

Friday's Islamist 'Uprising' in Egypt Could Be Bloody

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Brief Analysis

Although past uprisings have been quickly snuffed out, the latest calls for mass protests have been more strategically savvy and explicitly violent than usual.

On Friday, while Americans are recovering from Thanksgiving food comas, Egypt might experience its most violent day in over a year. The Salafist Front -- a fundamentalist group that opposed Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi's July 2013 ouster -- has declared a "Muslim Youth Intifada" that day against the government of President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, and other groups have signed on, including the Brotherhood. While it is difficult to predict the size and impact of the protests, they will likely spark severe confrontations between Islamist youths and government security forces, since both sides view their struggle as an existential one.

Indeed, the organizers are referring to their uprising as an "identity battle" and openly seek to topple Sisi. In a [November 15 YouTube video \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vc1-Rkd5VkA\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vc1-Rkd5VkA), which has now been viewed nearly 172,000 times, Islamist youth activists accuse Sisi of preventing the implementation of Islamic law (such as by "teaching dancing, heresy, and adultery"), permitting the media to "insult the Prophet [Muhammad] day and night," and opposing the establishment of a caliphate. Similarly, [a November 22 "Intifada" music video \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36DvxPVIkU4\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36DvxPVIkU4) calls Sisi a "pharaoh" and Interior Minister Muhammad Ibrahim "Haman," equating them with Quranic villains who rejected the Prophet Moses's call to worship Allah.

By the same token, Sisi's supporters have invoked religious language to discredit the Intifada. In a recent statement, former Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa lambasted the anti-Sisi Islamists as "*khawarij*," an epithet referring to the extremists who rebelled against the Caliph Ali in the seventh century. "Raising the Qurans is an insult to the Quran. The first act of betrayal that people committed was the raising of the Quran against Ali," he said, implying that rebelling against Sisi is un-Islamic.

As with previous calls for mass mobilization against Sisi, the turnout for Friday's demonstrations is difficult to predict and could ultimately underwhelm. After all, Egyptian Salafists are deeply divided, and their largest organization, the Alexandria-based al-Dawa al-Salafiya, has strongly supported Sisi and rejected the latest calls for

an uprising. Moreover, security forces have successfully, albeit brutally, repressed other recent attempts at Islamist mobilization, none of which has had any impact on Egypt's political trajectory or domestic security. The Sisi government further enjoys strong support among the public, who fear the kind of instability that the planned Intifada portends. A critical mass of Egyptians will therefore welcome a government crackdown on the protestors, no matter how severe.

Still, the Intifada organizers have demonstrated strategic savviness. They are calling on their supporters to march from mosques after dawn prayers, which will enable participants to coalesce into groups immediately before clashing with security forces, as the organizers are explicitly encouraging them to do. Participants are also being instructed to mobilize toward their local public squares, which could result in protests proliferating all over the major cities while it is still dark. In addition, Muslim Brothers and anti-regime Salafists have unified behind the Intifada, which could boost turnout. The protests will also include pro-Morsi soccer hooligans known as "ultras," who are notoriously motivated fighters against the security forces.

Given that the Intifada is explicitly calling for Sisi's overthrow and urging direct confrontation, the government will likely respond with significant force. For this reason, the images from Egypt on Friday will likely disturb U.S. policymakers and catalyze new calls for criticizing, and possibly punishing, Cairo. Washington should resist this urge, however. While the Obama administration is right to criticize Cairo for its repressive handling of peaceful protests since Morsi's ouster last summer, Friday's Intifada is an explicit call to violence.

Moreover, Washington should have no illusions about its ability to positively influence Egypt's domestic political struggles. Again, the government and its Islamist opponents view their conflict as existential, and Sisi therefore sees accommodating the radicals as suicidal. In this context, excessive criticism of Cairo would likely encourage the radicals and further alienate the military-backed government -- neither of which is in Washington's interest.

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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