brothers, however, these steps threaten to undermine their international reputation and bona fides as a legitimate political actor.

Anti-State Violence on the Rise

In addition to the ongoing radicalization of Brotherhood youth cadres, Egypt has witnessed the rise of a resilient low-level insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula and the proliferation of terrorist attacks in mainland Egypt. The scope of those attacks has broadened beyond the initial focus on security forces and government symbols to now include economic targets, most notably exemplified by a failed June 2015 suicide attack on the Temple of Karnak in Luxor. The June 29 assassination of Prosecutor General Barakat has served to further emphasize these negative security trends.

The nature and scope of recent violence is also likely reflective of tactical targeting decisions on the part of Egyptian militant groups, stemming from the instructive experience of the 1990s, which witnessed the rise of militancy and low-level insurgency in parts of Egypt. During that decade, however, the use of indiscriminate violence and the targeting of the tourist industry also strengthened the hand of the state and fueled popular support for repression.

The aversion to soft targets, however, suggests that pathways to major escalation remain, if militant groups choose to follow them. While the country lacks a tradition of major civil conflict, Egypt will likely see persistent and chronic forms of violence and terrorism. While the Sinai-based Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis terrorist group has pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State, there is no evidence yet of major external backing, and all indications point to domestic roots for the rising levels of terrorism. However, the porous nature of the country's borders has ensured that Egypt is awash in weapons, largely originating in Libya. Furthermore, the ongoing chaos and conflict there will continue to provide a potential base for Egypt-focused militants. These circumstances suggest that the issue of militancy and terrorism is deeply-rooted.

Sinai-based militants continue to demonstrate growing sophistication and effectiveness, as exemplified by the major coordinated operations undertaken on July 1 throughout northern Sinai Peninsula. The resilience of militancy despite ongoing Egyptian military operations is also indicative of major strategic and operational deficiencies stemming from the military's static and heavy-handed approach to counterinsurgency. The concentration of forces in fortified and isolated military bases has distanced the military from the civilian population and increased the military's reliance on less precise targeting methods such as airpower and indirect fire.

While hardline elements of the security establishment would relish the clarity provided by a more militarized conflict, it represents a lose-lose proposition for Egypt that would damage economic prospects and fuel repression, with little prospect for political change. The strengthening of hardline impulses will not be solely limited to the regime's conflict with militancy, and the spillover effects will impact the regime's approach to dealing with all manner of political opposition.

Demonstration Effects: The Arab World in Chaos

While Egypt's security situation is deteriorating and its security establishment has proven unsuited to the task at hand, particularly with respect to dealing with the low-level insurgency in the Sinai peninsula, the rising tide of violence, terrorism, and conflict throughout the Arab world have had a profound effect on Egyptian society and have curbed the impulse for political change. In the current regional context, political change and efforts at reform are seen by most Egyptians to be risky endeavors with potentially disastrous unintended consequences. This reactionary mood is further buttressed by Egypt's own experiences with political change, which have polarized society and failed to

either provide stable governance or better the material conditions of the populace.

This regionalized climate of instability has helped solidify support for the Sisi regime, albeit ambivalent support among certain segments of Egyptian society. The horrifying regional examples of state collapse and civil war have created widespread aversion and revulsion at the prospect of political violence and terrorism. While the proliferation of such violence might damage the credibility of the Sisi regime and its competence over time, it is unlikely to produce widespread public support for radical political change and potential upheaval amongst a cautious and fatigued society. The impulse for change is further tempered by a lack of cognizable leadership alternatives that is the result of the stunted growth of Egyptian political party life, the failure of post-Mubarak politics, and the assiduous efforts of the regime to tamp down the rise of potential challengers.

Conclusion

Despite unprecedented economic and security challenges and the first signs of serious public dissatisfaction with the Sisi regime, there is no evidence that these complaints will ripen into a challenge to the sustainability of Sisi's rule. Paradoxically, this sustainability will endure despite the inevitable instability that will be a persistent feature of Egyptian life in the near-term future. Instability is unlikely to translate into serious regime vulnerability so long as the state remains outwardly unified and coherent, which itself is highly likely in an environment when the state and its institutions perceive a collectivized sense of fate. With an irreparably fragmented state of political opposition coming together with other key factors to produce an environment of sustainability, Egypt and the outside world will have to contend with the durability of the Sisi regime and the unlikelihood of a political course correction amidst a deteriorating security situation.

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