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Position Paper

Egypt `s Plight: A political game without rules



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No sooner had the crisis that resulted from Mursi's constitutional declaration between November and December 2012 subsided, did the country descend into a new crisis. In fact, Egypt has been in a state of perpetual instability since Mursi took office in June 2012, experiencing one political upheaval after another.

This time, no definitive spark can be spotted behind the high degree of tension in the relationship between the security forces and the many groups of young people who have committed destructive and criminal acts, or that between the opposition, represented by the National Salvation Front (NSF), and the president. There were various opportunities for the escalation of violence – be it during the commemoration of the revolution, the release of the judgement in the case of the Port Said Sports Stadium massacre of 2012, or the constitutional declaration. The opposition reacted typically, questioning the legitimacy of the president and calling on him to meet a number of conditions before they would join a national dialogue. Behind it all, a foreign hand has become more pronounced. Reports of a huge inflow of political funding have increased, and there is a major shift in the position of the Nour Party, one of the largest parties in the Salafi movement.

So what is really going on in the Egyptian political scene and is there a way to put an end to the on-going crisis in the country?

The Anniversary of the revolution and the Port Said trial

Although the opposition failed to achieve its objectives during the crisis of November and December 2012, which subsided after the adoption of the draft constitution through a referendum, opposition leaders from the NSF rejected attendance at a national dialogue. Nevertheless, national dialogue sessions continued with those who attended, though it was clear that the NSF was not ready to accept the option of negotiation in order to find a solution to the disputes, whether political or related to certain controversial articles in the constitution. Since the remnants of protesters' groups did not vacate Tahrir Square, the area remained the focus of tension as a number of groups continued to carry out acts of destruction and actions against the security forces.

It was clear, however, that the NSF pinned its hopes on 25 January 2013, the second anniversary of the Egyptian revolution, to augment its forces against the president and his supporters. While the opposition announced its intention to demonstrate in Tahrir Square, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and the Muslim Brotherhood announced their celebration of the revolution by other means: social work, philanthropy and developmental work in various parts of the country.

Opposition activities began taking an aggressive turn during the crisis at the end of last year, but it did not result in material destruction. On 25 January, opposition rallies heading to Tahrir Square raised slogans calling for forceful entry into the State Council and the cabinet and for the removal of the president. It also raised similar slogans in a number of provincial capitals. Although the total number of protesters across the country, including Cairo, did not exceed 200 000, as soon as the gatherings began, armed and unarmed rioting groups attacked the Interior Ministry in central Cairo and attempted to reach the Shura Council and the prime minister's office. They also tried to storm government buildings in the Suez and Ismailia governorates and set fire to a number of public facilities and schools. The day ended with a number of people dying or being wounded, including a security officer.

The next day, 26 January 2013, was the day when the long-awaited judgement in the case of the Port Said sports stadium massacre, which claimed the lives of more than seventy sports fans, was to be handed down. The judges of Port Said's Criminal Court had just sentenced twenty-one of the defendants to execution when riots and protests broke out all over the city. Port Said's prison was besieged by an armed and organised attack of several hours since it was where the accused were held. The result of the clashes was that thirty people were killed and dozens wounded. Although the events in Port Said had little relation to the political issues in the country, the timing and the violence of the previous day created a coincidence between the criminal and the political. Since it had succeeded in launching a second revolutionary wave, the NSF issued a statement early on 26 January which concluded with the following demands addressed to the president:

1. We hold the president fully responsible for the excessive violence used by security forces against demonstrators, and we demand a commission to conduct an urgent and neutral inquiry and to hold culpable all those involved in the bloodshed of Egyptians. The NSF also emphasises its call on Egyptians to remain committed to peace in their demonstrations and legitimate protests and to fully condemn force, especially the excessive force that led to the fall of the martyrs.
2. The formation of a neutral legal committee to immediately amend the distorted constitution and to agree on the articles which need to be urgently changed.
3. The formation of a government of national salvation that is competent and credible to work for the achievement of the demands of the revolution, social justice, as well as the twin issues of security and the economy.
4. Removal of the effects of the authoritarian constitutional declaration which is invalid due to its attack against judicial authority and the violation of its independence, and the dismissal of the current attorney general.
5. To bring the Muslim Brotherhood to trial for its assumption of the role of the ruling party without legal or legitimate authority.

