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# Tracking the “Arab Spring”

## EGYPT’S FAILED TRANSITION

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The July 2013 military ouster of elected president Mohamed Morsi clearly marked the failure of Egypt’s two-year attempt to realize a transition to democracy following 2011’s mass uprising against authoritarian rule. That uprising had given birth to tremendous hopes that the region might see the forging of a new politics—a politics in which those wielding power would find themselves held accountable by the people acting through regular free elections; in which official actors would safeguard rather than trample human rights; and in which the long-overdue reform of numerous political institutions could take place in a manner both systematic and in keeping with societal needs and international norms. There were significant differences among Egyptians about what those goals meant in practice, how they were to be aligned with prevailing cultural and especially religious values, and how they should be pursued. But in the heady aftermath of President Hosni Mubarak’s overthrow, such strains seemed manageable—and indeed, they seemed to be precisely the sorts of policy differences that democratic mechanisms are designed to handle.

The failure of Egypt’s democratic experiment was not inevitable, but there were deep problems that repeatedly summoning voters to the polls could not overcome. Although elections were not the cause of the country’s political woes, voting threw the growing fissures in the Egyptian body politic into stark relief and sometimes aggravated them. Those divisions have not only sabotaged Egypt’s post-2011 democratic hopes, but have also undermined its prospects for future democratic development.

During the almost thirty months between 11 February 2011, when Mubarak was forced to resign, and 3 July 2013, when the military de-

posed and detained his elected successor Morsi—with both men targets of widespread popular demonstrations as well as military action—each step along the path of democracy ended with opposing segments of Egyptian society driven farther apart. Egyptians were called to the polls over and over—for a total of five national elections or referenda, some with multiple rounds—but every vote led to differences being redefined and magnified rather than managed or resolved.

### **Partisan Motives**

There was considerable debate in Egypt about the sequence of events and procedures that should follow Mubarak's forced departure. Should elections come first, and if so, for what? Should a constitution be written first instead to clarify such questions, and if so, how should Egypt be governed in the meantime? Most of that debate missed the point. All answers to such questions were partisan. Early elections would benefit civilian actors who were more popular, especially those experienced at translating general support into voters at the polls. But critics who decried the "rush" to elections were predictably enough also those who seemed most likely to lose them; only rarely was a call for delay in voting coupled with a realistic alternative that was recognizably democratic.

Finding the best sequence in the abstract was not the problem. Instead, two things were needed for Egypt's post-2011 democratic development: a broad agreement among elites on the rules of the transition, and a procedure that allowed people to express their will early without having all matters settled by backroom deals. Without general consensus on the rules, spoilers would cover the landscape; without popular participation, there might be a stable outcome but it would not be democratic.

These two ingredients would have been difficult to combine in the best of times, but Egyptians lost much hope of obtaining either when they allowed the military to seize control of the transition process in February 2011 and to start making all the rules on its own. Thus, the problem was not that Egypt rushed to elections but instead that the elections did not always deliver authoritative outcomes that bound those who held real power. Just as ominously, votes went forward under conditions that the eventual losers often ended up rejecting.

It was for these reasons that elections seemed only to deepen rather than ease or resolve differences. The resulting political crisis continued for almost two-and-a-half years until July 2013. At that point, a mass uprising that saw millions of demonstrators cheering the military and even the once-reviled police brought down the president that Egyptians had elected just a year earlier and suspended the constitution that they had approved at the polls barely six months before.

A review of the frequent marches to the voting booth shows the numer-

ous false starts on the democratic path. Egyptians were initially called to the polls in March 2011 by the military to approve a series of constitutional amendments (drafted by a small committee) that spelled out a way to build a new constitutional order. With this very first balloting, the revolutionary coalition began to find itself torn asunder. Islamists embraced the referendum because it promised a quick transition process and, implicitly, the rapid return of an elected parliament and president (to be chosen via elections in which then-popular Islamists would be the most experienced contestants and would no longer have to treat scruffy revolutionary youngsters as equals). Non-Islamists, for their part, rallied around the idea of writing the constitution first, but they were too slow in laying out a coherent alternative plan for a transition. When voters supported what they were told were “amendments,” the military decided not to insert the approved language into the old constitution. Instead, hiding behind the cloak of what they called “revolutionary legitimacy,” the generals opted to write a new, temporary “constitutional declaration” that inserted the clauses voters had approved into a forest of other articles on how the state would be run during the transition. That document was issued by military fiat, thus setting the dangerous precedent of insisting that the constitution was whatever those in power said it was.

