

The Future of Islamists in Egypt

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Brief Analysis

After the overthrow of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011, international actors and observers turned their attention to the Islamists in Egypt. All began monitoring how Islamism would be incorporated into the political equation. Led by the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamists were dealing with the new struggle around Egypt's Islamic identity as if it was "God's decision" – especially after they dominated the elections in Egypt following the January revolution.

But in the summer of 2013, the military establishment intervened in politics by overthrowing the Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi. Adly Mansour, president of the Supreme Constitutional Court, was appointed as the country's acting president, while in reality the military establishment controlled the course of events.

The "coup against legitimacy" did not hold well with the Brotherhood, who subsequently held sit-ins in al-Nahda and Rabaa al-Adaqiya squares, leading to the closure of vital centers nearby for over a month. They called upon regional pro-Islamist powers, such as Qatar and Turkey, and negotiated with the European Union to play the role of middleman between them and the military establishment. In addition, they tried to co-opt the terrorism of religious groups in Sinai as a pressure point to bring back Morsi. But none of this prevented the Egyptian regime from breaking up the Rabaa sit-in on August 14. Resulting in many deaths and injuries, it was the military's decisive method of solidifying their control over both state and society.

The Muslim Brotherhood's stunning defeat in Egypt led the organization to decentralize. A distinction arose between their experience in Egypt and their experiences in other countries, such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan. Through the Ennahda Movement, the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia was able to reach an agreement with other actors in order to avoid the bloody fate of the Brotherhood in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan voted on a new bill separating them from their Egyptian partners. In Morocco, the Brotherhood continued to be a partner of the King's government, which supported the Egyptian military's decision to overthrow President Morsi.

In Egypt, all forms of Islamism were politically and socially excluded, including the Muslim Brotherhood (Freedom and Justice Party), al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (Building and Development Party), Muslim Brotherhood dissidents (al-Wasat Party), and small Salafist groups (Virtue Party, Reform Party, Islamic Labor Party, Homeland Party, and Salafist Front). Additionally, there was a crackdown on Islamist reformers, such as Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh and the

Strong Egypt Party. There were also attempts to ban the Nour Party – the political arm of the Salafist Call in Alexandria based on the 2014 constitution, which forbids the establishment of religiously-based parties.

Islamists led a protest movement against the new regime throughout the streets of Cairo and various other governorates when the al-Nahda and Rabaa sit-ins were broken up. However, these protests failed to attract other political interest groups or create any real change reminiscent of Morsi's collapse. Despite their utter defeat, the Islamists, having lost all post-Arab Spring gains, continued to fantasize about establishing an absolute Islamic Caliphate that would defeat all opposition: democrats, liberals, leftists, and even the military.

Sisi's regime remains an obstacle to the re-integration of Islamists into the political sphere. Since Sisi broke up the sit-ins, his regime has been consistent in its opposition to all Islamists, regardless of their use of arms. The regime believes all Islamists are an imminent danger to the state and a threat to its stability, a zero-sum equation that comes at a high price during such a critical time for Egypt. The country lacks a clear political system and focused regional agenda, is economically exhausted and socially fragmented, and suffers from sectarian and racial issues and terrorism in numerous areas. The accumulation of these factors makes Sisi's decision to paint Islamists as an absolute enemy a dangerous step. So far, there is no evidence that the regime will back down from its current policy.

The danger of repercussions from the ongoing struggle between the Islamists and Sisi's regime lies in an anxiety over renewed political chaos. But a weakened Islamist position could lead to increased recruitment of easy-to-target youth by radical groups like ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, and Ahrar al Sham. These groups have already succeeded in attracting many current Islamists in Egypt, taking advantage of their disadvantaged political situation. With the Muslim Brotherhood's defeat, and their strategic failures afterward, many of their youth lost faith in democratic methods. These young Egyptians were left with no choice but to throw themselves into the arms of extremist organizations, driven by their eagerness for change even if through violence. Those who remained in traditional Islamist organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, have shifted to organized violence in their struggle against Sisi's regime and institutions. If all conflicting parties fail to reach mutually-agreed solutions to suppress the bloodshed and preserve the greater interests of Egypt, a dark future can be expected.

The Egyptian political crisis took a dangerous turn following the dispersion of the Rabaa sit-in. However, the likelihood of reaching a political settlement between the Muslim Brothers and Sisi's regime is possible, especially since the Muslim Brothers, led by Mahmoud Ezzat, expressed their interest in negotiating for some opportunities for participation. Moreover, Ezzat's success suppressing the violent special committees has significantly contributed to the decline of violence across Egypt. But since Sisi originally derived his legitimacy from his zero-sum battle with the Muslim Brothers, whom he labelled a threat to national security, the success of any future settlement is contingent on Sisi stepping down after the end of his presidential term in 2018. Then, new leadership that prioritizes political settlement or coexistence with the Muslim Brothers could ensure political stability in the future. ❖

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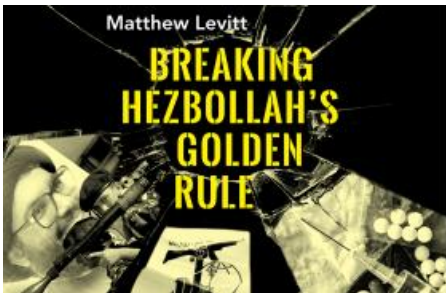
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