Egypt: One Year after Tahrir Square

by Samuel Tadros **(/experts/samuel-tadros)** , Eric Trager **(/experts/eric-trager)** , David Schenker **(/experts/david-schenker)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Samuel Tadros (/experts/samuel-tadros)

Samuel Tadros is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom and a distinguished visiting fellow in Middle Eastern studies at the Hoover Institution.

Eric Trager (/experts/eric-trager)

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

David Schenker (/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.

Brief Analysis

On January 24, Samuel Tadros, Eric Trager, and David Schenker addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Tadros is a research fellow at the Hudson Institute and a professional lecturer at John Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. Mr. Trager is the Ira Weiner fellow at The Washington Institute and a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Pennsylvania. Mr. Schenker is the Aufzien fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

SAMUEL TADROS

Those Egyptians who do not subscribe to the Islamist trend represent a disparate body of minority groups, tech-savvy youths, and leftists, among others. Although often described broadly as "liberals," "democrats," "secularists," and "moderates," many are neither secular nor liberal, and , in fact, have nothing in common apart from their fear (and, in some cases, hatred) of Islamists. Therefore, the best descriptor is perhaps "non-Islamists."

For decades, the three main players in Egyptian politics have been the regime, the Islamists, and the non-Islamists. The non-Islamists' actions have been guided by their perception of the Islamist threat and the regime's ability to coopt the non-Islamists. Whenever the Islamists appeared to be strong, the non-Islamists sided with the regime. But

when they perceived the Islamists to be weak, or when the regime's ability to maneuver was compromised, as was the case in early 2011, the non-Islamists felt more comfortable lashing out against the regime, viewing it as a greater threat and, ultimately, toppling it via revolution. Once Mubarak fell, however, Islamists once again became ascendant.

The postrevolutionary period has not been kind to non-Islamists for a number of reasons. Their obsession with past grievances (e.g., Mubarak's trial, stolen assets, corruption) led them to view regime remnants as the greatest threat to Egypt's future -- an approach that yielded only electoral failure. Most non-Islamist parties are uncompromising and lack a thorough understanding of how politics works. Electoral success requires the ability to negotiate, which requires compromise.

Non-Islamists also view themselves as the representatives of the revolutionary principles that toppled Mubarak. Accordingly, they believe they can change the rules of the game and the fabric of Egyptian society. The truth is, a disconnect exists between the revolutionary protesters and the Egyptian public,a fact that non-Islamists do not yet fully understand Take, for example, the shock that certain liberals experienced when they discovered Salafis in Egypt.

Moreover, non-Islamist parties are divided as to whom they fear more. For some, the prospect of a permanent military government is the biggest threat, so their primary objective is to defeat the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). For others, it is the Islamist Egypt that is quickly becoming a reality. Yet with no clear understanding of their Islamist opponents, non-Islamists will have great difficulty prevailing.

Thus far, most non-Islamist parties have reacted to this threat by either trying to outsmart the Islamists by appearing less controversial or by complaining in parliament about their mistreatment. The Egyptian Bloc, for example, has openly railed against the rapid Islamist dominance of legislative committees. Yet, in the long term, neither of these tactics will change anything.

Going forward, the most important step for both the non-Islamists and the United States is to understand the problem that lies before them. There is no true democratic transition in Egypt. Instead, two groups -- the military and the Islamists -- are posturing for power. Both Washington and the non-Islamists are therefore left to hope for a balance in which the Islamists do not take over every aspect of the state. This is not the only battle to fight in Egypt, but it is the most important.

ERIC TRAGER

At the onset of last year's demonstrations, the lack of a theocratic component led onlookers to believe that the protests would produce a more liberal, democratic Egypt. As the electoral process has since proved, however, Egypt is a long way from becoming a truly democratic state.

Far from being a moderate Islamist organization, as some have suggested, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is structured in a way that makes moderation highly unlikely. For example, after being recruited at a mosque or university, prospective Brothers typically spend four to eight years, sometimes longer, working toward promotion through four tiers of membership culminating in a final tier of "akh amal," or "working Brother." Each tier requires that they pass certain tests, which may include written exams about the MB's curriculum and assessments of their Quranic memorization and preaching skills. Because members must invest so much time in becoming a Brother -- and so much of this time is indoctrination into the group's beliefs -- makes them unlikely to diverge from MB orthodoxy or leave over ideological disagreements.

The MB's hierarchical structure also impedes moderation. At the bottom of the chain are the "families" (usra) -- groups of five Brothers that meet weekly to review MB curriculum, discuss politics, and share aspects of their personal lives. Four geographically defined levels are above the "family," and the MB's Cairo-based Guidance Office

uses this structure to quickly disseminate orders, such as calling on Brothers to participate in demonstrations or vote for the group's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in elections.

