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Egypt's Durable Misery: Why Sisi's Regime Is Stable

by [Eric Trager](#)

Jul 21, 2015

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Eric Trager](#)

Eric Trager was the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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Despite the risk of instability posed by ongoing violence, the government's anti-Brotherhood focus is still a political winner and will likely remain so for some time.

The past two years have been the most violent and repressive in Egypt's contemporary history. Ever since the country's military responded to mass protests by ousting the country's first elected president, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Mohamed Morsi, in July 2013, at least 1,800 civilians and 700 security personnel have been killed, tens of thousands have been imprisoned, and severe restrictions have been placed on media, civil society, and protest activity. And this sorry story is set to worsen. Following the assassination of Egypt's prosecutor general on June 29, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi blamed the Brotherhood and vowed an ever-harsher crackdown on the group, including tougher laws to ensure that Muslim Brothers on death row are executed sooner. In response, the Brotherhood endorsed the sudden upsurge in attacks on infrastructure, including electricity towers. And jihadists affiliated with the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS) launched a new round of attacks, including the July 1 bombings in North Sinai that killed dozens of troops and the recent attack on the Italian consulate in Cairo.

Yet despite this bleak security outlook, Egypt is more politically stable than it's been in years. Unlike the divided regimes that collapsed in the face of mass protests in January 2011 and June 2013, the Sisi regime is internally unified. And the various state institutions and civil groups that constitute the regime will likely remain tightly aligned for one basic reason: they view the Muslim Brotherhood as a significant threat to their respective interests and thus see the regime's crackdown on the organization as essential to their own survival. Moreover, as many and

perhaps most Egyptians see it, the Sisi regime's internal unity is the one thing preventing the country from descending into the chaotic statelessness that has overtaken other Arab Spring countries, and they strongly prefer even a repressive and somewhat inept regime to what they see as a far worse alternative. So even as Egypt's domestic security becomes more tenuous, the status quo is sustainable, because regime change appears highly unlikely in the near term.

To be sure, the Sisi regime's durability hardly implies that Sisi himself is durable. If anything, he faces a substantial risk of assassination. Egyptians speak about it so openly that Sisi had to address the matter during an interview prior to his election last year, in which he acknowledged two attempts on his life in the months following Morsi's ouster. That threat hasn't dissipated: Muslim Brothers call for Sisi's death explicitly, and the jihadist group Afnan Misr planted bombs outside the presidential palace last June, only weeks after Sisi took office. Sisi thus sleeps in an undisclosed location -- a sharp break in protocol from his predecessors, whose places of residence were well protected but not state secrets.

Yet the regime's survival does not depend on Sisi's longevity. Although the regime often presents him as a Nasser-like "strongman," it is more accurate to think of him as the CEO of the loose coalition of institutions and interest groups that backed Morsi's ouster in 2013, supported Sisi's presidential candidacy in 2014, and now make up his regime. This coalition includes state bodies such as the military, intelligence, police, and judiciary, as well as nonstate entities that serve as the state's appendages in the countryside, such as the powerful clans of the Nile Delta and tribes of Upper Egypt. The regime also draws critical support from the business community and the private media, which were particularly influential in rallying the masses against Morsi two years ago. And despite the political uncertainty and severe violence that followed Morsi's ouster, these power centers have held together for over two years now for one overarching reason: they share an interest in destroying the Muslim Brotherhood, which substantially threatened their interests during Morsi's 369 days in power.

HOW TO WIN ENEMIES AND ALIENATE PEOPLE

The Brotherhood's defenders often depict the organization as "gradualist," meaning that it seeks to implement its Islamist agenda through formal politics, unlike terrorist groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda. But there was nothing gradualist about the Brotherhood's attempt to combat, rather than coopt or cooperate with, these power centers after Morsi won the 2012 presidential elections. Morsi sought to undercut the judiciary through his November 2012 edict that placed his own decrees above judicial scrutiny, and the Brotherhood-dominated upper parliamentary house tried to retire over 3,000 judges through new legislation. The Brotherhood additionally used its influence over the constitution-writing process in late 2012 to ban all parliamentarians affiliated with former President Hosni Mubarak's ruling party from participating in elections for ten years, which effectively excluded the rural clans and tribes that make up the major power centers of the countryside, whose leaders often served in the Mubarak-era parliament. The Brotherhood similarly tried to sideline the business community by creating its own business organization, whose leaders accompanied Morsi on his foreign trips.

