

Egypt Will Erupt Again on June 30

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Articles & Testimony

Given the opposition's growing rage and the Brotherhood's increasingly confrontational stance, the upcoming nationwide protests are unlikely to end well.

The Middle Egypt governorate of Beni Suef, an agricultural province located 70 miles south of Cairo, is an Islamist stronghold. Islamists won 14 of Beni Suef's 18 seats during the first post-Mubarak parliamentary elections in December 2011, and Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi won nearly two-thirds of Beni Suef's votes in the second round of the 2012 presidential elections en route to an otherwise narrow victory.

Yet Brotherhood Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie, who teaches in the veterinary school of Beni Suef University, hasn't visited his home in the governorate since late March, when activists hoisted anti-Brotherhood banners and surrounded the mosque where he was scheduled to deliver a Friday sermon. "The people planned to attack him and hold him in the mosque," Waleed Abdel Monem, a former Muslim Brother who owns a socialist-themed cafe up the street from Badie's home, told me. The Supreme Guide's son now holds down the fort, and Brotherhood cadres are occasionally called upon to protect his home whenever demonstrations are announced on Facebook.

The anti-Brotherhood backlash that has forced Badie from Beni Suef is the product of mounting popular frustrations regarding the organization's failed governance of Egypt during Morsi's first year in office. Rising food prices, hours-long fuel lines, and multiple-times-daily electricity cuts -- all worsening amidst a typically scorching Egyptian summer -- have set many Egyptians on edge, with clashes between Brotherhood and anti-Brotherhood activists now a common feature of Egyptian political life. And this low-grade unrest may soon intensify: On June 30, the anniversary of Morsi's presidential inauguration, opposition activists will launch nationwide protests under the banner of "Tamarod," or "Rebellion."

The "Tamarod" campaign claims to have collected nearly 15 million signatures (take those numbers with a massive chunk of salt) on petitions that list Morsi's many failures -- such as "the economy collapsed" and Morsi "follows the Americans" -- and demand early presidential elections. If this demand sounds unrealistic, well, it is: There is no legal

basis for using a petition drive to force an elected president of Egypt to call for early elections.

To be sure, this is something that many "Tamarod" supporters recognize, which is why they have another goal in mind: channeling popular exasperation with Morsi's presidency into mass protests that will force him and his Brotherhood-dominated government from power. "We will leave our homes [on June 30] and not go back unless the regime steps down, or we will die," said Abdel Fattah Sabry, the chief organizer of "Tamarod" in the Nile Delta city of al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Sabry anticipates millions pouring into the streets -- "this revolution will break all records," he told me -- and forcing Morsi's ouster. Thereafter, he said, the military will appoint an interim presidential council largely comprised of non-Islamists, which would administer new elections.

Of course, this is equally improbable. The only foreseeable way that mass protests could topple Morsi is if things get so violent after June 30 that the military is impelled, against its better instincts, to intervene to stop what would have to be unprecedented bloodshed. But it likely wouldn't end there: An intervention of this sort would bring the military into direct confrontation with Islamists, some of whom would take up the very arms that they were prepared to use exactly a year ago, when they believed that Egypt's then-ruling junta might deny Morsi the presidency. This scenario is one that the military knows and desperately wants to avoid, which is why Morsi will probably still be Egypt's president on July 1.

But that shouldn't be a source of consolation to either Morsi or the Brotherhood because, political titles aside, the country may fall entirely out of their control. "Marches will start from different places, and will reach the presidential palace," said Mohamed Haikal, one of the five "Tamarod" founders. "We will also surround other places: governorate offices and even Egyptian embassies abroad, including in Washington." The activists intend to sit in these locations indefinitely, perhaps fortifying their position by parking hundreds of cars at the various protest grounds. Meanwhile, labor activists in Egypt's industrial areas are planning major strikes to shut down the economy until Morsi goes. "The atmosphere is ready because workers are ready," a labor leader at a major textile factory in Mahalla told me. "On June 30, factories will turn off, and we are organizing in factories all over the country."