6. If these legitimate demands are not met in the next few days, the NSF will invite all Egyptian people to a rally and a peaceful demonstration on Friday to defeat the invalid constitution and temporarily enact the 1971 constitution, as amended, and to immediately begin organising early presidential elections. The NSF has also decided not to contest the coming parliamentary elections except in the context of this comprehensive national solution.

On the same day, President Mursi invited the National Defence Council to a long meeting, the first working meeting of the council since the adoption of the constitution. Mursi probably did not expect violent reactions to the Port Said judgement but was concerned by the violence and rioting on the previous day and the growing indications that the opposition may cause further violence and rioting. The council's statement suggested that the president takes extraordinary measures to deal with any possible threat to security, and emphasised the need for national dialogue to resolve the political problems in the country. The president responded to the demands of the opposition with a mixture of seriousness and feigned disbelief.

The next day, against the backdrop of escalating violence in Port Said, Mursi gave a short speech in which he declared a state of emergency in three governorates of the Suez Canal and called for a comprehensive national dialogue, without mentioning the NSF's demands. It became known later that invitations had been sent to fifteen independents and party leaders, including four NSF leaders, to launch the second round of national dialogue. A few hours before the start of the first session of the dialogue, on 28 January, the NSF announced that it would participate in the dialogue on condition that the president responds to its earlier demands. Alternately, it would call for demonstrations demanding the ousting of the regime on Friday, 1 February.

The Opposition: The politics of threats

Although the opposition lost the battle against Mursi's draft constitution last year, and subsequently its ability rouse the population, it became more intense in its activities and more rigid in its demands. This was pointed to by its first statement on 26 January, as well as the statement related to the national dialogue two days later. The NSF has used the language of threats more than the language of dialogue and negotiation. There are a number of factors behind this severity.

Firstly, the front has become more confident, having succeeded in maintaining the unity of its leaders over the past two months, despite the differences in their backgrounds and aspirations. Ayman Nour, the leader of the liberal Ghad al-Thawra party, was the only leader to leave the NSF ranks at an early stage, though maintaining his oppositional stance. The NSF, in contrast, obtained a commitment from El- Seyyid el-Badawi, leader of the liberal Wafd Party.

Secondly, there are numerous reports in the Egyptian and Arab media that confirm both political and financial support for the opposition from two Gulf Arab states and from a regional Islamic state. There is no conclusive evidence for this, but there are apparent and circumstantial indications. It is unclear as to what the position is of the Egyptian state institutions regarding such reports, but *Al-Akhbar Al-Misriyyah* hinted on Tuesday, 29 January, that a prominent Gulf figure was funding the protests by the opposition and was purchasing weapons.

The third factor is closely linked to the second. It is the rapid change in the stance and position of the Salafi Nour Party, which now strongly favours the NSF. In a statement to *Egypt Today* on 14 January, D. Yasser Barhamme, vice president of the Salafi Da'wah (Preaching) party from which the Nour Party emanated, demanded Mursi changes the current government, describing it as incompetent. Barhamme asserted that the Da'wah and Nour parties both welcomed the invitation of Sheikh Mohammed Hassan, a prominent Salafi sheikh, to reunite the political forces and establish dialogue with the NSF. In an unexpected development on 17 January, Hassan met Hamdeen Sabahi, Amr Moussa and el-Badawi and a number of other leaders of the NSF, in the presence of Salafi sheikh Muhammad Hussein Yacoub, with the aim of 'looking for reasons to exclude the NSF from joining the national dialogue.'