The Islamists’ response was to accept the March 2011 constitutional declaration but to push for the elections that it stipulated, hoping to edge the military aside through the establishment of democratic institutions (ones that, not coincidentally, would likely give Islamists much voice and heft). By contrast, many of the groups that had organized the uprising in early 2011 opted instead for renewed street protests, increasingly redirecting their ire from the old regime to military rule.

The next two elections came in late 2011 and early 2012 as Egyptians voted in several rounds first for a lower house of parliament and then for an upper house. Those elections returned a resounding Islamist majority but left few satisfied. Non-Islamists felt their fears of Islamist majoritarianism deepening; Islamists discovered that their parliamentary majority meant little because the military had taken care in the constitutional declaration to ensure that the new parliament would have no power to oversee the cabinet or pass legislation without the generals’ approval. Even the military itself suddenly realized that it had engineered a transition plan that gave it an oversight role which was potent but only temporary. Once a new president was sworn in, the military would have no formal role and no clear tools with which to influence the outcome of the constitutional process.

That constitutional process was supposed to begin with an indirect election. The two houses of parliament were jointly to choose a hundred Egyptians who would spend six months drafting a final document, which would then go before the voters within fifteen days. The parliament was given no guidance as to who should serve among the hundred constitu-

tion-writers, and talks among various political forces regarding a consensus slate broke down. The result was that Islamists selected a body that was drawn half from parliament (with its heavy Islamist majority) and half from various social groups and official bodies (with Islamists significantly represented there as well).

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***The military rewarded the protestors on July 3 by forcibly deposing Morsi, arresting him and his top aides, shutting down Islamist broadcasters, and taking a series of steps (threatening even graver ones) against the Brotherhood's leadership.***

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Many non-Islamists boycotted the process, and some turned to the courts in a bid to stop it altogether. An administrative court agreed with them, disbanding the hundred-member committee on the grounds that it was unrepresentative and that parliamentarians could not elect themselves to it. The result could have been as politically healthy as it had been legally implausible if it had led to an agreement among Egypt's rival political groupings, but instead it resulted in parliament once again fail-

ing to craft a consensus and the Islamists electing a very similar body to replace the disbanded constitution-writing committee.

As these drafters went to work, voters were summoned back to the polls in May 2012, this time to elect a president. Several leading candidates were disqualified on obscure or questionable grounds (one leading candidate was eliminated when it was revealed that his mother had taken U.S. citizenship, while the Brotherhood's first choice, Khairat al-Shater, was banned from running because he had a criminal record arising from a trumped-up charge that the old regime had lodged against him). After the first round, Egyptians found that they had sent forward to a June runoff a former general who had loyally served the old regime and the 60-year-old Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood's second choice. After persuading a wide range of groups that he was the lesser of two evils in the runoff, Morsi managed a narrow win.

Once again, however, Egyptians woke up on the morning after an election to find the conflicts tearing at their society deepened rather than assuaged. On the eve of the balloting, the Supreme Constitutional Court had rushed out a ruling that the law under which parliament had been elected was unconstitutional, and that the lower house of parliament should therefore be disbanded. Just as presidential voting was beginning, the military also sprang a new constitutional declaration that robbed the presidency of significant power and carved out a strong role for the military in the constitution-writing process then underway.

Once elected, Morsi tried to reverse these steps. He reconvened the parliament before finally bowing to the courts and acquiescing in its suspension. More successfully, he asserted that the military's claimed

authority to issue constitutional declarations now belonged to the presidency, and followed up with a decree nullifying the military's recent actions. The military acquiesced, even allowing Morsi to negotiate personnel changes at the top of the uniformed officer corps. Other political players also went along with Morsi's moves, but fears lingered that the presidency was now unchecked. Most non-Islamists continued to refuse to involve themselves in the constitutional process while growing increasingly shrill in their criticisms of Islamists. Morsi treated these oppositionists as so many annoyances who could safely be overlooked. His supporters met shrill critiques with shrill responses, sometimes resorting to authoritarian speech restrictions that were still very much part of Egypt's legal order.

