
The Failure of Political Reform in Egypt

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Millions of Egyptians gathered in Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011 to call for the ousting of Egypt's authoritarian ruler, President Hosni Mubarak. This uprising was unique in that it "exhibited remarkable levels of pluralism and tolerance that had been missing in Egyptian society for decades."¹ Egyptians were drawn to the streets by their shared grievances despite any differences in ideological beliefs. The sense of community felt during this 18-day uprising earned the name the "Spirit of Tahrir,"² and its momentum seemed to indicate that social, economic and political change were well within grasp of Egypt's citizens. Although Egyptians successfully ousted Mubarak, the democratically elected government that followed has since collapsed in Egypt. How, then, did the Spirit of Tahrir dissipate—and political reform fail—just a little over one year later?

For these purposes, the definition of political reform is progress towards the fair rule of law, and the establishment of an accountable and legitimate government. There were multiple factors that contributed to the failure of political reform in Egypt. These include President Mohamed Morsi's arbitrary commitment to democratic principles, Egypt's economic and energy crises, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' (SCAF) tight grip on power, and—perhaps most decisively—the lack of compromise between the SCAF, the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The MB's minor attempts at democratization were not enough to obtain full political reform and the constraints placed on Morsi by the SCAF and the SCC undermined his presidency. These issues ultimately resulted in the failure of political reform and brought about a return to authoritarianism in Egypt with General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as its new face.

BACKGROUND

President Mubarak ruled Egypt for 30 years as a "quasi-military leader."³ He kept Egypt under emergency law, which allowed him to make arbitrary arrests against his opposition and restrict civil liberties.⁴ The Muslim Brotherhood started out in 1928 as a small group working to improve the lives of the poor in Egypt, but it rapidly grew into a multinational—and, at times, controversial—Islamist organization.⁵ The MB's goal of "restoring Islam to its rightful position of centrality in the social order" pinned it against secular military regimes in Egypt.⁶ Still, the MB built a strong presence, particularly because it offered social services not provided by the government. Moreover, other civic institutions could not develop under Mubarak's draconian rule. Mubarak suppressed the MB due to its growing influence and subsequently "amended the constitution to ban religious-based political parties."⁷ Accordingly, the MB was outlawed "almost from the time it was founded... until

¹ Emad El-Din Shahin, "The Egyptian Revolution: The Power of Mass Mobilization and the Spirit of Tahrir Square," *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 3, (2012): 68

² *Ibid.*

³ *BBC News*, "Profile: Hosni Mubarak," March 24, 2017, accessed April 9, 2017.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Rehab Sakr, "Why did the Muslim Brotherhood Fail? The Double-Faced Discourse of Ikhwan and Political Response to Islamist-Secular Diversity in Egypt," *Danubius* 32 (2014): 76.

⁶ Jennifer Wilmot, "A commitment to politics: the trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood during Egypt's 2011–13 political opening," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 8, no. 3 (July 2015): 381.

⁷ *Al Jazeera World*, "The Brotherhood and Mubarak: The story of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and its emergence into the political arena after decades of suppression," May 24, 2012, accessed April 9, 2017.

the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring,⁸ which forced the organization to operate furtively for much of its history. After Mubarak was forced to step down from the presidency on February 11, 2011, the MB formed the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) as its “political arm.”⁹ This allowed the Islamist group to adopt “the tone of a governing party rather than a beleaguered opposition group.”¹⁰ The MB subsequently became the strongest political group in Egypt with Mohamed Morsi as its presidential candidate.

Before Egypt’s first democratic election, however, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed transitional leadership of the country due to its already-large presence in the Egyptian government. The SCAF is the military enclave of Egyptian politics,¹¹ or more specifically, a council of military elites who make up what is called the deep state.¹² David Faris defines the deep state as “the presence of unaccountable, unelected elites that exert control over elected or civilian officials.”¹³ The SCAF has a self-ascribed role as the “guarantor of constitutional legitimacy and security,”¹⁴ and enjoyed significant authorities under Mubarak. Moreover, there is a general understanding in Egypt that joining the military and rising through the ranks “serves as a springboard for commercial or political privilege,”¹⁵ making it a lucrative and powerful entity of Egyptian society and politics.

