

COMMENTARY

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Reconstructing the Police State in Egypt

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The statement by Egypt's de facto ruler, Defence Minister and Egyptian Armed Forces Commander General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, that "there is room for everyone" in Egypt seems to indicate a readiness to negotiate a way out of the country's bloody crisis. Addressing supporters of deposed President Mohammad Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood to which he belonged, Sisi urged them on 18 August to help "rebuild the democratic path" and "integrate in the political process."

But clearly the general, who deposed Morsi on 3 July and who evidently believes his self-portrayal as the saviour of Egypt, expects this to occur on his terms. The Morsi camp's response to Sisi's exhortations is irrelevant: the country's real rulers have set it on a course leading to the revival of the police state that former president Hosni Mubarak built.

It is difficult to see the interim government that was formed on 16 July as anything but a civilian facade for the Egyptian Armed Forces command, and particularly for Sisi. If it is to prove otherwise, the interim government must launch a serious effort to reform the Ministry of Interior, which commands a security sector numbering between 1.5 and 1.7 million police officers, paramilitary forces, and plainclothes agents and informers. The security sector's systemic human rights abuses were the focal point of the 25 January 2011, uprising that overthrew Mubarak. But neither the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which ruled Egypt from February 2011 to June 2012, nor the Morsi administration, which came to power the following year, undertook the task of reforming this gargantuan sector.

Reforming the Egyptian security sector would have been difficult enough even when political conditions favoured it. Now, it poses an even greater challenge as the country slips deeper into crisis. The interim government, and behind it the Egyptian Armed Forces command, relies on the Ministry of Interior to spearhead its drive against the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists, so reforming the ministry and the sector it commands will not be seen as a pressing priority. But the

interim government risks falling hostage to the security sector, which is once again using indiscriminate and disproportionate force against largely unarmed protesters, confident of its undiminished impunity.

The consequences of these actions are apparent in a death toll of some 1,000 since the overthrow of Morsi and in the growing damage to Egyptian relations with the United States and the European Union. The security sector acts as if it has not only shaken off the sense of defeat and humiliation inflicted on it since the 2011 uprising but has indeed emerged from the transition as a winner and now seeks revenge. Over the past two years, officers repeatedly demanded more firearms, looser rules of engagement, and legal protection from prosecution, but their requests were denied. Now, they have a political blank check to use violence without accountability.

Failure to confront these practices will bankrupt the interim government morally, deepen the country's already-bitter social and political divisions, and set the stage for the complete recidivism of a sector long characterized by its crude methods and petty corruption.

To give its talk of the democratic path and political integration credibility, the interim government should use what political capital it has to leverage the armed forces into backing reform of the Interior Ministry. The interim government is weak, but the military needs it to maintain a claim to political legitimacy both domestically and internationally, stabilize markets, and attract aid and investment. Should it wish to do so, the military is the one force in the country that can bring the Interior Ministry to heel.

The military command also has an interest in preventing further defections from the interim government following the embarrassing resignation of opposition leader Mohamed el Baradei as interim vice president. Police violence is likely to deepen divisions, such as that between the interim prime minister and the interim deputy prime minister. While Prime Minister Hazem el-Beblawi has repeatedly rejected "reconciliation with those whose hands have been stained with blood and who turned weapons against the state and its institutions," Deputy Prime Minister Ziad Bahaa el-Din seeks an end to the state of emergency declared on 14 August by the interim government after a bloody crackdown on protesters, assurances for the political participation of all parties, and protection of human rights.

Paradoxically, security sector reform may be the only policy sphere in which the interim government can make some headway. Its official priorities are to achieve financial stabilization and restore economic growth. While it can claim short-term success in the former thanks to pledges of US\$ 12 billion in aid and oil from several Gulf monarchies, the latter requires fundamental reforms of the state apparatus and state-owned commercial companies in which the military has extensive networks. The military will not allow this, but it has no love for the police and internal security agencies and could benefit politically from making a show of curbing them.

Yet this is not the direction in which Sisi is heading, a fact that was made obvious on 13 August when 25 new governors were sworn in by his appointee, interim president Adli Mansour. Morsi had already appointed 13 new governors in June, but his appointments were simply disregarded.

Whereas Morsi's appointees were all civilians, 18 of the 25 governors appointed in August are retired generals, restoring the practice established by then president Gamal Abdel Nasser in the early 1960s and maintained by all his successors, including the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. The interim authorities did not even attempt a semblance of reform or inclusion in selecting the new appointees: the seven new civilian governors are former members or supporters of Mubarak's defunct National Democratic Party. No appointees were drawn from the interim government's political allies such as the liberal al-Wafd and al-Dostour parties, the Social Democratic Party, or the Nasserist Democratic Party.

This suggests that the Egyptian Armed Forces command and the Ministry of Interior have not shed any part of their authoritarian mindset or coercive, anti-civilian culture. This does not pose a particular problem for the ministry, which led the fight against the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadist Islamists for thirty years, so long as it is not scapegoated for the sins of the entire state apparatus that underpinned Mubarak's rule, as it was in 2011. But it leaves Sisi, who has unmistakable presidential ambitions, with limited options, especially given the weakness of the political parties supporting the interim government.

This fact explains why the campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood is being conducted in the name of "fighting terrorism" rather than focusing on genuinely democratic reforms such as demilitarizing the security sector or preparing to transform local government, which is appointed in its entirety from top to bottom by the executive branch, into an elected structure. But suppressing a large social movement like the Muslim Brotherhood necessitates mass arrests—the desert camps that held as many as 20,000 political prisoners under Abdel Nasser in the 1950s or 30,000 under Mubarak in the 1990s could reopen—and may also lead to a "dirty war" of covert assassinations and disappearances. The inevitable retaliation, whether by the Brotherhood or more militant Islamists, will serve the interim authorities retroactively as validation of their fight against "terrorism."

Egypt can avoid this outcome only if Sisi and the armed forces use their considerable clout to do so. But for now, it appears that the security sector has free rein and is doing the military's bidding. Mubarak is gone, but his police state is coming back.

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