By November, as the deadline for completing the draft constitution approached, both Morsi and his foes betrayed signs of panic. The president charged that a cabal of opposition politicians, old-regime elements, and judges was scheming to dissolve the constituent assembly, roll back his own moves to tame the military, and even disband the upper house of parliament. Such maneuvers would have amounted to a counterrevolution, leaving the shell of a presidency but returning Egypt to de facto military tutelage. His fears were almost certainly overblown, though they do not seem to have been fully imaginary. Morsi tried to seize the initiative by issuing yet another constitutional declaration, this one removing the issue of the constituent assembly and other matters from judicial review. This was effectively an assertion of absolute presidential power, even if only a temporary one meant to expire with the passage of the new constitution. The effect was to set off a new round of protests, this time not against the old regime or the military but against the Muslim Brotherhood and the president who hailed from that movement.

In the midst of this tumult, the constitutional assembly rushed to finish its task. Completing their work in an all-night session, the assembly members forced Egyptians to trudge back to the polls one more time in a referendum (held between 15 and 22 December 2012) that large parts of the opposition boycotted, contributing to a low turnout of about 33 percent. The constitution passed, but majorities in the largest cities turned out against it.

And according to the newly approved constitution, Egyptians were still not done voting. They were to be summoned before the end of February 2013 to elect a new lower house of parliament to replace the one disbanded in June 2012. (According to a later Supreme Constitutional Court ruling, that step would itself set off a new election: The still-sitting upper house would be dissolved, with new elections scheduled as soon as the lower house finally sat.) But those later elections never came. Under the new constitution, the upper house was required to submit a draft election law to the Supreme Constitutional Court before elections could be scheduled, and the Court sent it back twice after finding

constitutional flaws. In late June 2013, one of the upper chamber's last acts was to submit a third draft to the Court; the Court had no opportunity to act before a political crisis brought the entire system down.

On June 30, millions of Egyptians marched in the streets nationwide to demand an immediate end to Morsi's presidency, effectively signaling that they were not willing to wait until the next elections to remove him. The military rewarded them on July 3 by forcibly deposing Morsi, arresting him and his top aides, shutting down Islamist broadcasters, and taking a series of steps (threatening even graver ones) against the Brotherhood's leadership.

But having launched their coup, military leaders quickly proclaimed that Egyptians would still keep voting. The constitution was suspended, it was true, but two small committees, one legal and one political, would work on amending it, and Egyptians would then be summoned to approve their work. The upper house of the parliament was disbanded, but the Supreme Constitutional Court was urged to speed its review of the electoral law so new parliamentary elections could be scheduled. And as soon as a new parliament was seated, a new president would be elected.

### **Bad Behavior**

If democracy failed to develop in Egypt, then, it was not for lack of voting. The problem was not that elections came too early or too often: A revolution that is carried out in the people's name is unlikely to be able to keep them out of the voting booths for long. And better-timed elections might have helped: Had parliamentary elections been successfully scheduled for the second quarter of 2013, it is likely that significant opposition energies would have gone into campaigning rather than street protests, thereby forestalling any mass uprising.

The immediate problems in Egypt can be traced not to voting as such but to the choices of the main political actors. And at a still deeper level, anyone seeking to grasp what went wrong in Egypt must reckon with the persistence of underlying authoritarian patterns as well as a transition process (dating from 2011) that was, in actuality, neither a real process nor anything that provided for a real transition.

First, the actors' bad choices are obvious. The Brotherhood's behavior ranged from high-handed to extremely heavy-handed. Some of its moves were subtle but far-reaching in significance. The problem was not that the Brotherhood was antidemocratic but that its conception of democracy was shallow and often illiberal; further, Egypt had no rules of accepted democratic behavior. For instance, when forming the constituent assembly, the Brotherhood's parliamentary deputies agreed that half the drafters would be nonpartisan representatives of various institutions and organizations in Egyptian society—but then chose numerous formally “nonpartisan” people with Islamist inclinations. The Brother-

hood pressured institutions that were supposed to stand outside partisan politics, sending followers to prevent the Supreme Constitutional Court from meeting by surrounding its building, filing legal complaints against critical journalists, and pushing legislation that would have forced all senior judges into retirement. Some of its actions were rough indeed, such as when the Brotherhood called out movement stalwarts to protect the presidential palace in December 2012—and those stalwarts seized, beat, and interrogated demonstrators. As his presidency tottered in June 2013, Morsi decided on a strategy of bluster and threats that merely united and augmented an already implacable opposition.