The SCAF’s alleged goal after Mubarak was removed was to “oversee the transition and ensure that the power would be transferred to a civilian government elected by the people.”¹⁶ Upon assuming power in February 2011, the SCAF issued an Interim Constitutional Declaration, which granted sole parliamentary and presidential powers to the SCAF.¹⁷ Additionally, the SCAF issued an official declaration called the al-Selmi Document in late 2011, which granted the council “broad influence over the decision-making process in Egypt,”¹⁸ including veto power over the soon-to-be president’s authority to declare war. The document also gave the SCAF power to “overrule any passage that ‘contradicts the basic tenets of the Egyptian state and society.’”¹⁹ These laws, among others, were an attempt by the SCAF to avoid being cast aside once a democratically elected president assumed office. Although this document was rejected due to public protests,²⁰ in June 2012—right around the time of the highly anticipated presidential election—the SCAF issued another addendum to the Constitutional declaration, which largely resembled the al-Selmi document. Specifically, the document noted that the president only declares war “after the approval of the SCAF.”²¹ This was an attempt by the military to blur the lines between civil-military rule and hold onto certain authorities; in particular, controlling national security.

⁸ Noah Feldman, “A Life or Death by Choice for Egypt’s New Pharaoh,” *Bloomberg View*, June 16, 2015. Accessed October 7, 2015. <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-06-16/a-life-or-death-choice-for-egypt-s-new-pharaoh>.

⁹ Shadi Hamid, “Beyond Guns and Butter: A U.S.-Egyptian Relationship for a Democratic Era,” *Middle East Memo* 22, Brookings (April 2012): 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Steven Cook, *Ruling But Not Governing: The Military Enclave in Egypt, Algeria and Turkey* (The John’s Hopkins University Press, 2007) in David M. Faris, “Deep State, Deep Crisis: Egypt and American Policy,” *Middle East Policy* (2013): 100.

¹² Hicham Bou Nassif, “Wedded to Mubarak: The Second Careers and Financial Rewards of Egypt’s Military Elite, 1981-2011,” *Middle East Journal* 67, no. 4 (Autumn 2013): 509-529.

¹³ David M. Faris, “Deep State, Deep Crisis: Egypt and American Policy,” *Middle East Policy* (2013): 100.

¹⁴ Alexey Khlebnikov, “Why did the 2011 Egyptian Revolution Fail?,” *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 10, no. 3 (2016): 100.

¹⁵ Faris, “Deep State, Deep Crisis: Egypt and American Policy,” 100-1.

¹⁶ Khlebnikov, “Why did the 2011 Egyptian Revolution Fail?,” 100.

¹⁷ Gamal M. Selim, “Egypt Under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood: The Triangle of Counter-Revolution,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 181.

¹⁸ Arab Strategic Report. (2013). Cairo, Egypt: Markaz Al-Ahrâm Lil Dirâsât Al-Siyâsiyyah Wa Al-Istirâtiyyah, 308 in Gamal M. Selim, “Egypt Under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood: The Triangle of Counter-Revolution,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2015) 183.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Evan Hill, “Background: SCAF’s last-minute power grab,” *Al Jazeera*, June 17, 2012, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/egypt/2012/06/201261812449990250.html>

²¹ “English text of SCAF amended Egypt Constitutional Declaration,” *Abram Online*, June 18, 2012, accessed April 14, 2017, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/45350/Egypt/Politics-/URGENT-English-text-of-SCAF-amended-Egypt-Constitu.aspx>.

The MB/FJP candidate Mohamed Morsi was elected president on June 24, 2012 after the FJP won a majority of seats in the parliamentary elections held earlier that year.²² While the MB initially attempted to work with the SCAF on political reform, constitutional documents previously passed by the SCAF were a significant source of contention. This led both parties to become suspicious “of each other’s intentions to increase their respective control of the Egyptian state.”²³ Moreover, there was also contention between the judiciary branch and the Freedom and Justice Party. During Morsi’s rule, the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) “dissolved parliament, saying the rules, under which a third of the parliament candidates contested, were unconstitutional, making the entire body’s makeup invalid.”²⁴ The SCC also “revoked a law that would have barred former regime officials... from holding office.”²⁵ This bureaucratic infighting stalled political progress in Egypt. In response, Morsi attempted to exempt his authorities and decisions from judicial oversight in November of 2012 and dismissed the head of the judiciary.²⁶ One month later, Morsi drafted a new constitution that broadly incorporated Sharia law. Specifically, the Constitution allowed “clerics to intervene in the lawmaking process,” and left certain “minority groups without proper legal protection.”²⁷ This move outraged many Egyptian citizens.

