

Viewpoints
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Repression's Diminishing Returns: The Future of Politics in Egypt

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Many analysts have rushed to declare a political outcome for Egypt's transition. Some noted the emergence of democracy by detailing the rise of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. Others record the failure of the revolutionaries to compete successfully in elections. More pessimistically, scholars focus on the military and the unreformed Mubarak state apparatus as producing reconstituted authoritarianism. Stacher argues that we must understand Egypt's transition as a process of change rather than a finalized outcome. In doing so, he details the structural limits of governing Egypt as well as the receding capacity of state elites to deploy repression as a means of political control.

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February will mark the beginning of the third year of the Egyptian revolution. While it looked more like an uprising during the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF)-led transition, the structure that SCAF bequeathed to elected president, Mohamed Morsi, suggests more revolutionary change is on the horizon in the coming years. It is, therefore, a pertinent time to review Egypt's political arc.

When popular mobilization temporarily united an ideologically disparate and traditionally fragmented opposition, the swell from the contentious politics overwhelmed Egypt's long-time elites and their coercive tools of repression. Immobilized and unable to regain the initiative, SCAF ultimately sacrificed Hosni Mubarak and his colleagues to the crowds. Yet, rather than the generals siding with democracy, instead this was an opportunistic grab aimed to pre-empt the protesters from gaining more strength, nationally unifying, or developing linkages with other contentious zones such as the restive labor movement. Thus, forestalling structural change beyond SCAF's control served as a real impetus in their move against the incumbent.

Forcing Mubarak to resign bought Egypt's generals time as they salvaged what they could of the political arena. Aware that a Mubarak-style system was lost, SCAF tried to dilute the power of popular mobilization while safeguarding the military's extensive economic interests. They also sought to protect the institution from encroachment by civilians, who possibly could seek accountability. SCAF was unable to will this type of system into existence on its own. These objectives required partners to help implement. Entering into such an uncertain political arrangement meant that a political order needed to be designed to encourage the necessary complicity from previously unreliable groups.

SCAF constructed a favorable political arena by pursuing allies from two main constituencies. The first involved securing the support of the existing state apparatus. The state was disrupted but not broken when Mubarak and his central cronies were forced from office. As time passed, the state bureaucracy resumed its previous functions largely with the same personnel that the Mubarak and Sadatist system had produced. SCAF aided this venture. Hardly any aspect of the state bureaucracy was touched, much less reformed. In fact, with respect to the state's egregiously repressive apparatus, the Interior Ministry stands out as a case in point. Despite persistent calls by activists and protesters to reform the domestic security sector, SCAF did little. Field Marshal Tantawi oversaw the process. He ordered the dreaded State Security bureau to be renamed Homeland Security as well as the removal of some senior figures. Yet, he appointed people in their places who happened to be standing directly behind them. Thus, the internal chain of command and appointment process inside the organization stayed the same. Also, high-profile and politicized courts continued to reliably hand down rulings that protected

senior officers that had been implicated in cases of the torture or wrongful deaths of protesters. This was replicated across the whole of the state bureaucracy when SCAF governed the formal transition. Keeping the state apparatus loyal to the military as an institution was crucial because the state is present throughout the country and responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of authority and delivery of services.

The second constituency that SCAF sought out to partner with was the Society of Muslim Brothers, which is a nationally connected grassroots movement that was established in 1928. The Brotherhood had a tradition of being in opposition but also of communicating with the Mubarak regime. While many Muslim Brothers had gone to jail arbitrarily at the hands of Mubarak's security state, they had also renounced violence, chosen to reform the system from within, and habitually ran for professional syndicate elections as well as for elections in local councils and both houses of parliament. While it would be erroneous to say the Brotherhood were puppets of the Mubarak state, it would be equally wrong to say they rejected the system outright or stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the contentious protest opposition.