The opposition could also be blamed for nondemocratic behavior. Major opposition actors not only tried to stave off or boycott several elections; even when they found one they could like (the mid-2012 presidential balloting, for example), they ended up seeking to overturn its results with street protests. Oppositionists complained about the make-up of the constituent assembly but did little to articulate their own constitutional vision, instead simply pressing non-Islamists to withdraw from the body. And virtually every sin with which the opposition charged the Brotherhood—using force against protestors, trying to purge judges, denying and even applauding security-force abuses, harassing media—was a sin that the opposition embraced with unseemly enthusiasm in July 2013.

In short, Islamists plausibly charged non-Islamists with refusing to accept adverse election results, while non-Islamists plausibly charged Islamists with using those same election results to undermine the development of healthy democratic life.

That said, it must also be acknowledged that both charge and countercharge also contained unfairness and exaggeration. It is true, for instance, that the Brotherhood dominated the constitutional process, but it is not clear that non-Islamists would have accepted any process that reflected the Islamists' electoral strength. It is true that non-Islamists struck a petulant pose every time that the Brotherhood made one of its clumsy conciliation efforts, but those attempts offered very little in the way of guarantees, and those participating exposed themselves to charges of breaking opposition ranks. It is true that the Brotherhood used force against protestors in December 2012, but it was also true that Egyptian security forces made no effort to defend the offices of the Brotherhood and its political party from a very real series of attacks, leaving the Brotherhood to fall back on its own devices. It is true that non-Islamists relied on courts and ultimately chose to invite military intervention, but it was also true that they had few ways to affect the rules of the political game as these were being written.

Turning to the deeper reasons for failure, it is impossible to ignore the heavy weight of Egypt's authoritarian past. This legacy—a factor with which key actors have still not come to grips—made itself felt in

four ways. First and most obviously, authoritarian actors played a key role in the transition both through what they did and what they did not do. The Egyptian military did not seek to exert direct day-to-day control over public affairs, but it refused to accept civilian oversight and for more than a year monopolized the making of key decisions. That led most other political forces to gear their actions to the military's. The only gestures made toward challenging the officer corps—first by revolutionary youth and later and in a much more limited way by the Brotherhood—were ineffectual.

The general pattern was for civilian political actors to seek an accommodation with the military in order to avoid having to deal with each other. The Morsi presidency did not invent this strategy, though it seemed at first to perfect it—but the gambit ultimately proved fatal. As for the civilian opposition, it prodded the military to depose Morsi but quickly found that it had stirred up a force beyond its control. If the military's role was corrupting, that of the security services was even more pernicious. These provided a level of public safety that was uneven at best, and too often stood deliberately idle while violent protests raged, giving a green light to disorder. Egyptian media were fed a steady stream of outlandish information (in 2011, directed primarily against revolutionary youth; in 2012 and especially in 2013, aimed mostly at the country's newly elected leadership) that undermined trust.

Second, decades of authoritarian rule had left behind an unbalanced political scene that tilted elections toward the Islamists and gave non-Islamists a deep mistrust of the ballot. The problem was not that the Mubarak regime had repressed non-Islamists more than Islamists—just the opposite. Islamists were treated far more harshly. But because participation in formal politics was so unpromising under authoritarian rule, non-Islamist parties that had focused their energies in that direction had by 2011 become little more than dried-out husks. With their broader social agenda, Islamists had deeper and more extensive organizations that could be quickly turned to electoral purposes. Non-Islamists had nothing to match these (and mostly were not inclined toward building such organizations).

Third, the infrastructure of authoritarianism remained in place. A virtually permanent official state of emergency may have come to an end in 2012, but authoritarian practices and procedures had become so deeply woven into laws and institutions that it sometimes seemed to political rivals as if their only way to deal with one another was to reach for the very sticks that had been wielded against them in the past. Mubarak had gone, but there were still powerful public prosecutors whom those outraged by press stories could lobby for the filing of criminal charges; military and state-security courts stayed open regarding some cases; and the state-owned press promoted the agenda of those in power with mindless and shameless enthusiasm.

Even where the machinery of state was not clearly authoritarian, it provided imperfect tools (or none at all) for civilian oversight. The judiciary and the religious establishment, for instance, were able to exercise considerable autonomy within their own realms and had some ability to resist the newly elected institutions (the presidency and the parliament). The judiciary in particular went beyond resisting partisan oversight and tried to make itself self-perpetuating to a degree that undermined democratic mechanisms. Judges had the means not merely to defend against encroachments on judicial turf by parliament and the presidency, but to undermine these institutions by striking at their legal basis.