Coupling Morsi’s power grab with an increase in Egypt’s public debt and high unemployment rates, citizens began to view Morsi’s government as inefficient and possibly undemocratic.²⁸ The tourism, real estate, and construction industries were negatively impacted by internal instability under Morsi, leading many Egyptians to suffer economically.²⁹ Additionally, Egypt saw an energy shortage which forced Egyptians to wait in long lines for fuel. There were also occasional power outages and water shortages under Morsi’s rule.³⁰ After one year in power, Morsi did not produce the transformative results the people hoped for, and Egyptians blamed him for the country’s economic and societal ills. The frustration over these crises drove Egyptians to protest again on June 30, 2013, this time demanding the removal of President Morsi and the FJP. The desire for democracy, human rights and social justice that had originally brought Egyptians to the streets in January of 2011 was replaced with a desire for stability. The SCAF subsequently removed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood from power. Immediately following Morsi’s ousting, the SCAF reinstated military regime, this time under General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi.

ANALYSIS

Many scholars and journalists have pointed at Morsi’s attempt to incorporate Sharia law into the new Constitution as the explanation for the collapse of Egypt’s first democratically elected government. While Morsi’s actions certainly contributed to his downfall, other factors were working in tandem to reverse the revolution’s outcome and stall political progress. These factors include the government’s inability to solve the failing economy, power outages, and fuel shortages, as well as government infighting and a lack of power-sharing behind the scenes. The latter severely

²² Toni Johnson, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood: Their History and Egypt’s Future,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 5, 2012., accessed October 7, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-history-egypts-future-094801290--politics.html>.

²³ Selim, “Egypt Under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood,” 186.

²⁴ Johnson, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood: Their History and Egypt’s Future.”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Laura Smith-Spark, “The rise and rapid fall of Egypt’s Mohamed Morsy,” *CNN*, July 4, 2013, accessed April 16, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/02/world/meast/egypt-morsy-profile/>.

²⁷ Peter Beaumont, “Mohamed Morsi signs Egypt’s new constitution into law,” *The Guardian*, December 26, 2012, accessed April 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/26/mohamed-morsi-egypt-constitution-law>.

²⁸ Salem Y. Lakkhal, “Morsi’s Failure in Egypt: The Impact of Energy-Supply Chains,” *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 134-135.

²⁹ Ibrahim al-Ghitany, “The performance of the Egyptian economy under Morsy,” *Egypt Independent*, June 25, 2013, accessed April 14, 2017, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/performance-egyptian-economy-under-morsy>.

³⁰ Perrine Mouterde, “Egypt’s energy crisis sparks conspiracy theories,” *France 24*, July 13, 2013, accessed April 16, 2017, <http://www.france24.com/en/20130713-egypt-petrol-fuel-morsi-cairo-muslim-brotherhood-islamist-energy-conspiracy>.

undermined the new regime and allowed elements of the old regime to grip onto power. The SCAF attempted to maintain their political authority—consistent with the historic deep state in Egypt—and both the SCAF and MB were unwilling to compromise with one another. The SCC also complicated matters, and at times reinforced the ways of the old regime.

In the lead-up to his removal from office, Morsi attempted to consolidate his power. He issued a decree that exempted his decisions from judicial oversight following the SCC's dissolution of the lower level of parliament.³¹ He also incorporated Sharia law into the new Egyptian Constitution and removed the head of the SCC.³² These authoritarian actions prompted mass protests, as Egyptians began to fear that Morsi was not interested in democratization and instead wanted to enforce an Islamic state.³³ Moreover, these actions contradicted the Brotherhood's earlier statements on Islam and the Constitution. The MB initially claimed that they were "committed to gradual and peaceful Islamization and only with the consensus of Egypt's citizens."³⁴ Morsi also claimed during the election, "There is no such thing called an Islamic democracy. There is democracy only... The people are the source of authority."³⁵ As such, Morsi engaged in "double-speak" since he paid lip service to the Egyptian public, but attempted to implement policies that would please the MB and hardline Salafists.³⁶ It is likely that Morsi recognized the SCAF was working against him and saw it as one of his last opportunities to conceal his power. While Morsi's intentions are debated—with skeptics saying he intended on incorporating Sharia from the outset—, ³⁷ what matters more is that Morsi lost the trust of many Egyptians and became viewed as unwilling to cooperate within a democratic and pluralistic system. This is significant because it legitimized the power of the military over national security, since the SCAF stepped in to save Egypt from what was seen as Morsi's dictatorial rule.