SCAF had to devise a system whereby it could elicit the trust and support of this nationally represented political force. SCAF did so by choosing an approach that appealed to the Brotherhood: elections. Between March 2011 and June 2012, Egyptians had the opportunity to vote five times. They cast ballots for a constitutional referendum, for candidates in both houses of parliament, and twice during the presidential elections. During the process of "electionizing" Egyptians, SCAF conditioned a political arena that not only facilitated and staked participants into the system, but also wed them to the unreformed state apparatus. Thus, by the time the Muslim Brothers had won around 47 percent of the parliamentary vote in January 2012, the group's leadership had become invested in cooperating with SCAF and the state. Then, to protect these gains, the Brotherhood doubled down on the gamble and eventually placed one of its own – Mohamed Morsi – into the office of the presidency. Anchored into the system as such, the designed structure took on a life of its own and provided incentives that rewarded acquiescence and acceptance of the logic of the state while punishing movement that broke from the state. In fact, breaking away from the state produced rebellion from within the governing ranks against the elected Brotherhood figures. When presented with the choice to either face an uprising within the governing structures or confront ongoing protests in the streets, Morsi has chosen to side with the state. Yet, this also meant more status quo than change.

President Morsi's consolidation has been incremental but steady. In consultations with members of SCAF, he removed the perceived proponents on SCAF who had argued for the military's imperial presence in domestic politics. As a result, SCAF's generals have seemingly returned the military to the barracks while civilians resume governing. Yet, evidence of the pact continues to surface. In fact, in the new constitution that Morsi rammed through in a December 2012 referendum, the military was one of the largest winners. Not only did the military maintain the ability to try civilians in military trials, but also it became unconstitutional for any

parliament to discuss its affairs or its budget. Furthermore, a National Defense Council will convene that will serve as a way to block any civilian president from unilaterally taking the military to war. In effect, the military has veto power over when the institution can be used. Such constitutional considerations were unthinkable during Mubarak's time, even if civil-military relations have been unchanged in practice. Yet, now the military has constitutional guarantees that ensure its political and economic prerogatives.

In exchange, Morsi and the Brotherhood have been handed the reins of the state as well as its problems. While there are consistently expressed fears of the "Brotherhood-ization" of the state, these seem to be unfounded at this stage. While it is likely that the Brothers would prefer friendlier faces in the state, each time Morsi tries to exercise the executive's privilege of appointment, it is met with fierce resistance and governing obstruction. Undoubtedly, Morsi and the Brothers will win some battles, but it is likely that the state in Egypt will be more of a hybrid than a Brotherhood-dominated creation.

