

Egypt: A Tinderbox Waiting for a Spark

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Behind the government's political transition and security measures lies a deeply unstable country.

Nearly six months after the mass uprising-cum-coup that toppled Mohammed Morsi, the key cleavages of Egypt's domestic political conflict are not only unresolved, but unresolvable. The generals who removed Morsi are engaged in an existential struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood: They believe they must destroy the Brotherhood -- by, for instance, designating it a terrorist organization -- or else the Brotherhood will return to power and destroy *them*. Meanwhile, Sinai-based jihadists have used Morsi's removal as a pretext for intensifying their violence, and have increasingly hit targets west of the Suez Canal. Even the Brotherhood's fiercest opponents are fighting among themselves: the coalition of entrenched state institutions and leftist political parties that rebelled against Morsi is fraying, and the youth activists who backed Morsi's ouster in July are now protesting against the military-backed government, which has responded by arresting their leaders.

So despite the fact that Egypt's post-Morsi transition is technically moving forward, with a new draft constitution expected to pass via referendum in mid-January and elections to follow shortly thereafter, the country is a tinderbox that could ignite with any spark, entirely derailing the political process and converting Egypt's episodic tumult into severe instability. What might that spark be? Here are three possibilities:

1. A high-profile political assassination. While he may be as well-guarded as any top official, Egyptian Defense Minister (and de facto ruler) Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is squarely in the Muslim Brotherhood's crosshairs. He is, after all, the face of the coup that toppled Morsi, and he later called Egyptians to the streets to seek their "authorization" for a subsequent crackdown that killed more than 1,000 Morsi supporters.

The Brotherhood hasn't been shy in calling for his death. Brotherhood protests frequently feature images of Sisi with a noose around his neck for "treason," and the Brotherhood-backed Anti-Coup Alliance recently tweeted, "the people want the murderer executed," in an apparent reference to Sisi. Moreover, in December, a pro-Brotherhood website even reported excitedly (double exclamation points and all) that an assassination attempt against Sisi had already

taken place, adding that Sisi was hastily flown to Saudi Arabia for treatment, where he refused to have his leg amputated so that he wouldn't have to retire from the military. (This was, of course, false.) And while the Brotherhood has been implicated in political assassinations previously, such as the 1948 murder of Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Nuqrashi, it is hardly the only or best-equipped organization that wants Sisi dead: The Egyptian general is currently overseeing a military campaign against Sinai-based jihadists, who attempted to assassinate Egypt's interior minister in Cairo in early September and have repeatedly attacked security installations, most recently in the Nile Delta city of Mansoura and governorate of Sharkiya.

If Sisi were assassinated, it would have two effects. First, the military would likely respond with an even more severe crackdown on the Brotherhood than the one that is already underway. This is precisely what happened following a 1954 assassination attempt on Gamal Abdel Nasser that was blamed on the Brotherhood: thousands of Muslim Brothers were detained, tortured, and executed over the next two decades. Second, given the current expectation that Sisi will either run for president or act as the kingmaker, his assassination would catalyze intense competition among various security officials who would vie -- directly or via proxies -- for the presidency. This would further weaken Egypt's already disjointed state, raising the prospect of even greater violence.

2. Protests and/or violence at polling stations. Egyptians are widely expected to approve the referendum of the new constitution in January -- no referendum in Egyptian history has ever resulted in a "no." But the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies reject the post-Morsi political process and are reportedly planning to thwart the plebiscite by protesting at polling stations and preventing voters from entering the booths. While one must take reports about the Brotherhood in the Egyptian press with a heavy chunk of salt, the organization's statements in recent weeks comparing voting in the referendum to "participation in bloodshed" suggest that aggressive action is possible. And the fact that Egyptian security forces are planning for this possibility is hardly reassuring: Egypt's notoriously brutal police would likely engage the obstructionists violently, and those areas in which Islamists are particularly strong might be able to hold off government forces for a while, as occurred in the Giza town of Kerdasa in September.

This sort of incident wouldn't just delay the vote -- it would reveal the transitional government's weakness. This would encourage the Brotherhood to escalate its protest activities, and might also encourage the Sinai jihadists to escalate their attacks. Rather than moving quickly toward the next rounds of elections, Egypt would be headed toward persistent civil strife.

3. A major terrorist incident in the Suez Canal. In August, Sinai-based jihadists fired rockets at a Panamanian-flagged cargo ship passing through the Suez Canal. While the Egyptian military responded with a major ground offensive against the jihadists shortly thereafter and beefed up security along the canal, Egypt's generals admit that the campaign in Sinai has proven much more difficult than they expected. Moreover, subsequent terrorist attacks against both military and civilian targets suggest that the jihadists are extremely determined and, at times, very well-armed: terrorists filmed themselves firing an RPG in Cairo in October, and an explosion outside a camp for security forces in Ismailia in December wounded 30 people.

A major attack on the Suez Canal would be particularly devastating. In addition to embarrassing the military-backed government internationally, it would harm the one source of domestically generated state revenue that has remained relatively stable despite the political tumult of the past three years. The current government can't afford to lose it: Despite a \$12 billion pledge from Persian Gulf states in the immediate aftermath of Morsi's ouster, Egypt's cash reserves have declined in recent months -- dropping from \$18.6 billion in October to \$17.8 billion in November. Meanwhile, the government has announced plans to increase the minimum wage for government employees and preserve the costly food-subsidy program. A sharp dip in Suez Canal revenue would affect the government's ability to meet its obligations, and ongoing cash-reserve declines could spell the return of the constant blackouts and long gas lines that plagued Morsi during his final months in office. Mass anger, and the beginnings of a

possible uprising, would likely follow.

There's a slim chance, of course, that any of these particular scenarios will occur. But Egypt's unsettled political situation and swell of violence make the atmosphere ripe for further upheaval. Something will likely give.

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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