Meanwhile, as media criticism of Morsi's increasingly autocratic and incompetent rule mounted in early 2013, Muslim Brothers carried posters of TV anchors' heads in nooses at their rallies, vowing to "cleanse" the media. By the same token, Brotherhood leaders' calls for "restructuring and reforming" the Interior Ministry put Egypt's police on notice, driving many officers to participate in the anti-Morsi uprising in their uniforms. And although Morsi tried to court the military by respecting its autonomy over national security matters and its own internal affairs, he undermined the arrangement through aggressive foreign policy pronouncements during his final month in office. Indeed, from the generals' standpoint, Morsi usurped the military's national security responsibilities when he declared that "all options are open" against Ethiopia's construction of a Nile dam and then endorsed the Syrian jihad at a Cairo Stadium rally alongside a group of radical Salafist clerics in mid-June 2013.

Of course, the alignment of these institutions and interests isn't new: it goes back to the Mubarak days. But they have never been closer. Under Mubarak, for example, the military viewed the Interior Ministry as its rival, which is why the brass effectively stood to the side as the police collapsed during the first days of the 2011 uprising. Similarly, some of the more popular private media outlets publicized police abuses under Mubarak and were harshly critical of the military junta that ruled Egypt for 16 months following Mubarak's ouster. And there were also divisions within these power centers, such as the rift between the aging military leadership and the younger officers that Morsi repaired in August 2012, when he fired the top generals and appointed Sisi as defense minister.

Intraregime tensions haven't entirely dissipated, of course. As Michael Hanna of the Century Foundation noted in a recent report, the leaked phone conversations of top military officials, resurgent media criticism of the Interior Ministry, and the security establishment's open antipathy toward former air force general and presidential candidate Ahmed Shafik are all signs of elite division. Yet in every instance thus far, the tensions have dissipated quickly, because the regime's various components are ultimately more unified in their desire to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood than they are divided by anything else.

If they don't destroy it, they fear, the Brotherhood might reemerge and seek vengeance for the many hundreds of Muslim Brothers who have been killed over the past two years -- which is precisely what the Brotherhood has vowed to do. Indeed, as multiple Brotherhood leaders have told me since the coup, the organization seeks to investigate, try, and possibly execute those who participated in the current regime's anti-Brotherhood crackdown. So for the regime's constituent power centers, the success of the anti-Brotherhood crackdown is a matter of life and death.

UNITED IN FEAR AND LOATHING

As a result of the regime's single-minded focus on the Muslim Brotherhood, Sisi has far more leeway for issuing edicts and consolidating his legal authority than Morsi ever enjoyed. Sisi's recent law empowering him to fire the heads of Egypt's four independent regulatory agencies is a case in point. Morsi's various power grabs sparked regime-ending protests, yet Sisi's maneuver passed with nary a peep.

There is ample reason to doubt whether a regime whose primary objective is destroying the Brotherhood can succeed at governing. After all, a regime that spends so much political capital on locking out one organization can never be politically inclusive. Moreover, the regime's insistence that the Muslim Brotherhood is behind every terrorist incident, including the most severe attacks for which ISIS-affiliated groups have claimed responsibility, means that it is still not viewing the threats it faces realistically. And the regime's broad crackdown in the name of counterterrorism, which has swept up activists and journalists who strongly supported Morsi's ouster, is creating new enemies and possibly sowing the seeds for more violent revolutionary upheaval down the road.

Yet for the most part, the regime's anti-Brotherhood bent is still a political winner and will likely remain so for some time. At home, many, and possibly most, Egyptians continue to view the Brotherhood as a destabilizing force, given the significant political uncertainty of Morsi's tumultuous year in power and the Brotherhood's endorsement of attacks on infrastructure. These Egyptians are not necessarily enthusiastic about Sisi, but they view his regime's internal unity as the one thing preventing the country from descending into the stateless chaos that has overtaken Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Revolutionary activists feel this stability-first mood very acutely and say that they have stopped protesting because they fear a popular backlash almost as much as they fear getting arrested. "If five people march and chant about a political issue, people will shoot you," an activist in Port Said told me during a recent trip. The Sisi regime's anti-Brotherhood position has also aligned Egypt with wealthy Persian Gulf states, which have kept Egypt afloat by donating over \$20 billion since Morsi's ouster.

Still, it is worth remembering that the elite politics on which the regime's stability depends are often opaque. Few, if any, external observers knew of the divisions within the Egyptian military that culminated in Sisi's appointment as

defense minister in August 2012, and nobody can know for certain whether there are similar, game-changing divisions beneath the surface now. Yet nobody understands these risks better than the regime's constituent institutions and interests. And since they all fear that another round of regime change could mean their deaths, they will likely continue focusing on the anti-Brotherhood crackdown that unites them, rather than allowing internal rifts to escalate too far. Egypt's status quo, in other words, is durable. But should it suddenly break down, watch out: it will be a bloodbath.

Eric Trager is the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared [on the Foreign Affairs website](#). ❖

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