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Understanding Egypt's search for stability

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Egypt is still in crisis four years after Mubarak's downfall, and one and a half years after Morsi's removal from power. Searching without success for a political system, to build upon the revolutionary momentum and to establish a just regime and a stable society.

The upcoming parliamentary elections are supposed to be the final step of the road map drawn up by civil society under the aegis of the military establishment, and upon the public's empowerment of General, and later President, Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi. But to achieve its revolutionary ideals, Egypt still has many steps to go.

The source of today's crisis does not lie in the public's exhaustion with the daily crises and tensions, nor in the mobilisation of the public to fight terrorism – spread by the forces of jihadist Salafism and empowered by the regime to exact revenge. The problem is not the Muslim Brotherhood's announcement that they would use violence in response to all that has happened to them since the dispersal of the 2013 Rabaa massacre: judicial rulings, preventive detentions, funds confiscation, and the imprisonment of thousands of affiliated youths. The predatory behaviour of the security forces and their use of an excessive force previously unseen in Egypt, even during the darkest days of Mubarak's regime is also not the cause. As bad as they are, these are mere symptoms of the crisis resulting from President Sisi's rule.

Those of us who follow events in Egypt cannot understand how the security forces make their decisions or how they determine their priorities.

We are shocked at the jihadists' establishment of the Islamic Emirate of the Sinai and the forced migration of its citizens. We are heartbroken by the killing of dozens of fans at the gates of a football stadium. We agonize about the collective life-sentence against 230 activists, following soon after the mass death sentences. We are rendered mute by the severity of media campaigns accusing dissenters of treason, stigmatising each and every one of them. Why is the leader of a leftist party killed while carrying flowers and marching in a silent demonstration? How can anyone explain the ignoring of leaked telephone conversations between military leaders that prove their manipulation of legal rulings? We are restricted in our reactions and responses, unable of being heard about what is unfolding in Egypt.

There are two possible explanations of events. The first sees all the above as signs of the breakdown, dislocation and infiltration of the state's institutions, turning the security forces into savage beasts who destroy everything, both good and bad, in a desperate attempt to remain in power. The second explains the tendency to use violence as a sign of the entrenchment of "militarism and totalitarianism", - the two new major characteristics of the Egyptian political regime, given Sisi's rumoured disdain for politics and politicians.

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There are few comparisons of the current political regime's performance, including its unprecedented tendency to use violence and penchant for enacting extraordinary laws on a daily basis, with the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood despite the considerable similarities between them. The Muslim Brotherhood's rule also witnessed an escalation in the use of violence, a monopoly of power, improvised laws, the use of militias, the empowerment of trusted cadres and a discourse portraying Egypt's security as being in jeopardy. Both Mohammad Morsi's and Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi's regimes tend to ally themselves with more violent elements in their search for political support, and both spread a conspiracy discourse as a main source of legitimacy for their coercive, violent and illegal practices. There are also similarities, too often ignored, in the two regimes' ill-considered appeals for large national projects, in the reckless tendency to attract foreign political funding and in the excess of rosy promises, such as those for the al-Nahda Project and the Tahia Masr Fund. Furthermore the common denominator between the two regimes that have tried to replace Mubarak is the lack of trust in both the country's political society and its theoretical pluralistic institutional framework. Both regimes employ legitimate violence, and rely primarily on calculating allotments and sharing the rewards with the existing state agencies to ensure their support, even if temporarily.

The two regimes' use of the courts, trying to limit them to more restricted decision-making circles, expanding their institutional prerogatives and granting them immunity from accountability, is also similar, with changes merely involving alliance partners rather than content.

In its last six months, Morsi's regime repeatedly stated that a large conspiracy was being hatched against it by various agencies and institutions. The current regime has been singing the same tune ever since Sisi's election to the presidency. It reiterates at every opportunity that the Brotherhood, along with various internal and external forces, are plotting to dismember Egypt and make it part of the Islamic State. This has been repeated so much that conspiracy accusations against the Brotherhood have become the butt of jokes among the public.

How uncannily similar today is to yesterday, and how much greater is our need to understand the similarities in the behaviour of these two inimical regimes rather than focusing on the enmity between them. This is especially true after the long public honeymoon that the old version of the Military Council has tried to institute to contain the public's anger and retain the ability to lock different institutions and agencies into a coalition replacing Mubarak.

The real challenge that people have kept silent about is the current regime's inability – despite its tools of coercion and its warmongering discourse – to bring security to the country, the very purpose for which it was elected, to provide security formulas acceptable to various sectors of the Egyptian population, rather than only to its own supporters. The Egyptian people have voted for security in order to achieve stability, in both its physical and economic dimensions.

It is high time to evaluate exactly what the current security solution has been able to achieve over one and a half years. Not only has it failed to bring stability, but physical and economic security is now more unattainable than ever before. This is due to the repetition of the same mistakes that led to the downfall of the Brotherhood regime.

We make a mistake when we concentrate on the security practices of Sisi's regime or devote our efforts to refuting the constitutionality or legality of his decisions and laws. In order to fully understand the crisis that plagues Egypt, we should begin by highlighting the similarities with the previous regimes, since Mubarak's demise. We should look at the sectarian character of the official agencies' attempts to forge alliances, and the tendency of the security forces to abuse citizens in their attempt to regain control, to fuel a civil war, even if the conflict is created in the name of preserving Egypt's unity and security.

Doing away with the elements of the authoritarian regime maintained by Mubarak for 30 years will not happen by jailing thousands of demonstrators, or by enacting hundreds of restrictive laws in the absence of a legislative authority that is developed in a pluralistic environment. Doing away with the old regime will only happen when the different agencies and political forces no longer resort to the former practices of coercion, violence, corruption and containment. And when they stop scaremongering to remain in power

Then, and only then, will we the people and the country be able to achieve what we started on February 11, 2011.

About the author

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She is an expert of higher education policies and knowledge production processes in the Arab region and civil society dynamics. Dina El Khawaga has previously worked in both Ford Foundation and Open Society Foundations as a program officer and a regional director. Her current focus is on social movements, collective actions and the various forms of contentious politics that took place after the Arab uprisings. She also manages the Arab Research Support Program at ARI, funded by OSF and Carnegie Foundation..

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