Whether or not the June 30 protests achieve the numbers that "Tamarod" anticipates -- and it's impossible to know, because the average person's decision to join an uprising is typically an in-the-moment kind of thing -- the basic, anti-Brotherhood rage that their plans reflect is, indeed, widespread.

The Brotherhood, however, is in complete denial of this. Brotherhood leaders and members contend that Morsi has been a mostly successful president, and they view the planned protests as validation that their long-term project of building an Islamic state in Egypt is progressing. "[Brotherhood founder] Imam Hassan al-Banna told us this would happen 70 years ago," Mahmoud Rashad, the Brotherhood party's media chief in the Nile Delta governorate of Gharbiya, told me. "So I am not worried, but confident that we are on the right track."

At the same time, the Brotherhood views "Tamarod" as a conspiracy by a small, though vocal, minority -- one that it wants to expose by counter-mobilizing more emphatically, and earlier. "We will go even before June 28 in all governorates all over the country to celebrate one year of a legitimately elected president," said Reda Ghanem, another Brotherhood media official in Gharbiya. Indeed, the Brotherhood announced on Friday that it would hold a "series of million-man marches to protect the sharia" during the week leading up to June 30, and it has repeatedly signaled its willingness to confront "Tamarod" directly. As Brotherhood party secretary-general Hussein Ibrahim recently declared, "the people will not allow their will to be assassinated...and will defend their will with everything they own." In this vein, at its mass protest on Friday, the Brotherhood ominously featured Islamist youths performing martial arts.

Of course, the Brotherhood has confronted its opponents violently before -- and the results were disastrous. On December 5, 2012, the Brotherhood dispatched cadres to attack a mass opposition protest outside the presidential

palace in Ittahadiya. As the *New York Times* reported, Muslim Brothers "captured, detained and beat dozens of [Morsi's] political opponents...holding them for hours with their hands bound on the pavement outside the presidential palace while pressuring them to confess that they had accepted money to use violence in protests against him." Seven people were killed in the fighting, and many activists contend that the ruling party's use of violence against its opponents was the point at which they decided they could no longer tolerate Morsi's presidency.

Yet Muslim Brothers still see their December 5 mobilization as the right move. "The MB...saw that what's happening around Ittahadiya as sort of taking off the rule and trying to end the legitimacy of the president," former Brotherhood party spokesman Ahmed Sobeia, who now runs the Cairo bureau for the Hamas-owned al-Aqsa network, told me. "So the people went to protect -- to defend -- the palace." Will the Brotherhood once again send its cadres against anti-Morsi protesters? "What the organization or the Muslim Brotherhood [leaders] see is right, we will obey," Sobeia said.

Meanwhile, rather than working to calm the political atmosphere at this critical moment, Morsi is doubling down on confrontation. Consider, for example his most recent round of gubernatorial appointments, in which he bucked opposition demands for more inclusive rule by granting governorships to seven more Muslim Brothers. Most astoundingly, Morsi appointed a member of al-Gamaa al-Islamiya, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, to govern Luxor, which was the site of a horrific 1997 al-Gamaa terrorist attack in which 58 tourists were murdered. Predictably, these appointments set off immediate -- and often violent -- demonstrations, which ultimately forced the governor to resign on Sunday.

Yet, from Morsi's perspective, the al-Gamaa appointment might have been worth the blowback. Two days later, al-Gamaa leader Assem Abdel Maged announced that "the Islamists will face violence with violence on June 30," warning that his organization would respond to violence by declaring an Islamic state from Tahrir Square. And lest one thinks that these are idle threats, take heed: Abdel Maged was imprisoned from 1981 to 2006 for providing "moral and material" support to the assassins of former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and he previously shared a prison cell with al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

So this is where most Egyptians find themselves on the eve of yet another planned mass demonstration: between an enraged opposition seeking a new uprising whose "success" depends on its ability to foment unprecedented chaos, and an utterly incapable, confrontational ruling party that now counts some of Egypt's most violent political elements as its core supporters. Whatever happens on June 30, it can't end well.

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