

Sally Khalifa Isaac

Egypt's Transition: How is it under Brotherhood Rule?

The election of the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohammed Morsi, as Egypt's first civilian elected President in June 2012, does not seem to bring Egypt's transition to an end. Morsi, who won the elections with slightly more than 50% of votes, has been constantly gaining more opponents to his rule over the past two months. However, a wide stratum of the Egyptians who disagree with Morsi also seem to prefer to be patient and give the President a chance to act. As many of his critics have repeatedly observed, the President – who is generally liked for his spontaneous speaking – appears to be an honest guy with good intentions for reform and development. Yet, Morsi is challenged for two main reasons: one is what he has done since he was elected President, which has unleashed the criticism of non-Islamist forces who accuse him of “Ekhwanizing” the state, silencing his critics, and firmly consolidating a new autocracy of a religiously ideological nature. Second is the challenge in searching for a new foreign policy posture and seeking a reinvigorated regional role. This analysis attempts to shed light on both the domestic milieu and foreign policy under Brotherhood rule.

The Domestic Milieu: Ekhwanizing the State and Consolidating a New Autocracy?

To start with, the vague relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ekhwān Al-Moslemeen) as an organized group, their Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), their top Guidance Bureau, and the Presidency itself has fueled criticism concerning the MB rule. Many are totally convinced that Morsi does not speak his heart, but that the top Guidance Bureau fairly dictates to him what to do. This conviction is supported by the fact that Morsi himself lacks political expertise, and that the hierarchical structure and internal discipline governing the Brotherhood is very strong. In line with this conviction, the steady actions that Al-Ekhwān have pursued ever since Morsi's election confirm to a great extent their prior tendency to

No.138 – OCTOBER 2012

Abstract

The election of the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohammed Morsi, as Egypt's first civilian elected President in June 2012, does not seem to bring Egypt's transition to an end. Morsi is challenged for two main reasons: one is what he has done since he was elected President, which has unleashed the criticism of non-Islamist forces who accuse him of “Ekhwanizing” the state, silencing his critics, and firmly consolidating a new autocracy of a religiously ideological nature. Second is the challenge in searching for a new foreign policy posture and seeking a reinvigorated regional role. This analysis attempts to shed light on both the domestic milieu and foreign policy under Brotherhood rule.

Sally Khalifa Isaac, Associate Professor of Political Science at Cairo University.

The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

monopolize power and have raised debate domestically on what is now widely termed “Ekhwanization” of the state. These actions include:

1. The new appointments of either Ekhwan or Ekhwan-friendly persons to almost all the high-rank positions of the executive. This process started with the prime minister and cabinet, which is also almost free of women and Copts, and extended to the Head of the Presidential Diwan, Morsi's consultants and Presidential Team.
2. Morsi's bold decision to reshuffle the armed forces and nullify the constitutional declaration, which the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) had issued shortly before naming the elected President. Morsi forced retirement on all top-level military officers, including SCAF head and Defense Minister, Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi; his Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Sami Anan; and heads of the navy, air force, and air defence branches. Two days later, Morsi appointed a new Defence Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, General Abd-Al-Fatah Al-Sisi, who resumed the process of reshuffling the Military by sending around 70 generals into retirement and changing the composition of SCAF¹. Although Al-Sisi does not belong to the MB, he is considered to be non-resistant to Islamists and MB rule. On the one hand, Morsi's decision to profoundly reshuffle the Military was celebrated nationwide, even if this was mainly manifested by thousands of Islamists gathering in Al-Tahrir Square in support of Morsi's decision². Indeed, this clever political move marks notable progress in Egypt's post-January-2011 transition to civil rule, and also to a theoretically healthy balance in Egypt's civil-military relations coming for the first time in sixty years in the hands of a democratically-elected civilian President. On the other hand, however, Morsi's bold decisions raised huge concerns domestically and internationally over the now inflated powers of the Islamist President, who just got rid of his only real counterbalance. Indeed, in the aftermath of the January revolution, the Military was perceived as Egypt's most robust state institution that could counterweight the Islamists. Hence, while domestically non-Islamist forces also celebrated Morsi's decisions, they fear that such a move may contribute to more Ekhwanization of state institutions, as the President now possesses not only full executive powers but also legislative authority, and perhaps eventually a decisive say in the ongoing drafting of the new constitution.
3. The currently mysterious drafting of the new constitution by an undemocratically chosen constituent committee, where the majority is controlled by Islamists. The notable lack of transparency in the workings of the committee adds to concerns over the shape of the new constitution, especially its civil rights and freedoms section. The little that comes out of the committee to public debate is both telling and preoccupying. For instance, the committee discussion of modifying a constitutional article to stipulate that God, instead of the people, is the source of authority is quite revealing.
4. The decision of the Islamist-dominated Shura council – the upper chamber of the Egyptian Parliament – to appoint around 50 editors-in-chief and board members of national newspapers³. The decision was largely seen as an MB attempt to dominate the press, and added much to the already existing concerns over freedom of expression under al-Ekhwan rule. The fact that just a

