Clan Warfare in Egypt

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Articles & Testimony

Given Egypt's brewing power struggles, the current state of relative calm should not be mistaken for progress, let alone stability.

Nearly five months after the uprising-cum-coup that ousted President Mohamed Morsy, Egypt is mostly calm. That might seem surprising, especially given the reemergence of hundreds-strong protests following the military-backed government's passage of a law restricting demonstrations last week, and the ongoing power struggle between the government and the Muslim Brotherhood, in which over 1,000 Morsy supporters have been killed. Just last week, Islamist protesters reached Tahrir Square for the first time since Morsy's ouster this summer. But this is also the way most of Egypt has been for the past three years: Like the old Microsoft Windows computer game Minesweeper, the most explosive tumult typically occurs in small pockets, leaving the rest of the country safe, tranquil, and at times eerily quiet.

Egypt's relative calm, however, should not be mistaken for stability. Far from representing the first step toward the better future that the "Arab Spring" once promised, it is an interlude -- one that might endure, even if somewhat unsteadily, for a while, but which cannot last forever. That's because Egypt's emerging regime is trying to preserve this measure of peace by reestablishing the status quo ante -- putting power back in the hands of the clans that supported Mubarak for decades, and which chafed mightily under Morsy's rule. But the new regime has done nothing to address the factors that catalyzed the first uprising almost three years ago: It has no answer for Egypt's still-dwindling economy and no strategy for incorporating or appeasing Egypt's Islamists, who tasted power once and are unlikely to accept the current crackdown indefinitely.

The attempt to restore the Mubarak-era way of doing business reflects the nature of the coalition that backed Morsy's removal in July. The most critical opposition to Morsy's rule outside Cairo came from the large families and tribes in the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt, which comprised the Mubarak regime's base and benefitted from its clientelist approach to politics.

"These traditional powers are the critical mass of voters," Abdullah Kamal, a journalist and onetime official in

Mubarak's now-defunct National Democratic Party (NDP), told me. These clans, he continued, "had sympathy" for Mubarak, voted for Mubarak's former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik in the 2012 presidential elections, and would likely back Army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi if he runs for president.

For decades, these clans wielded substantial political influence. They were empowered by the Mubarak regime's use of relatively small electoral districts, which allowed them to mobilize their family members and local supporters to win elections. And since Egypt's parliament was largely a mechanism for distributing state resources, the clans typically used their electoral victories to deliver resources back to their districts and thereby entrench their local support. Following the 2011 uprising, however, the new electoral system entailed much wider electoral districts that diluted these traditional powers' support. Meanwhile the Islamist parties rode their internal unity to overwhelming, nationwide victories.

While the details for Egypt's next parliamentary elections will be determined by the government, it is widely anticipated that the next system will feature smaller districts that will re-empower the old tribal networks. Influential players within the Egyptian state are pushing for a system that would shrink electoral districts considerably.

"I participated in some of the discussions, and urged the adoption of an individual-candidacy system, because any other system forces us to have large districts, and we want smaller areas," said retired Interior Ministry Gen. Mohamed Rifaat Qumsan, the man personally responsible for drawing Egypt's electoral districts.

Qumsan, who previously served in the division of Egypt's state security responsible for monitoring -- and thwarting the political ambitions of -- Islamists, admitted that the internal tribal make-up of each district is one of his key considerations when he's drawing districts. "I know very well the geographic and social situation and tribes and families," he said. "For example, if one big village has only one electoral box according to law, but it's unsafe because people [from different tribes] clashed, I can make two boxes so they won't clash."

As a result, tribal leaders are once again key players in Egyptian electoral politics. Egypt's non-Islamist parties are already planning to aggressively court them: For example, the Conference Party, founded by former Foreign Minister Amr Moussa earlier this year, is essentially a coalition of relatively small parties that managed to win seats in the last parliamentary elections in large part due to their tribal connections. And those parties with barely any popular support, such as the left-of-center Dostour and Egypt Social Democratic parties, are working through their clan-affiliated members to win key tribes' support.

"[The tribes] are renewing their blood," Kamal, the ex-NDP official, told me. "The guy who ran for parliament years ago won't run, but his cousin will." The old way of doing politics, in other words, is back.

By appeasing the old tribal networks, the newly emerging regime looks to promote a level of calm that the Muslim Brotherhood -- which the clans largely view as mortal competitors -- could never achieve. But there are two big reasons why this strategy will falter in the long run.

First, the return of a clientelist system won't resolve the core problems that incited the 2011 uprising and also contributed to the anti-Morsy uprising this summer: high youth unemployment and widespread economic hardship. The current government, in fact, appears to be in total denial that there is even a real problem. "We are least worried about the economics," an official in the Finance Ministry's policy division told me. "The fundamentals are there."

