

Now That Morsi Is Gone, Sisi Should Ease His Crackdown

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Brief Analysis

The resilient Muslim Brotherhood is only feeding off Cairo's repression campaign, which cannot ensure stability indefinitely given the government's failures on other fronts.

Mohamed Morsi's death in a Cairo courthouse is an ignominious end for a man who briefly led the Arab world's most populous country. Though in many ways little more than a figurehead, he nevertheless symbolized the Muslim Brotherhood's failure to transition from authoritarian rule to democratic politics. His death is unlikely to further vitiate the degraded organization or trigger mass protests. But international pressure to explain Morsi's dismal prison conditions may give Washington an opportunity to quietly nudge Cairo on loosening the tight strictures that have stifled civil liberties under President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi.

A SPARE LEGACY

Morsi was an effective enforcer for the Brotherhood when he oversaw its parliamentary delegation from 2000 to 2005, but his prosaic demeanor and lack of political acumen put a ceiling on his upward mobility. Only the disqualification of the group's preferred candidate for president in 2012 paved the way for his ascension, leading many Egyptians to dub him the Brotherhood's "spare tire." Their uncertainty in his ability to lead was demonstrated by his razor-thin victory in the country's first democratic presidential election.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, his one year in office was a disaster. He refused to negotiate deals with other parties, instead ruling by fiat. And the judicial remnants of the ancien regime so stymied him that he issued a decree annulling judicial review in November 2012. Security officials and bureaucrats likewise undermined his presidency by refusing to consistently provide basic commodities and services. Meanwhile, political and security instability caused the economy to crater.

In a country where stability is prized over everything, Morsi's inability to provide a modicum of it spawned nostalgia for the authoritarian regime his government had replaced, resulting in massive protests. By June 2013, then-defense minister Sisi and a coterie of other generals were all too happy to reclaim their positions as guardians of the state by staging a coup.

BROTHERHOOD AGAINST THE WALL

Since then, Sisi has launched an all-out war against the Brotherhood. He has arrested the group's General Guide (a step that not even Hosni Mubarak countenanced), incarcerated its most insignificant foot soldiers, and sought to dismantle its social welfare network. Although the Brotherhood was formally banned under Mubarak as well, its presence was nevertheless tolerated. That is no longer the case; Sisi wants to destroy the group entirely.

Morsi's death may provide the Brotherhood with a martyr and a rallying cry to mobilize its troops, but it is unlikely to bring Egyptians into the streets en masse. Morsi was far too pedestrian to inspire such passionate support, and his maladroit governing style earned him little more than public ire. The omnipresent security services have further quashed any desire or ability to protest.

At the same time, Morsi's death is little more than a symbolic loss for the Brotherhood. When recruiting and rallying the faithful, the organization relies more on rigid ideology and military-style discipline than on charismatic leadership. This strategy has served it well in its current predicament, since it can afford to sacrifice leaders to Sisi's gaols—the “next man up” system of decentralized, clandestine cells simply replaces them with fresh legs.

Meanwhile, Cairo's various missteps are only facilitating the Brotherhood's growth. Inept governance creates openings that the organization readily exploits. Explosive population growth has left the state unable to provide for all, allowing the Brotherhood's dedicated cadres and social welfare machine to fill the void. And in a country where civil and political organizing is proscribed, the Brotherhood is the only alternative to a state that fails at everything from generating electricity to providing healthcare.

Despite its durability, however, the Brotherhood faces a critical challenge. Radical elements and younger members are increasingly unwilling to toe the line of endless faith and patience, **creating internal rivalries** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/organizational-split-and-radicalization-within-egypts-muslim-brotherhood>) and new calls for armed struggle. An endless crackdown that wipes out the Brotherhood's entire Guidance Council would deny the group the leadership needed to reassert consensus on avoiding violence and keeping the struggle political. Fundraising has become more difficult as well now that the Brotherhood's traditional spigots in the Persian Gulf countries are shut off.

EUROPE MUST TAKE THE LEAD

On the orders of the security services, Egyptian media largely glossed over Morsi's death; for instance, *al-Shorouk* newspaper ran a brief five-paragraph story on page three. Foreign observers have been more vocal, however. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other advocacy organizations swiftly called for an investigation, and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights soon added its voice to the chorus.

But if the international community truly wants to ease Cairo's wider crackdown against the opposition, European governments will have to take the first step. That may prove difficult given their longstanding reluctance to pry into Egypt's internal affairs—they are far more interested in selling weapons to Cairo than lecturing it on human rights. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, France was Egypt's main weapons supplier from 2014 to 2018 (\$2.8 billion), while Germany was fourth (\$450 million). And when French president Emmanuel Macron hosted Sisi in October 2017, he declared, “I believe in the sovereignty of states, and therefore, just as I don't accept being lectured on how to govern my country, I don't lecture others.”

If Europe overcomes such hesitance and decides to up the pressure on Sisi, it may try to steer the United States in a similar direction. In that scenario, Washington may consider broaching the sensitive topic of individual freedoms. Under Sisi, the Egyptian government has become far less tolerant of perceived dissent than it was during the Mubarak era, greatly expanding the net of arrests, blocked websites, and media restrictions. With European support, U.S. officials could credibly urge Cairo to restore some of these liberties, such as allowing citizens to express opinions on social media without fear of retribution. Releasing labor lawyers and civil society activists from prison should also be a priority.

Egypt is one of the region's only countries to emerge from the tumultuous Arab Spring with only a few scratches and bruises instead of all-out civil war. Yet this relative stability should not come at the expense of freedoms. Sisi needs to find a balance between the two, and as a longtime ally, Washington should be willing to tell it so.

Barak Barfi is a research fellow at the New America Foundation and an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute, where he authored the 2018 study [Egypt's New Realism: Challenges Under Sisi](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-new-realism-challenges-under-sisi>. ❖

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