Fourth, Egyptians discovered that authoritarian politics—and perhaps especially the brand to which they had long been exposed, with its meaningless elections and hollow but still formally democratic procedures—is a poor school for democracy. By discrediting democratic promises, leaving a cloud of distrust and suspicion hovering over the rules and conduct of elections, suppressing healthy organizations in both civil and political society, and favoring a divide-and-rule approach to opposition, autocratic politics can reach out from its grave to hobble efforts to move toward democracy.

Thus, each actor went into democratic politics with unrealistic expectations regarding what it could achieve and exaggerated suspicions of the motives of all rivals. It was not so much that Egypt's political actors lacked democratic commitments (though some did), but more that they deeply distrusted their adversaries and regarded real democratic processes as full of potential pitfalls. Here they paid for decades of life under dishonest rulers who mouthed democratic promises and sought to hide behind democracy's form while withholding its substance. After the 2011 uprising, the Egyptian political landscape was filled with actors who had learned always to look for the fine print and to distrust every promise and procedure until its advantages were proven in practice. In short, fear ruled the day: Everyone was suspicious that democratic promises were worth little (they had been made and ignored so often in the past), and that democratic procedures were nothing but traps destined to end up helping only one's rivals.

## Bad Choices

If the authoritarian past weighed heavily on Egyptian politics after the uprising, the transition “plan,” such as it was, only made things worse—even if more by accident than by intention. Egypt's transition was not badly designed; it was simply not designed at all. Its original failing lay in a series of shortsighted decisions made by generally well-meaning but myopic actors who found themselves thrust into positions of limited authority in February and March 2011. In retrospect, we can see that the extensive debates which at the time swirled around the topics of how to

sequence the writing of a constitution and the electing of a president and parliament only obscured the real mistakes that were being made.

The most basic problem was the huge amount of political control that fell into the hands of the military high command for no other reason than that the high command claimed it and no one else could come up with a timely alternative. The soundest idea heard was a call for a presidency council capable of compelling the main political forces (assuming that they could be identified and could manage their differences) to move forward by consensus. But revolutionary groups did not unify around this notion until it was too late.

So the military was free to take the next misstep. It began when the generals charged a tiny ad hoc committee with marking the outlines of a transition by amending parts of the 1971 Constitution. Then the committee's work was folded into the March 2011 constitutional declaration, a document whose authors have never been revealed. Nor did anybody in the military bother to explain why this declaration borrowed some elements from the suspended 1971 Constitution but not others. Among the 2011 declaration's gaps was its silence on the matter of amendment: If a change needed to be made to the constitutional text (and various actors quickly came to feel that some were necessary) first the military and then the president (once elected) would have to assert the constitutional power to do so. Had a process of broad and careful consultation been used to adjust the basic law, the results might have been made palatable. But the generals were predictably bad at consultation, and later the first freely elected president turned out to be even worse. So Egypt's rulers took turns decreeing unilateral changes with ultimately disastrous results.

Suspicious arising from the opacity of the process emerged as early as the March 2011 referendum. Islamists suspected that their revolutionary partners' real agenda was to delay elections for fear of how well Islamists would do. Non-Islamists felt (with similar legitimacy) that Islamists were shoving hard for a vote so they could elbow their way into the most seats at the table.

Such political rivalries were not in themselves bad. The deeper problem was that the only way to settle them was not through negotiation, compromise, and consensus but by pressuring, nagging, and bargaining with the generals. Suspicious of separate deals and secret agreements deepened fears, and Egypt's contending political forces quickly learned that allegations need not be coupled with evidence in order to be taken seriously.

Differences on questions of political machinery were not that vast in early 2011, and a more consensual process could certainly have been devised. Much of the basic framework for making a postrevolutionary political order—a weaker presidency, stronger safeguards for freedoms, more democratic procedures, and judicial independence—united almost the entire political spectrum. But the tiny ad hoc committee, acting in haste, had created a number of procedural time bombs.

The first of these was the stipulation that a new constitution would be drafted by a hundred figures chosen by parliament. This offered no guarantee that everyone would have a voice. The hundred-member assembly's draft was to go before the electorate immediately for an up-or-down, simple-majority vote. No one realized at the time how much these procedures would favor Islamists. Their electoral abilities were not a surprise, but the scale of their eventual parliamentary and presidential victories was. This was a process that could work well only if there was already a deep consensus. It could hardly produce a consensus on its own, nor did it give anyone much incentive to pursue one.

