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Articles & Testimony

The Egyptian military's deadly crackdown on Copt protestors marks a turning point in its post-Mubarak rule. Is this what democracy looks like?

Sunday's deadly attacks on Egypt's Coptic Christians, in which armored military vehicles killed 25 and injured hundreds by driving into crowds demonstrating against the recent arson of a church, represent a possible turning point in Egypt's rusting revolution. The military's responsibility for this bloodshed -- apparently carried out while senior officers were helping broker the Israel-Hamas prisoner swap announced Tuesday -- makes it harder to believe that Egypt's military leadership will promote the democratic changes that it has promised. "The military council has stated time and time again that it will not attack Egyptians," said U.S. Copts Association president Michael Meunier, who was in Egypt during the attacks. "But on Sunday, for the first time, it did. And that's a disaster."

But in Egypt, illusions rarely die quickly -- especially when the government doesn't let them. And from the moment that the violence broke out on Sunday evening, Egypt's transitional government has mounted a tireless campaign to manage the public's response and keep it firmly on the government's side.

The government's propaganda effort began on Sunday evening, when, according to reports, Information Minister Osama Heikal ordered state-run media to cover the clashes "wisely." State-run television obliged, reporting that protesters were attacking soldiers and calling Egyptians into the streets to defend the military. As if on cue, thugs showed up in full force. Shouting "Islamiya! Islamiya" and "the people want the fall of the Christians," they beat protesters, looted Christian-owned shops, and even attacked a Coptic hospital where victims were being treated. Meanwhile, soldiers raided the U.S.-funded Alhurra satellite channel and the privately owned Channel 25, both of which were broadcasting the ongoing violence. (According to reports, at the Channel 25 studio the soldiers asked for employees' ID cards and then proceeded to beat those identified as Christian.) When a number of state-television producers began criticizing the government's coverage of the violence on Twitter, Heikal appeared on state television and announced that anyone who "spreads rumors" about the state-run media would be tried.

While the state-run media has been forced to walk back some its initial propaganda -- such as its false claim that

three soldiers had been killed during the fighting when, in fact, none had died -- the transitional government has promoted a series of conspiracy theories that firmly absolve the military. The most predictable of these was uttered immediately following the violence on Sunday night, when Prime Minister Essam Sharaf addressed the nation and warned of "the external fingers that stir conspiracies." Translation from Egyptian: The United States and Israel are to blame.

Another conspiracy theory peddled by the government is that the anti-Coptic violence was entirely the work of thugs from the previous regime. Tourism Minister Mounir Fakhry Abdelnour, a Coptic billionaire who served in parliament from 2000 to 2005, repeated this line to me over the phone. What about the videos showing military vehicles running roughshod over protesters? "I saw the vehicles running into protesters," he acknowledged. "But I didn't see who was driving those cars. And it is very possible that the same attackers who shot gunfire or threw stones or threw Molotov cocktails took the cars and rode them."

In a way, the government's conspiracy-theorizing been useful because it has highlighted its alliance with Islamists, who have overwhelmingly echoed the official story. Former Muslim Brotherhood leader and presidential candidate Abdel Moneim Abouel-Fotouh -- a "liberal Islamist" according to the *New York Times* -- said that the attacks on Coptic protesters had the "foreign and Zionist aim to foment sedition in Egypt." The Muslim Brotherhood also sought to absolve the military. "We need a fact-finding committee to see who started it, and how people who dared to attack the army," Essam el-Erian, a leader in the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, told me. "The army is not in conflict with the people because the army is only guarding the high institutions, like television and others."

That's not how many Copts see things. "Our media is inciting hatred, because they said that the army needs protection," Sally Moore, a member of the Coalition of Revolutionary Youth, told me. "As if the Christians are stronger than the army, and as if it's a Muslim army -- it's an Egyptian army." While Pope Shenouda, the Coptic patriarch, has called for a three-day fast and urged restraint, many Copts are demanding further action. At funerals held for those killed in Sunday's violence, worshipers called for the downfall of the transitional government.

Egypt's pro-democratic youth activists, however, are taking a more conservative approach. They fear that the government's misinformation campaign has won over the broader public -- and that they will lose the battle of ideas if they push against the government too directly. "People are being influenced by this. I feel it on the streets," Shadi El-Ghazali Harb, a leading activist in the Coalition of Revolutionary Youth, told me over the phone as he stood outside of a Coptic hospital awaiting autopsy results. "There is a widespread belief that it was not the military's fault." So, in the short run, the activists seem inclined to direct their protests against Egypt's less popular transitional government, rather than denouncing the military leadership directly.

To some extent, the public outrage that the youth activists have helped channel against the transitional government is already paying off. On Tuesday, Finance Minister Hazem el-Beblawi tendered his resignation to protest the government's handling of the clashes. Though the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces ultimately rejected his resignation, it represented an important setback for the military junta, and rumors that Prime Minister Sharaf has resigned are further undermining it. Meanwhile, the transitional government has moved quickly to pass new legislation that Copts have long demanded, including laws that ban discrimination, legalize churches that were built before licensing became available in the 1900s, and ease church construction. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces still has to approve these laws, however, and many Copts remain skeptical. "If the law is issued, what's the guarantee that it will be applied practically?" asked Coptic human-rights lawyer Naguib Gobrail, who was injured in Sunday's attacks.

The deep divide in the way that the Copts and Egypt's pro-democratic activists on one hand and the broader Egyptian public on the other view Sunday's violence is potentially explosive. The rage within Egypt's Coptic community -- the understandable reaction to the violence against them before and after Mubarak's toppling -- will only intensify as

Egypt's state-run media continues to dismiss their anger.

Some are predicting that Copts will be inclined to leave the country in the face of this state-sponsored brutality. Gobrail, the human-rights lawyer, noted sadly that two of his sons are pharmacists in Australia and Canada. Moore, however, rejects this notion out of hand. "Copts are ethnically part of this country," she said. "We're not building a new Israel somewhere else."

Eric Trager, The Washington Institute's Ira Weiner fellow, is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is writing his dissertation on Egyptian opposition parties. ❖

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