Indeed, the MB's nationwide structure has been essential to the FJP's ascension. The group's parliamentary candidates were chosen directly through this hierarchy: prospective candidates applied to the head of their usra, and approved applications passed through four additional layers of MB leadership where they were thoroughly vetted before being seen by the FJP's executive offices. This also disproves the notion that the FJP and MB are separate entities: the former feeds off the latter's organizational structure in most everything it does.

In contrast, Salafi groups -- including the Nour Party -- have no institutionalized structure, and are unified only by a common ideology: following Islamic law to the letter. They are supported and loosely connected through numerous mosques and organizations. Alexandria, the epicenter of the Salafi trend, reportedly has some 2,500 Salafi mosques and 40 Nour offices. Because influential preachers in such mosques have long supported Salafi groups, their followers readily knew who to vote for during the elections. The relative ease of joining the movement might lead more young Islamists to choose Salafism over the long process required to become a Muslim Brother.

The main questions for the new parliament are clear: which parts of their ideology will they act on, and how much will the Salafis pressure the FJP to move further toward the theocratic right? MB leaders have repeatedly threatened to put the peace treaty with Israel to a referendum. The Islamists' stance on civil liberties is a concern as well. Both MB and Salafi leaders have said they will not tolerate criticism of Islamic law, and that they expect Coptic Christians to support sharia-based legislation.

Thus far, Washington has focused on Egypt's formal political process, but it should pay more attention to what is happening on the streets. Given the Islamist electoral victory, the government may now be even less inclined to prevent vigilante action against Christians and secularists. Rather than heading toward democracy, Egypt seems poised to become a competitive theocracy, one in which the key players -- MB and Salafis -- fight over how to properly interpret Islamic law. Such an environment would inherently exclude non-Islamists, including Christians and liberals.

DAVID SCHENKER

The Egyptian revolution placed Washington in an unenviable position: either back a democratic process that would produce an Islamist-dominated parliament (and, perhaps eventually, an Islamist-led government), or support undemocratic and untenable military rule. The absence of appealing policy options has resulted in a year of vacillation between supporting the SCAF and demanding that it transfer power as soon as possible.

Early on, for example, President Obama extolled the SCAF for serving "patriotically and responsibly," while National Security Advisor Tom Donilon praised it for taking steps to allow freedom of expression and assembly and for being "responsive to the aspirations of the Egyptian people." By June, however, some of this euphoria had faded. Ambassador-designate Anne Patterson expressed concern about "arbitrary arrests...nontransparent trials, and attacks on religious groups" as well as "disgusting abuses against women demonstrators." By fall, however, the SCAF was again in the administration's good graces, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton describing it as "an institution of stability and continuity."

In November -- after the Maspero incident that left twenty-seven Copts dead at the military's hands -- Washington seemed to reach a tipping point. On November 25, the White House announced that "the new Egyptian government must be empowered with real authority immediately." Then, in December, Clinton condemned the SCAF for its treatment of women protesting in Tahrir Square. Just days later, however, the administration reverted to its more conciliatory rhetoric, even though the SCAF had just shut down the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and fifteen other NGOs. On January 5, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs

Jeffrey Feltman announced that the closures would not harm U.S.-Egyptian relations.

In contrast to the moving target on SCAF, Washington's policy on Islamists has been consistent and predictable. In July, Feltman laid out the broad outlines of the administration's policy of engagement with the MB, which held that the United States would continue working with the group so long as it respects the rule of democracy, minority rights, and human rights in general. Since then, the administration has initiated a senior-level dialogue with the MB and the Salafis, largely focused on the transition and the ailing economy. Yet according to U.S. and MB accounts of these meetings, Egypt's peace treaty with Israel has not been discussed, despite the Brotherhood's desire to nullify it.

Going forward, Washington must make clear that U.S. engagement with the Islamists -- and, indeed, the U.S.-Egyptian relationship -- will be damaged if parliament presses for confrontation with Israel or otherwise advocates violence. Washington should also set the bar high for the MB in terms of honoring Cairo's other obligations, including Suez Canal passage, counterterrorism cooperation, respect for rule of law, and commitment to freedom of speech and religious tolerance.

Washington will continue to face difficult and unpalatable policy options in Egypt. For example, would the administration be sympathetic if the SCAF attempted to bar the Islamists from changing the country's presidential model of government to a parliamentary model? And how does Washington view the supraconstitutional principles that enshrine the military's authority in Egyptian politics, and which the SCAF has yet to repudiate? Finally, will Washington continue its efforts to help the non-Islamists become a viable alternative to the Islamists? And will it do so even if the Islamist-led legislature opposes this assistance? At present, the administration appears to consider the SCAF -- and not Islamist authoritarianism -- as the biggest impediment to democratic development in Egypt.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Lauren Emerson. ❖

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