¹ The 70 dismissed generals included high ranking military leaders who were part of SCAF under Tantawi's leadership, such as; Mamdouh Abd Al-Haq, Ismail Etman, Mohsen Al-Fangary, AdAl Omara, Samy Diab and Mokhtar Al-Mula. Cfr. A.A. ENEIN, *Al-Sisi decides on new SCAF formation*, in «The Daily News Egypt», 3 September 2012, <http://thedailynewsegypt.com/2012/09/03/al-sisi-decides-on-new-scaf-formation/> (accessed: 10 September 2012).

² This came as a result of a Muslim Brothers' call, which was broadcasted simultaneously with Morsi's decision on all national and private TV channels, urging its followers to go down the streets in support of the president's daring initiative.

³ A. TAYEL (1 July 2012). *Egypt's journalists fear the “slamization” of press*, in «Al-Arabeya», <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/01/223742.html> (accessed 10 September 2012); *Egypt's journalists protest new Shura Council rules for state-run press*, in «Al Arabiya», 4 July 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/04/224408.html> (accessed 10 September 2012).

few days after these appointments, a satellite TV channel was pulled off the air, two journalists were referred to the criminal court for defamation of the President, and a few articles by renowned writers were censored (such as Youssef Al-Qaeed's article in the Akhbar Al-Youm newspaper) could only confirm the non-Islamists' concerns.

5. The controversial appointment of ten new governors, four of whom are affiliated to the MB, which sparked further criticism of the Brotherhood especially when the newly appointed MB governor in Kafr Al-Shaikh was quoted saying that his prime task is to call people to the true Islam rather than make sure necessary public services are provided. Even with Presidential Spokesman Yasser Ali's announcement that there would be no further changes in the remaining 17 governors, many expect the MB to effect further changes as part of a continual and gradual process to Ekhwanize the state.
6. To the surprise of all political currents, the MB and the newly appointed Justice Minister, Ahmad Mekky, started discussing a new project for the emergency law. The new law is believed to include elaborated measures as conditions for imposing the emergency status. They include cases where public order is disturbed, state security is threatened, and humanitarian disasters occur.
7. Even the newly appointed Minister of Religious Endowment (Awqaf), Talaat Afifi came recently under fire for his attempts to radicalize the Al-Azhar institution. This was in particular manifested on September 9 with the demonstrations organized by the Independent Syndicate of Preachers and Imams and the Al-Azhar Independence Movement against Afifi.
8. Finally, the appointments of the National Council on Human Rights, previously chaired by ex-UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali, to include a majority of Islamist members.
9. Added to all these points are mounting fears in non-Islamists' circles over the Brotherhood's and Salafi's unabated calls to reform the educational syllabi, which is perceived in these circles as an attempt to accommodate conservative Islamic thinking and manage a gradual transformation of society and culture.

For these reasons and more the opposition appears to have valid fears about Egypt's transition, and especially that the course the MB has chosen to embrace over the past two months is tending to lead to the consolidation of a new autocratic rather than democratic rule.

It is very important here to distinguish between two strands in Egypt's opposition: the first are all non-Islamist forces which include leftists, liberals, nationalists and secular youth movements; while the second are the more hard-line conservative Islamic parties and movements, the most important of which are the Salafies and Jihadist movements. While the talk about the opposition here mainly regards the first strand, it would be naïve to ignore the influence of the second. The more hard-line Islamists are significantly putting the MB under careful scrutiny, testing their sincerity in implementing Sharia and in conforming to the principles of Islam – according to their radical interpretations – while redirecting Egypt's domestic and foreign policies. These groups do not feel satisfied with their share in power and, mainly because of their view of the MB as being soft in the application of Islamic law and values, they continue to rebuff alliances with the Brotherhood. Salafies for instance have been very critical of the MB government's decision to seek an IMF loan worth \$4.8 billion, founding much of their criticism on a religious basis and accusing the MB of following the very same policies of the ex-Mubarak regime. It is assumed that this hard religious line may in the future push the MB to accentuate their adherence to Islamic values and principles more than the current situation, even should they not really wish to do so.