While Egyptian officials correctly attribute the country's economic woes to the political instability of the past three years, their assessment that Egypt is on the verge of an economic rebound appears based on a set of worryingly data-free assumptions. Deputy Prime Minister Ziad Bahaa El-Din told me that once things normalize, the government will be able to fund its ballooning budget without having to rely on oil-producing Gulf states' largesse in part through a tourism resurgence. "We cannot assume that Egypt will continue in the current level of touristic travel," he said. "We

must assume that it will get higher."

The math, however, just doesn't add up. The latest data pegs Egypt's cash reserves at just under $19 billion -- and that's despite a massive $12 billion pledge from the Gulf states immediately after Morsy's removal, approximately $7 billion of which has already been delivered. Meanwhile, rather than using that cash to reform the food and fuel subsidies that comprise a significant portion of the government's expenditures, it is being used to increase government employment, raise the minimum wage for government employees, and complete infrastructure projects. And the new constitution will further handcuff the government's fiscal flexibility: According to the recently circulated draft, the state will be required to spend 3 percent of GDP on healthcare, 4 percent on education, 2 percent on university education, and 1 percent on scientific research.

The present trajectory, in other words, doesn't bode well for a country that cannot count on Gulf generosity indefinitely. And these expansionary policies won't even buy prolonged social peace: As Bahaa El-Din acknowledged, it will take time before the infrastructure investments trickle down to lower-income Egyptians, and the government has struggled to control food prices and implement the minimum-wage raise. So while Egypt's economic cliff is further away than it was during Morsy's last weeks in office, when gas and electricity shortages intensified just as Egypt's summer burned the hottest, a cliff is still waiting in the distance because the current level of spending is simply unsustainable.

The second reason why Egypt's current calm won't translate into longer-term stability involves the Islamist parties who, not too long ago, dominated Egyptian politics. These parties recognize the emerging political system for what it is -- an attempt to limit, if not entirely obliterate, their political influence -- and they might therefore pursue politics via other, more destabilizing means.

This is especially true of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Islamist movement has refused to accept the government's post-Morsy "roadmap," which is the government's condition for ending the crackdown against the Brotherhood, and it continues to believe that Morsy will be reinstated.

"Sisi has on his neck 5,000 dead Egyptians," one Brotherhood leader told me, inflating the reported death count by a factor of five. "So it makes no sense that he'll complete his political life. Bangladesh is now taking its putschists to court, and Turkey did the same thing even without having a revolution against the coup like we have here in Egypt."

By "revolution against the coup," the Brotherhood leader meant the mostly small pro-Morsy protests that have continued for months. Still, the Brotherhood's confidence that it will win, however delusional, indicates its motivation to fight the status quo rather than accept it.

While Egypt's other Islamist parties don't share the Brotherhood's eagerness for confrontation, they don't trust the emerging order either. "I won't run," said Amr Gamal, a Qena-based leader for the Salafist Watan Party, which aligned itself with Morsy and protested his ouster. "If they pass the constitution -- and God willing they won't -- it will not be real elections," he said.

Even the Salafist Nour Party, which has participated in the post-Morsy transition and seemingly won the military's acceptance as a political player, mistrusts the forthcoming system. The current regime "is returning back to the time of Mubarak," Sharkiya-based Nour Party leader and former parliamentarian Gamel Metwally, told me. "And the explanations for it are nonsense."

While Metwally said that the Nour Party intends to continue participating in the transition "to preserve the Islamic identity for the Egyptian people," he acknowledged that it -- unlike the Brotherhood -- has no control over its rank-and-file, and therefore could not guarantee that members would vote in the forthcoming political process.

Egypt's new powerbrokers shouldn't count the Islamists out, or expect them to meekly retreat from the political

sphere after getting their first taste of real power. While Islamist movements have lost substantial popular support in the past year, they remain extremely well organized and boast ideologically cohesive, motivated bases. That raises the strong possibility that they will take to the streets or embrace violence, both of which bode poorly for Egypt's long-term stability.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that including Islamists isn't exactly a recipe for stability either. During Morsy's year in power, Islamists demonstrated that they are just as willing to manipulate Egypt's political institutions to their own advantage as their Mubarak-era opponents. Moreover, Islamists' explicit desire to control Egyptians' personal lives makes the choice between a stable Egypt that includes Islamists and an unstable Egypt that excludes Islamists a false one, since there is nothing particularly stabilizing about a government that would enforce a ban on bikinis, let alone incite its rank-and-file against Shiites.

Ultimately, Egypt's ideological struggles are a sideshow. The country's fate will be determined by two intertwined power struggles: The narrower fight between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military that removed it from power, and the broader fight between the old Mubarakist tribal order and the Islamist order that was only beginning to consolidate itself. For both sides in these conflicts, the stakes are existential, which is why Egypt's current calm -- unsteady though it is -- should not be mistaken for progress, let alone stability.

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