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The logic behind Egypt's new authoritarianism

Having used his democratic legitimacy to shield himself, Morsi has raised the stakes of political competition in Egypt.

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The Muslim Brotherhood has a problem, and by virtue of its candidate having been elected president, that problem has now become Egypt's problem. The source of the recent political crisis, President Mohamed Morsi's constitutional decree is rooted in causes both internal and external to the Muslim Brotherhood.

On the one hand, the dilemma that resulted from the aborted revolution of January 25, 2011, which succeeded in ridding the country of the decades-long rule of Hosni Mubarak, but failed to address the authoritarianism and corruption embedded within the state's institutions, from the military and the security agencies, to elements within the judiciary and bureaucracy.

Added to that, in March 2011 voters widely approved a referendum to delay the passage of a new constitution, instead preferring first to elect a new parliament and head of state, resulting in one of the most dysfunctional transitions in modern political history.

The lack of will to see the revolution through to its conclusion has yielded a bizarre hybrid government made up of a combination of the counter-revolutionary remnants of the old regime as well as the self-proclaimed protectors of the revolution, embodied in the group that has enjoyed the greatest electoral success of any political actor, the Muslim Brotherhood.

To be sure, the military council that oversaw the transition, along with the Supreme Constitutional Court, through their constitutional decrees and judicial rulings, has thwarted the revolution's demands at every turn, attempting to secure a political order as close to that of the previous regime as conditions would allow.

From the military's securing of unchecked executive authority, to the constitutional court's dissolution of the elected parliament and both parties' promotion of the presidential candidacy of Mubarak-era relic Ahmed Shafiq, the overarching aim of these moves was to limit the gains of the revolution.

Power struggle

For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood, through its political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), adopted an untenable position of continually seeking accommodation with the power holders while also claiming to uphold the principles of the revolution, resulting in frequent confrontations that culminated in last summer's presidential race.

Morsi's victory and the subsequent power struggle resulted in a government that is essentially Frankenstein's monster run amok, with the Egyptian people, especially those who have repeatedly laid down their lives in the cause of a revolution, ultimately made to pay the price.

The outrage over Morsi's decree and draft constitution stems in large part from the deep suspicions the Muslim Brotherhood have generated among some segments of Egyptian society, due to the tendency of its leadership to shroud its decisions in secrecy and impose its will on the country's remaining political forces.

The so-called "dictatorial power grab" and comparisons to Pharaoh are alarming exaggerations,

even in a country where hyperbole is common political currency.

In truth, the Muslim Brotherhood's unrivalled success in every election it has contested - particularly its impressive triumph over the fully mobilised engines of the state in the presidential race - gives it no need to upend its democratic legitimacy.

Rather than an attack on the popular will, which his party continues to take for granted, Morsi's recent manoeuvres should be read in light of the internal battle among the state's institutions and the escalation they have witnessed in recent months.

Far earlier than claiming legislative powers for himself, Morsi attempted to reinstate the elected parliament, only to be overruled by the Supreme Constitutional Court. Moreover, the timing of the recent move coincided with the expectation that the high court was to dissolve the upper chamber of parliament, along with the Constituent Assembly, placing immense pressure on Morsi to unilaterally appoint a new committee to write Egypt's constitution.

The president did not relish in the prospect of appointing a committee he knew would be rejected at the outset by the political opposition, and preferred to allow the current committee to complete its work. While giving him expansive powers in the process, the decree also allowed Morsi to shield the current committee from the court's impending dissolution order.

The burning question remains, if Morsi believed he lacked the political capital to appoint a new 100-person committee to write the constitution, what possibly possessed him to think the opposition would accept the sweeping nature of his decree, or the rushed constitutional draft that emerged in the current committee's eleventh hour?

The answer may lie in the Muslim Brotherhood's recent history, which prioritised a strong internal hierarchical structure, or *tanzim*, that preached strict discipline throughout the ranks and placed a premium on secrecy in the face of repression. From the early 1980s, the legacy of Nasser's suppression and the authoritarianism of the Mubarak regime caused the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders to view Egyptian politics as a zero-sum game.

New authoritarianism

Despite the strong push by some younger members to expand outreach into society and pursue incremental changes to the political structures, the senior leadership, aided by some of its cadre of new officials, including Morsi and Khairat al-Shater, promoted an insular Muslim Brotherhood that became deeply suspicious of the rest of Egyptian society.

Even upon the group's entry into social and state institutions such as the professional syndicates or the parliament, it was only after they dominated those structures that the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership believed they were worthwhile endeavours. That trend has continued throughout the post-January 25 transition.

The Muslim Brotherhood doubled down from its initial pledge of limiting the number of candidates fielded in parliamentary elections and infamously reneged on its promise not to run

for the presidency.

As a recognised political actor, the Muslim Brotherhood was well within its rights to challenge as few or as many of the available offices that it wished. But given the closed nature of its organisational structure, the consistent lack of engagement with competing political forces and its propensity for relying on majoritarianism to quash all dissent within its ranks and now within the broader society, its leaders should not be surprised by the widespread displays of hostility and resentment.

The latest casualty of this dynamic has been the struggle over the new constitution. If the turmoil surrounding the transitional government has thrown Egypt's political life into disarray, the politicisation of the state's foundational document is sure to have long-term consequences.

The most objectionable clauses, whether enshrining the military's privileged status, the checks place on the freedom of expression, or the potential confessionalisation of Egypt's legal system could eventually be undone through the proper channels of revision and amendment.

However, the process of producing and passing this document has the potential to embed a deep-seated polarisation within the heart of Egypt's burgeoning political culture.

Indeed, based on the massive public demonstrations for and against the draft constitution, this has already occurred. Morsi now faces the challenge of bridging a deep divide, a task for which he has thus far proven to be ill-suited, obstructionism of some of the more ideological segments of the opposition notwithstanding.

Having used his democratic legitimacy to shield himself from all accountability, the president has raised the stakes of political competition in Egypt. Given the intensity of the response, however, the unintended consequence of this overreach may be to force a recalculation on the part of the Muslim Brotherhood's political leadership.

In spite of its supposed successes up to this point, the logic of the new authoritarianism cannot hold in a future Egypt that is not only democratic, but embodies the principles of political pluralism as well.