As for the non-Islamist forces, they seem to have learned the lesson that they have to unite if they really wish to seriously confront the Islamists. This has been reflected in the ongoing negotiations among many leftist, liberal and nationalist parties to gather in coalitions in preparation for the future parliamentary elections. A notable coalition to mention is the National Egyptian Front, which encompasses the to-be-established party of Mohammed Al-Baradei, Al-Dostour, together with a

number of other parties rallied under two coalitions: the Third Current parties⁴ and the Public Current parties. The new parliamentary elections are expected to take place once a new constitution is approved in a public referendum. It is still hard to predict whether these parties will succeed in uniting, noting their previous failure to do so, their tendency to stress how they are distinguished from each other, their little influence on the street and among the poor strata of society especially compared to the Islamists, and also due to the fact that many big liberal and leftist parties stay out of such coalitions, examples including the leftist Tagamo Party and the liberal Wafd Party.

Apart from party coalitions, other forms of resistance have included organizing demonstrations to counter the Islamists, but with little success. The 24th July demonstration organized by the liberal and former parliamentary member, Mohammed Abu-Hamed, was a great failure as it attracted only a handful of participants and encountered clear threats of Islamist Shaikhs to protestors against Morsi⁵. Likewise were the demonstrations organized by the leftists on August 31st in Talaat Harb Square in downtown Cairo demanding a stop to the Ekhwanization of the state, and the symbolic protests of Egyptian Artists. All these protests came under heavy criticism by the Islamists, who accused their organizers and participants of being anti-God and anti-Islam. This scenario of accusing anti-Morsi and anti-Ekhwan protestors of being anti-God and anti-Islam is quite dangerous as it has come to constitute the post-January revolution regime's mainstream reaction to its opponents.

Foreign Policy: Unwise Swings or is Pragmatism Continuing?

Over the past three decades, Egypt's foreign policy has been constantly criticized for being too attached to the United States if not a follower of the USA. Understanding Egypt's strategic importance and political weight in the region very well, and seeing the advance of the MB in Egypt in the aftermath of the January revolution, the Obama Administration did its best to support the MB. Washington also hailed Morsi's bold decision to reshuffle the Military and regain his full presidential powers. It also sought to write off \$1 billion of Egypt's foreign debt, and continues to extend its second largest foreign aid worldwide to the Egyptian government. However, understanding that an important dimension of the January revolution was the tight embrace of the United States and the close relationship with Israel, Morsi has been trying to find a balance in Egypt's foreign policy and in reinvigorating its regional role.

In seeking this balance, Morsi's first overseas visit was to China, not to the United States, where he was accompanied by seven ministers and an 80-businessman delegation to seek increased Chinese loans and investments. On his way back he headed to Tehran, where he attended the opening session of the Non-Aligned Movement summit to hand the NAM presidency from Egypt to Iran. But his visit also was the first of an Egyptian president to Iran since the latter severed diplomatic relations with Egypt when Sadat signed the peace treaty with Israel in 1979. These two visits to China and Iran have attracted much attention domestically and internationally, for they have indeed marked a change in Egypt's traditional foreign policy. However, the overall picture of Morsi's foreign policy course indicates that pragmatism still prevails in Egypt's external behavior, through its less explicit embrace of the United States and diversification of foreign relations.

⁴ "Third Current" or Al-Tayar Al-Tha'leth is a coalition of 9 civil parties, most important of which are Al-Masreyeen Al-Ahrar, Al-Masry Al-Democracy, Al-Tahalof Al-Shaby , Al-Karama, Al-Araby Al-Nassery.

⁵ *Critics blast Egyptian cleric's fatwa against anti-Morsi protesters*, in «Ahram Online», 15 August 2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/50515/Egypt/Politics-/Critics-blast-Egyptian-clerics-fatwa-against-antiM.aspx> (accessed 10 September 2012).

The decision to address the Chinese on economic matters is indeed clever, especially when noting Egypt's dire need to revive its economy and increase its hard currency reserves. On the other hand, while Morsi's visit to Iran has indeed contributed to easing Iranian-Egyptian relations, it turned the balance again when Morsi addressed the NAM summit with a speech condemning the Al-Assad regime in Syria, which is supported by Iran. The results of the two visits do not seem to have offended Egypt's traditional allies, be they the United States or the Gulf countries, in any way. Rather, Morsi has also been forging friendly relations with the Gulf states: not only with Saudi Arabia but also with Qatar, which recently promised to deposit \$2 billion in Egyptian banks and to launch investments worth \$18 billion. These diversified policies reveal continuity in embracing pragmatism, and also demonstrate that the MB have learned some lessons from Mubarak's last errors. Ironically, history also tells that Mubarak himself sought to adopt what he called a middle way in Egypt's foreign policy when he succeeded Sadat in 1981 after the latter's assassination. That was through restoring relations with the Soviet Union and adopting a cold peace with Israel. These policies turned out in the late 1980s to be successful and pragmatic ones, that did not influence Egypt's close relations with the United States nor bring an end to Egypt's peace with Israel. Rather, they helped Egypt to gradually reinsert itself in the heart of the Arab world, and by 1989 the headquarters of the Arab League was in Cairo again.