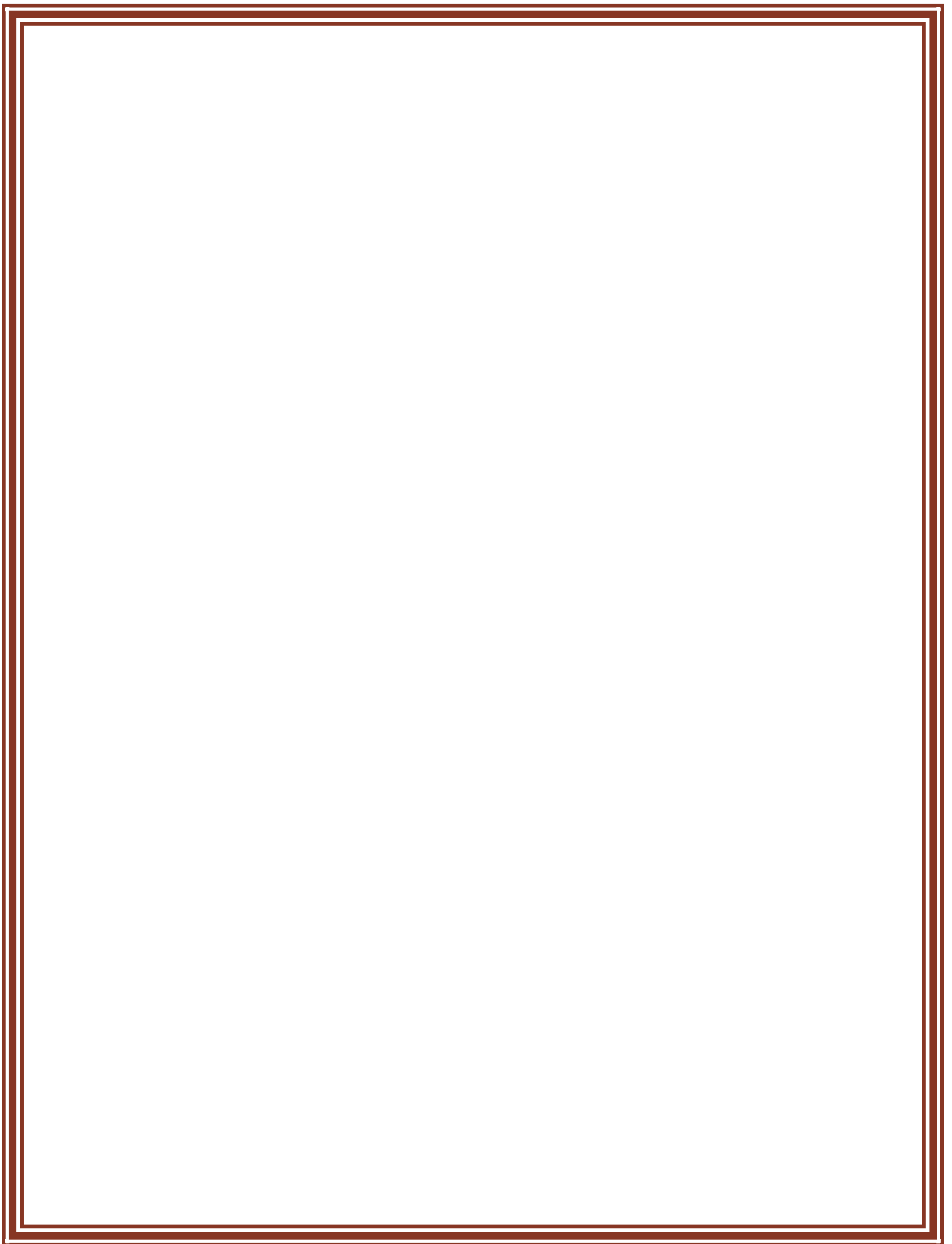
All this suggests that there are continuities that will underpin the overt changes that have occurred and have yet to manifest. Yet, there is one dynamic related to the state's repressive capacity that will be significant and likely will produce greater inclusive change in the future. During the Mubarak era, the president commanded centralized control over the domestic repressive apparatus. Not only did this result in nearly one out of every 50 Egyptians being employed by the Interior Ministry by 2009, it also meant that political control through surveillance was pervasive. The internal security services could pre-empt, contain, and violently deal with real and perceived state opponents. Yet, it is precisely this mechanism that has melted away. Neither Morsi nor any other state faction can wield this type of extensive, penetrating hand into the lives of the citizenry. While the military could theoretically mow down protesters in squares, the generals clearly believe this is an untenable route. Thus, Egypt's elected and unelected rulers are left without the option of repressing their way out of this political impasse. While the previous tactic was a staple of the Mubarak regime, the option to repress political opponents will not be available to the Muslim Brothers or other civilian groups should they ever organize nationally and prove capable of doing well in procedurally free elections. While the police and other state security forces will still pursue petty or violent criminals and will treat threats to the state as existential, the Egyptian state is no longer synonymous with the presidency. Neither does the presidency seem to have the ability to use repression for political purposes.

Thus, the Brothers will have to govern however they can from the offices of state with an uncooperative bureaucracy as well as an increasingly experienced protest movement. Morsi and the group, for now, realize that repressing dissent is futile and have turned to elections to move the political process forward. This has been a successful strategy given their organizational dominance against their current competition. But, as many exclusivist rulers in Eastern Europe will attest, holding snap elections to win political mandates or pass controversial initiatives works until it does not. The contentious opposition that started a process of change in Egypt in

January 2011 has shown no signs of abating. We can expect the next two years to look much like that last two years. While the revolutionaries have not been successful at winning people over to their side, state inefficiency and governing gridlock will send legions of opponents into the revolutionary camp. Given the state elites' weakened capacity to deploy repression, we can expect a wider political negotiation to be the endgame of this unfolding process.



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