For a brief period in early 2011, it looked as if goodwill could make up for a bad process. But as the revolutionary coalition broke apart, few saw compromise as a paying proposition. Periodic efforts to achieve it—in 2012, when it was time to pick members of the constituent assembly, or in early 2013, when domestic and international mediators tried to bring Morsi and the opposition together—foundered in an atmosphere of mistrust.

### The Meaning of Failure

Elections themselves were hardly the cause of Egypt's democratic fiasco. While the mundane realities of democratic politics are not particularly pretty anywhere, they nonetheless offer real possibilities to which Arab societies still strongly aspire. But those who build a democracy for the first time must do so on foundations that autocracy has built. Getting rid of autocrats is easier than getting rid of their structures or erasing the stains on political practice that autocrats have left behind. Egypt's post-2011 politics has not overcome the legacy of the past.

Failure was not inevitable. We have already seen that there were moments when Egypt's course could have taken a very different turn. Had a deal over the constituent assembly been struck in the first half of 2012, a more consensual process might have emerged; had the strong opposition within the Brotherhood to fielding a presidential candidate carried the day or had a few percentage points shifted in the 2012 first-round presidential results, there might have been a different runoff; had President Morsi learned how to reach beyond his narrow base, the showdown of mid-2013 might never have happened. Even as late as June 2013, had the upper house succeeded in passing a Constitutional Court–approved election law, the confrontation might have taken the form of an election campaign rather than massive street protests and a military coup.

Missed opportunities, in short, have abounded, leaving three sets of lessons—for students of democracy, for Islamists, and for Egyptians.

For those interested in transitions from authoritarian rule, Egypt's experience provides a stark lesson: Not only do decisions about timing, sequence, and rules have a large impact on political outcomes, but those

decisions themselves are the outcomes of deeply political processes. To put it more paradoxically, the design of a transition matters, but at the same time transitions are *not* designed—instead they are shaped by political contests among confused and confusing actors at a time when the basic rules of political life are unclear, constantly reshaped, and broken. There is no force outside the political process that designs a transition; there is no time-out when politics ceases so that political systems can be designed in a pristine atmosphere; there is no magic moment when political actors put aside their own goals, values, and experiences and stand aloof from day-to-day political struggles.

The generals who were given a free hand to steer the transition in February 2011 did so in a way that guarded their institutional interests but walled off important parts of Egypt's authoritarian state from reform. Their decisions about the timing and sequencing of elections not only affected electoral outcomes but also undermined trust among civilian political actors and aggravated their tendency to shun the hard work of coalition-building. No one, at any rate, should have expected the military to give up its institutional self-interest, the opposition to embrace elections that it knew it would lose, the Brotherhood to ignore its edge in electoral support, or the judiciary to abjure its tools for self-defense.

When the mass uprising of 30 June 2013 culminated in the military coup of July 3, Egypt appeared to reprise the mistakes of 2011—seeing the country's problems as the work of a few individual miscreants, mistaking purges of personnel for the reform of institutions, rushing a transition process, failing to provide for consensual constitutional design, walling off particular institutional interests from discussion, and failing to provide for meaningful public participation. But while it seemed that "Egypt" was making the same mistakes again, that is not quite correct, for it was not the entire nation of Egypt that was acting. Instead, various political actors (the military, some judicial personnel, the security apparatus, and a small number of political movements) were taking decisions in Egypt's name, sincerely believing themselves in each case to be defenders of the nation as a whole. Those decisions, however much they damaged hopes for a democratic transition, were not mistakes for the actors who made them—for by its choices each actor acted on behalf of its particular partisan interests, interests that no actor could see as distinct from Egypt's national interest.

If the lesson for analysts is that transitions are not designed but politically shaped, the lesson for Islamists is far less clear. Islamists will almost surely try to learn from the Morsi presidency, but they will take considerable time to do so. For the past generation, the Arab world's leading Islamist movements have become increasingly politicized—taking part in elections, writing platforms, and seeking public office out of a belief that the political process, even if flawed, was one of the best ways they had to pursue their Islamizing agenda. Egypt's Muslim Broth-

erhood was the largest movement to try such an approach, and from 2011 until 2013 its investment in politics seemed to be paying off more handsomely and quickly than expected. Islamists swept parliamentary elections, won the presidency, and dominated the constitution-writing process. The Brotherhood's rivals on the Islamist spectrum began racing to follow a similar path.

