Egypt: Elections Amidst Violence

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According to unofficial estimates, at least 1,500 people have been killed in Egypt since the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood regime in late June 2013. This is an unprecedented number of casualties in violent domestic confrontations in Egypt in recent decades. The two main causes of casualties are the violence by security forces against supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, and terrorist attacks carried out by various Islamist organizations against the security forces.

The starting point for the current deterioration in Egypt is the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood government by the military, which occurred in cooperation with the liberals and the support of the masses. Millions of Egyptians were tired of the chaos in the country – in the realms of the economy, law and order, and personal security – and feared that the Muslim Brotherhood was exploiting its power in order to introduce Islamic content into state institutions and the Egyptian way of life. The Muslim Brotherhood was pushed completely out of the government, and the army was left as the dominant force in the political arena. Many liberals continue to support the role of the military, even though it is criticized for its intervention in politics and its use of force against the Muslim Brotherhood. A large part of the Egyptian public feels that the conditions that have developed in Egypt over the past three years require a strong hand, and that the alternative, namely, a Muslim Brotherhood government, is much worse. After the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood regime, talks were held with the organization with the idea of including them in the government, albeit as a secondary player. However, the Muslim Brotherhood, which had earned the support of the majority of the people in democratic elections to the parliament and the presidency, refused to accept its ouster from leading positions. Therefore, it demanded that deposed President Mohamed Morsi be returned to office and that the constitution prepared during his tenure be restored.

The issue of the constitution reflects the orientation of the new government. In accordance with the roadmap published by the military leadership immediately after Morsi's ouster, a new constitution was drafted by a fifty-member committee headed by former Egyptian Foreign Minister and former Arab League secretary Amr Moussa. The

committee included representatives from the various factions, including five from Islamic organizations, among them a representative of the Salafist al-Nour party. For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood refused to participate.

Departing from the constitution drafted in 2012 under the Muslim Brotherhood government, most of the clauses in the new constitution are new or amended. The main changes concern the status of Islam in Egypt, the position of the military, and the emphasis on individual freedom and rights. While Islam was defined as the state religion, as it was under Mubarak, and the principles of the *sharia* will be the main source of legislation, these principles will be defined by the Supreme Constitutional Court. The constitution weakens the status of Islamic institutions and strengthens the institutions that are not identified with political Islam. It limits the powers of the president and increases the powers of the defense minister and the military establishment, including the authority to try civilians in military courts, which led to serious criticism from many people, including those who advocated ousting Morsi. The constitution also makes it easier for members of Mubarak's regime to become involved in politics.[1] In a referendum held in January 2014, some 98 percent voted in favor of the constitution; the high rate of support in part reflects the Muslim Brotherhood boycott of the referendum.

With the approval of the constitution, the government intends to continue to implement the roadmap it outlined and hold presidential elections soon, followed by parliamentary elections. As expected, Defense Minister Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi resigned from his position and presented his candidacy for the presidency. The enormous majority with which the constitution was approved was a test of his chances of election, which is almost guaranteed in advance, especially if the Muslim Brotherhood boycotts the elections. Holding the presidential elections before the parliamentary elections could help the new president and influence the results of the parliamentary elections. What will also be in al-Sisi's favor is the recognition by a large part of the Egyptian public that under current circumstances, it is essential that there be a strong and reliable leader who can cope with the problems that plague the country, mainly the economic situation and the clash with the Muslim Brotherhood, even if this represents an undesirable return to the model of government in which a military figure leads the country.

The Muslim Brotherhood's refusal to join the new government led to a direct confrontation between the movement and the army and security forces, and since the summer of 2013, the situation has escalated. The Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters have begun violent demonstrations against the military government in different cities, while the security forces have used force to suppress the demonstrations. Furthermore,

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[1] L. Lavi, "Egypt's Draft Constitution 2014: Focus on De-Islamization, Expansion of Military Power," MEMRI, Inquiry & Analysis Series, Report No. 1049, January 10, 2014.

the army has arrested most of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders and prominent activists, outlawed the group, and declared it a terrorist organization. Against the backdrop of the intensifying terrorist attacks by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic organizations, which have spread from Sinai into Egyptian cities, these measures have pitted the sides against one another. Moreover, it is not only the Muslim Brotherhood that is engaged in the terrorist attacks. There are also many hundreds of Bedouins who operate mainly in Sinai, Salafist jihadi militias, Islamic fighters who have infiltrated from Iraq and Yemen, and groups connected to al-Qaeda. In addition, the military command apparently suspects that Hamas members are involved in the attacks. These terrorist operatives are assisted by arms smuggled from the large weapons stores in Libya amassed by Muammar Qaddafi.

Where will this confrontation lead Egypt? It is difficult to see the end of the deterioration because the sides have not started any substantive dialogue on a cessation of violence and an agreement on a political settlement. The Muslim Brotherhood is vacillating between joining the government, which it deems as tantamount to forfeiting its just demand to return to the positions of power that it rightfully achieved, and a comprehensive struggle – that it might lose – that will cause most of the nation to accuse it of leading Egypt into chaos. In the meantime, it is choosing the middle path of a limited struggle, mainly terrorist attacks and demonstrations, which are not bringing it closer to its goal. On the other hand, al-Sisi could be a strong leader who would enjoy the support of the army and a large part of the public. Nonetheless, it will be difficult for his government to overcome and suppress by force a large, well-organized, highly motivated group with roots such as the Muslim Brotherhood. If the attempt to suppress the uprising fails, the government will need to make concessions and provide at least a partial response to the Muslim Brotherhood's demands to be included in the government. However, as long as the government does not find the way to a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood, the violence and terrorist attacks will continue. At the same time, it is unlikely that the conflict would deteriorate into an all-out civil war such as what is happening in Syria.

For Israel, the significance is twofold. The violence and terrorist attacks harm the stability of a government that is important to Israel, and these attacks could spill over into Israeli territory through Sinai. At the same time, there is no doubt that the military-led government is much better for Israel than the Muslim Brotherhood government. While the Muslim Brotherhood government did not attempt to harm the basis of its relations with Israel, this was a result of the constraints of Egypt's difficult situation. On the ideological level, the Muslim Brotherhood rejects Israel's right to exist, and Israel has common interests with the current regime in Egypt. In practice, security cooperation with this government has increased, especially in regard to the situation in Sinai and prevention of terrorist attacks there. Furthermore, the military government sees Hamas as a threat and has greatly increased its efforts to block the border between Sinai and the Gaza Strip, including by destruction of the tunnels.