Many other facts indicate that Egypt's foreign policy is not undergoing unwise swings. An important one is the ongoing operation in Sinai to counter terrorist/Jehadist groups responsible for the attack on an Egyptian army unit last August and for their quasi domination of the Sinai Peninsula. The Egyptian authorities did not tolerate this terrorist act, carried out in the name of Islamic Jihad, and did not shy to announce that they are closely coordinating moves with the Israeli authorities. Also, the new appointment of the Egyptian Defence Minister did not seem to mar US-Egyptian relations, noting the close ties between the US and the Egyptian Military, since the Pentagon Chief commented in mid August that Al-Sisi pledged to maintain a strong relationship between Cairo and Washington. Perhaps the only foreign action that came under fire at home was the MB's tepid response and apparent reluctance to condemn Hamas for the attack on the Egyptian army in Sinai, even with the Egyptian Military's announcement that the attackers were supported by mortar fire from Gaza during the raid. Noting that from an organizational point of view Hamas is actually part of the MB as a transnational group, it is still unclear how Morsi is going to deal with Hamas regarding a crucial issue of Egyptian national security, such as Sinai. Early in October 2011, the MB played a significant role in the Shalit swap deal by facilitating US and Egyptian mediation between Hamas and the Israeli government. Indeed, Egypt now under MB rule could have a promising role in mediating the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, the question that still needs to be answered is whether or not Morsi is going to put the Palestinian question ahead of Egypt's national security.

Conclusion

Egypt is undergoing a troubled transition that does not seem settled neither with the election of a civilian President nor with the restoration of a theoretically healthy balance between the President and the Military. The Brotherhood's actions over the past two months have only confirmed their tendency to monopolize power and "Ekhwanize" the state, widening the base of their opposition. In conclusion, the past two months of Egypt under MB rule signal a continuous process of consolidating a new autocracy rather than helping found a budding democracy. On the external front, the general line of Egypt's foreign policy under the MB has improved their popularity domestically and somewhat compensated for their huge mistakes in running the country internally. Egypt, up until now, has not experienced radical or 'unwise' swings under MB rule in its general foreign policy orientation, which has been fearfully envisioned by skeptics of how prudent Islamists would be in managing the complexity of Egypt's external relations. Rather, the past two months of

Egypt under MB rule demonstrate a domestically-admired attempt to restore a certain balance in Egypt's foreign policy and to reinvigorate its regional role.

The challenges ahead are many. On the domestic front the MB are challenged by the inevitable need to demonstrate in practice that they can conform to democratic values. This has to appear in the ongoing drafting of the new constitution, especially regarding the section on rights and freedoms, as well as in practically demonstrating their acceptance of pluralism and diversity. One major challenge to the process could be the steady rise in the more conservative Islamists, which could trigger ugly competition between the MB and these radical groups over who is *truly* adherent to the principles and laws of Islam. On the external front, the MB is mainly challenged by the need to simultaneously cope with two overlapping concerns: one being the necessity to restore security and order in Sinai and eventually maintain Egyptian sovereignty over it, which is deemed a core issue of Egyptian national security. The second is the need to engage effectively in the Palestinian question, noting its rising importance and influence on both domestic and regional politics.

La ricerca ISPI analizza le dinamiche politiche, strategiche ed economiche del sistema internazionale con il duplice obiettivo di informare e di orientare le scelte di policy.

I risultati della ricerca vengono divulgati attraverso pubblicazioni ed eventi, focalizzati su tematiche di particolare interesse per l'Italia e le sue relazioni internazionali e articolati in:

- ✓ Programma Africa
- ✓ Programma Caucaso e Asia Centrale
- ✓ Programma Europa
- ✓ Programma Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente
- ✓ Programma Russia e Vicini Orientali
- ✓ Programma Sicurezza e Studi Strategici
- ✓ Progetto Argentina
- ✓ Progetto Asia Meridionale
- ✓ Progetto Cina e Asia Orientale
- ✓ Progetto Diritti Umani
- ✓ Progetto Disarmo
- ✓ Progetto Internazionalizzazione della Pubblica Amministrazione

Le pubblicazioni online dell'ISPI sono realizzate anche grazie al sostegno della Fondazione Cariplo.

ISPI
Palazzo Clerici
Via Clerici, 5
I - 20121 Milano
www.ispionline.it