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Egypt's Islamist Future

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The struggle for supremacy between the Islamists and the military is second to a more important political battle: what kind of Islamic state Egypt will become.

The election of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi as Egypt's president temporarily puts to rest the debate about whether the nation will be secular or Islamist. Egypt is an Islamist state.

Not only does a member of the Muslim Brotherhood hold the nation's highest post, nearly 75% of the legislature's seats are held by Brotherhood members or by their harder-line Salafi cousins -- or at least they were held by the Islamists before the dissolution of the People's Assembly by the ruling military council last month. Though headlines will remain focused on the struggle for supremacy between the Islamists and the military, the more important political battle in Cairo will be over what kind of Islamic state Egypt will become.

Within this new competitive theocracy, many of the differences are in degree and not in kind. Both the Salafis and the Brotherhood, for example, support the imposition of the hudud: the Islamic prescription to cut off hands of recidivist thieves. The disagreement is over how soon the penalty should be imposed.

Competition between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis is not new. Indeed, according to a diplomatic cable written by the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and published by WikiLeaks, Brotherhood leaders have been uncomfortable since at least 2009 watching its younger, more rural members "becoming increasingly Salafi-oriented."

It takes years to become a full member of the Muslim Brotherhood. To become a Salafi, one needs only to commit oneself to the cause and grow a beard. It's little surprise the Salafis are nipping at the heels of the old-school Brotherhood.

The animosity between the groups was on display during parliamentary elections last

winter, when the Salafi Nour Party and the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party went head to head. In addition to trading accusations of election violations, party members often came to blows outside polling places. In May, during the first round of the presidential election, the Brotherhood and the Salafis backed competing candidates.

Even before the presidential election, the friction was clear. In January, in an effort to reassure nervous Egyptian Christians, Morsi opined that there was "no difference in the beliefs of Muslims and Christians," prompting the Salafis -- who have long baited Christians -- to demand that Morsi "repent to Allah." Morsi described the ploy as "cheap propaganda."

A month later, in a gambit to embarrass the Muslim Brotherhood, a Salafi lawmaker interrupted a legislative session by issuing the call for afternoon prayer. Then-Speaker of Parliament Saad Katatni admonished him: "You are no more Muslim than any of us."

The Muslim Brotherhood was never particularly moderate. In December 2011 the group's general guide, Mohammed Badie, predicted that his organization's success in Egypt would "lead to a rightly guided caliphate that will instruct the world." Now, internal political dynamics are likely to propel the Muslim Brotherhood toward even more militant positions as it tries to bridge gaps with its Salafi cousins.

Already, this dynamic is taking effect. In April, the Muslim Brotherhood committed to giving Salafi clerics authority to certify that Egyptian legislation is consistent with sharia, or Islamic law. And last month, the Muslim Brotherhood sided with the Salafis in opposing a \$426-million Japanese loan to expand the Metro system in Cairo, calling it interest-based and hence forbidden by Islam.

But clashes are certain. Already, the Salafis have threatened to withdraw from Morsi's presidential team if he follows through on his commitment to include a woman and a Coptic Christian among his six vice presidents. In the months and years ahead, the Muslim Brotherhood could easily find itself in the uncomfortable position of opposing the Salafi-backed imposition of zakat charity on Muslims and the jizya tax on nonbelievers, or even the establishment of committees for the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice, a la Saudi Arabia, to police Egyptian morality. At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood may diverge from the Salafis to favor accepting a critical \$3.2-billion IMF loan.

In his victory speech, Morsi spoke about reconciliation. But going forward, nervous about being outflanked on its right, the Muslim Brotherhood will see little alternative to adopting the positions of its Salafi rivals, including a stricter interpretation of Islamic law.