### **What Next for the Muslim Brotherhood?**

In July 2013, that sudden success came to a sudden end. The Morsi presidency is without a doubt one of the most colossal failures in the Brotherhood's history. What lesson will the movement learn from it?

The Muslim Brothers (as well as Islamists more generally) may conclude that their failure was a result of their own miscalculations. And it seems undeniable that Morsi and the Brotherhood made almost every conceivable mistake—including some (such as reaching too quickly for political power or failing to build coalitions with others) that they had vowed they knew enough to avoid. They alienated potential allies, ignored rising discontent, focused more on consolidating their rule than on using the tools that they did have, and used rhetoric that was tone deaf at best and threatening at worst.

Such introspection might go deeper than tactics and lead to new thought about basic organizational issues. Although the Brotherhood had tried after Mubarak's fall to refashion itself into a national governing party, the movement had been built not for open democratic competition but for resilience under authoritarian pressure. It was tight-knit, inward-looking, and even paranoid. It came to be led by figures, including Morsi himself, who were termed "organization men," little used to dealing with the world beyond Brotherhood confines. A thorough recognition of these limitations might have induced the Brotherhood itself to step aside and leave the political game to its post-Mubarak spinoff, the Freedom and Justice Party (a body that the Brotherhood instead decided to keep on a short leash). Things could have even gone so far as an announcement by the movement that its members were free to join any political party they liked, an idea that a few young Brotherhood activists favored in 2011. Either path (a far more autonomous party or no direct political role at all) would have been very hard for the current leaders—raised as they have been on hierarchy, coordination, and discipline—to follow.

But even if Islamists eventually engage in reflection and self-criticism of this sort, they will likely conclude that whatever mistakes they made in organization, one of their biggest errors was to underestimate their adversaries' resistance to the Brotherhood's political role. In other words, the Brotherhood's mistake lay in ever thinking that it would be allowed not merely to win elections, but to govern. In Islamists' eyes, the Morsi presidency might come to be seen as similar to the experi-

ences of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front in the early 1990s (when the military halted an electoral process to prevent an Islamist victory) or of Hamas in 2006 (when that Islamist group won the Palestinian elections only to have domestic rivals and international actors sabotage its ability to rule). This diagnosis may well win out over the long term, but where will it point? Will it lead to the movement abandoning political work, to individuals abandoning the Brotherhood, or to the Brotherhood determining that it will play politics but no longer by peaceful rules?

At a minimum, many Islamists will likely find that electoral politics holds far less appeal. The effect may not set in immediately—the feeling of having been cheated, the urge to fight back, and the desire to salvage whatever institutional and constitutional achievements can be preserved may win out for now. Eventually, however, Islamists will have to come to terms with the longer-run factors that they pride themselves on knowing how to reckon with. At that point, the strategies that have won most favor among Islamists for the past generation could give way to some very different approaches. The sudden unexpected success of Islamists in 2011 and 2012 led them to make decisions on the fly; their defeat in 2013 will give them time to ponder how they should face the years ahead.

As for those Egyptians who aspire to a more democratic future, the lessons that they learn may end up being oddly similar to those that the Islamists draw. A leading lesson might be phrased as “Do not let victory take you by surprise.” When the decades-old Mubarak regime perished in the sudden and spectacular crash of early 2011, the triumphant revolutionaries found themselves beholding the wreckage of a shattered authoritarian presidency with no shared platform and no authoritative structures to guide them beyond those needed to hammer out communiqués from Tahrir Square. By showing disdain for politics and ceding control to the military, those who pulled off the revolution revealed that they lacked a common understanding of how to overcome authoritarianism's malign legacies. In June 2013, a new Egyptian revolutionary movement made precisely the same mistake, effectively allowing the military to seize the reins once again.

The Egyptian failure to produce a democracy may have been avoidable, but it could still have effects that are highly damaging and long-lasting. Indeed, the failure has discredited democratic mechanisms as a means for managing differences, at least for the present. Islamists have come to feel that even when they win at the ballot box, they will be denied the right to exercise authority. Their opponents, meanwhile, decry “ballotocracy” as mindlessly majoritarian but have shown themselves to be even more ruthlessly majoritarian than the Muslim Brotherhood when they can outmobilize their foes in street demonstrations.

And that might be the greatest cost of the Morsi presidency—that, at least for a time, it has left behind an Egypt in which the very idea of democracy has lost much of its meaning and all of its luster.