Additionally, the failing economy in Egypt led many of Morsi's supporters in the poor and middle class to "become disaffected," and pull their support for him.³⁸ The economic crisis, however, cannot be pinned on one person or ruling party. Putting aside the fact that a year is too ephemeral to fix the issues with Egypt's economy, the MB was not wholly responsible for the deterioration of the economy. The economy was, in fact, on the decline before Morsi assumed office: "He [Morsi] inherited a huge public debt and a legacy of 30 years of corruption under President Hosni Mubarak. Dissatisfaction with economic conditions in the country was already high."³⁹ Egypt's internal security issues further crippled the economy, as tourism slowed and foreign investments became more infrequent. It is likely, however, that whoever won the presidency would have faced similar issues. Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Doha Center argues, "Anyone who was going to be president right now was going to deal with a deteriorating economy and a rotten, corrupt bureaucracy, many of whom are hostile to President Morsy and the Muslim Brotherhood."⁴⁰ While some argue that the Brotherhood was more focused on consolidating power than fixing the economy, the FJP vocally supported an "Egyptian economy built on the principle of economic freedom," and declared that "economic freedom is the guarantor of economic creativity, progress,

³¹ Nirmala Pillay, "The Rule of Law and the New Egyptian Constitution," *Liverpool Law Review* 35, no. 2 (August 2014): 151 and Smith-Spark, "The rise and rapid fall of Egypt's Mohamed Morsy," CNN.

³² Ibid.

³³ Jeffrey Haynes, "The 'Arab Uprising', Islamists and Democratization," *Mediterranean Politics* 18, no. 2 (July 2013): 179.

³⁴ Johnson, "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood: Their History and Egypt's Future."

³⁵ Mohamed Morsi quoted in Smith-Spark, "The rise and rapid fall of Egypt's Mohamed Morsy," CNN.

³⁶ Carrie Rosefsky-Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, in Bassam Tibi, "Changing Islamism from Jihadism to Institutional Islamism, a Moderation?" *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 98, no. 2 (2915): 156.

³⁷ Smith-Spark, "The rise and rapid fall of Egypt's Mohamed Morsy," CNN.

³⁸ Fawaz Gerges, quoted in Smith-Spark, "The rise and rapid fall of Egypt's Mohamed Morsy," CNN.

³⁹ Smith-Spark, "The rise and rapid fall of Egypt's Mohamed Morsy," CNN.

⁴⁰ Shadi Hamid, quoted in Smith-Spark, "The rise and rapid fall of Egypt's Mohamed Morsy," CNN.

and development...⁴¹ Certainly advocating for liberal economic prosperity and implementing successful economic policies are two different things; however, the FJP was eager to boost the economy as they were aware it would legitimize Morsi's rule and keep the SCAF at bay. Moreover, a few months before his ousting, Morsi agreed to try and renegotiate with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) regarding economic reforms to receive loans.⁴² The negotiations for an IMF loan began before Morsi took office and ran into "repeated snags" because the IMF wanted Mubarak to "rein in public finances" and broaden reforms.⁴³ As such, Egypt's issues with the IMF began before Morsi's rule. Because Morsi was ousted before any economic policies could take effect, whether or not Egypt's economy would have ultimately improved remains an unknown.

In addition to the economic problems, fuel shortages and power outages that occurred in the months leading up to the removal of Morsi were detrimental to the MB's credibility as an effective ruling party. This was arguably the *coup de grâce*, which led to Morsi's removal from power.⁴⁴ Following Morsi's ousting, it seemed as though the SCAF "injected a large quantity of gasoline into the market to fix the shortage,"⁴⁵ since the energy crisis seemed to resolve itself overnight. It is important to consider how Egypt went "from having long lines for gasoline" under Morsi's rule, to "having such an abundant supply that the lines disappeared" the day after Morsi was jailed.⁴⁶ Critics of Morsi claim that the "miraculous turnaround only proves how badly he was running the country."⁴⁷ On the other hand, *The New York Times* journalists Ben Hubbard and David Kirkpatrick argue that the "miraculous end to the crippling energy shortages seems to indicate that the legions of personnel left in place after... Mubarak was ousted... played a significant role—intentionally or not—in undermining the overall quality of life under the Islamist administration of Mr. Morsi."⁴⁸ Although concrete evidence indicating that the SCAF manufactured this energy crisis is lacking, the return of the police to the streets immediately following Morsi's fall indicates that forces were working against him. For instance, under Morsi's rule, "crime increased and traffic clogged roads," and yet, "the police refused to deploy fully," until after Morsi was removed from power.⁴⁹ While Morsi may have shown an inability to develop a comprehensible solution to economic issues and fuel shortages, the unwillingness of the SCAF and the police to work towards fixing these issues indicates that some sought to undermine Morsi at the expense of Egyptians. It is reasonable to interpret this to mean that even if Morsi had developed a solution, it would not have been accepted or applied.

Ultimately it is the lack of power-sharing that contributed most to the demise of democracy in Egypt, as indicated by the power struggle underlying the economic and energy crises in Egypt. Scholar Arend Lijphart argues that power-sharing is "a set of principles which... provide each significant group in a society with representation and decision-making capacities in general affairs."⁵⁰ Power-sharing involves compromise and is a crucial element of successful democratization. This is particularly true in a country like Egypt, where the deep state makes it extremely vulnerable to

⁴¹ *Egypt Independent*, "Part IV of the Freedom Party Program and Justice: Economy," April 5, 2011, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://www.almazryaloum.com/node/388072> also in Hamid, "Beyond Guns and Butter," 5.

⁴² Selim, "Egypt Under SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood," 194.

⁴³ Roula Khalaf, "Morsi adviser blames IMF for delaying Egypt \$4.8bn loan agreement," *Financial Times*, June 9, 2013, accessed April 9, 2017.

⁴⁴ Lakhal, "Morsi's Failure in Egypt" 135.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Harold Maass, "Did Egypt's military manufacture an economic crisis to sabotage Morsi?," *The Week*, July 11, 2013, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://theweek.com/articles/462268/did-egypts-military-manufacture-economic-crisis-sabotage-morsi>.

⁴⁸ Ben Hubbard and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Sudden Improvements in Egypt Suggest a Campaign to Undermine Morsi," *The New York Times*, July 10, 2013, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/11/world/middleeast/improvements-in-egypt-suggest-a-campaign-that-undermined-morsi.html?smid=pl-share>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Arend Lijphart, 1977a: 25 in Alexandre de Sousa Carvalho "Power-sharing: concepts, debates and gaps," *Janus.net e-journal of International Relations* 7, no. 1 (May-October 2016): 20.

military takeover. The lack of trust between the MB and the SCAF made power-sharing nearly impossible. The SCAF—which is a “deeply rooted bureaucracy”—resisted Morsi not only because of a lack of trust, but because the SCAF had “always hated” the Brotherhood due to its resistance to Mubarak’s rule.⁵¹ The MB and Morsi, likewise, distrusted the SCAF and were “disinclined to compromise or to reach out to his [Morsi’s] political and ideological opponents,”⁵² especially those from the old military regime. Both parties attempted to pass laws that would undermine the other, and the SCC involved itself into this power struggle, most times on the side of the SCAF. The constant bureaucratic infighting in Egypt misallocated time and resources towards the consolidation of power rather than towards tending to Egypt’s fragile state and economy. Instead of working together, the SCAF and MB tried to work around one another and undermine each other’s power.

CONCLUSION

When coupling Morsi’s attempts to incorporate elements of Sharia law into the Constitution with the economic problems in Egypt and the lack of reconciliation between the SCAF and the MB, it becomes evident why political reform was unsuccessful. Morsi’s rash decision to overextend his authority and the SCAF’s efforts to undermine Morsi further sealed the fate of his presidency. Whether or not Morsi was a moderate Islamist, to some extent, is moot because the other institutions, namely the SCAF and the SCC, would not compromise and did not trust the MB. The power struggle between elites made it so that political reform was hopeless from the time the SCAF published the Interim Constitution and the Muslim Brotherhood formed the FJP. The SCAF and the MB were skeptical of each other from the outset and thus unwilling to share decision-making capacities, marking the ultimate failure of the revolution. The case of Egypt sheds light on the need for reconciliation and power-sharing in democracy transitions, and thus provides a prescription for emerging democracies: elites from the previous regime—as well as new representatives and revolutionaries—must be willing to compromise and put the fate of the country before political power.

⁵¹ Max Read, “Did the ‘Deep State’ Sabotage Morsi?,” *Gawker*, July 11, 2013, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://gawker.com/did-the-deep-state-sabotage-morsi-742435712>.

⁵² Max Read, “Did the ‘Deep State’ Sabotage Morsi?,” *Gawker*, July 11, 2013, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://gawker.com/did-the-deep-state-sabotage-morsi-742435712>.