At first, Sheikh Hassan's step was regarded as an attempt to contain the sharp polarisation in the country, but his subsequent statements to Barhamme, the strongest person in the Da'wah party, who has considerable influence on the Nour Party, raised questions as to whether the party's position displayed any change. During the following week, the Nour Party's criticisms against the president and the Muslim Brotherhood increased and it came closer to the NSF.

On 24 January, the Egyptian paper *Al-Shuruq* reported that Salafi sources had confirmed further meetings between the Nour party leaders and NSF members, and suggested that the two sides may coordinate their efforts in the next parliamentary election or may establish a parliamentary alliance after the elections. The next day, *Al-Masri Al-Yaum* quoted Yasser Barhamme as having emphasised that the Nour Party will never coordinate with the Muslim Brotherhood regarding individual seats (which are usually the subject of coordination between the parties). He added that the Nour Party alone was capable of resolving the electoral battle in its favour. In following days, spokespersons of the Nour Party began adopting slogans of the traditional opposition on talk shows, such as 'One political force will not be able to manage the affairs of the country'. They also said that the Nour party 'stands against the orientations of those who are disloyal to Egypt'.

On 29 January, Younes Makhyun, president of the Nour Party, announced the party's plan for dealing with the crisis. Makhyun's initiative included all the demands of the opposition NSF. This was confirmed in the next two days in Makhyun's meetings with opposition leaders, including the el-Badawi and Ayman Nour.

Speculation in the Egyptian capital is that the Nour Party was facing pressure from an Arab country known for its dealings with Arab Salafi groups, and that this country paid the Nour Party to disengage from the Muslim Brotherhood and to form an alliance with the NSF – either by joining in calls by the NSF to oust the president or, if this cannot be accomplished, to coordinate with the NSF during the elections to try and win a parliamentary majority and then create a consensus to form the next government and besiege the president throughout the remaining years of his reign.

Political mobilisation and slim hopes

Since Mursi called for the resumption of national dialogue and the NSF refused to join the dialogue before its demands were met, the initiatives to find another possible path of negotiations did not stop. The problem was that there were no concrete indications that any of these initiatives can provide a solution. Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, former member of the Muslim Brotherhood and now leader of the Strong Egypt party, ignored the national dialogue supervised by the presidency, which he had previously agreed to join, and proposed, instead, a meeting to assemble two leaders each from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice party and the NSF in his presence to discuss ways out of the crisis. But neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor the NSF took Aboul Fotouh's proposal seriously.

The first session of the national dialogue was held on 28 January, despite being boycotted by the NSF. Among other issues, the dialogue agreed to form a committee of politicians and constitutional scholars to discuss the controversial articles of the constitution and ways to amend it. But the president did not accept the resignation of the government, on the basis that the date for parliamentary elections was near, and attempting to form a government of national consensus would not be easy or quick. Whatever the case, the first dialogue session did not reach a positive outcome for the NSF, which confirmed its intention to organise demonstrations on Friday, 1 February, demanding the collapse of the regime and the constitution.

Since the initiative announced by Younis Makhyun matched the demands of the NSF, its leaders quickly welcome it. Spokespersons of the Muslim Brotherhood and the FJP responded with a notable indifference. The proposal by Mohamed ElBaradei, an NSF leader who called for a meeting between the leadership of the NSF and the president in the presence of the ministers of defence and interior, does not differ from that of the Nour Party. The Da'wah party, despite its lack of involvement, saw this as a spin tactic

by ElBaradei to manoeuvre the military onto the opposition's side. ElBaradei's proposal was rejected by Mursi's supporters and some opposition forces, such as the 6 April Movement.

The only initiative that seemed to produce something was the meeting held at the invitation of the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Al-Tayeb, on 31 January, which included a large number of political leaders opposed to and in support of the president, as well as public figures, Muslim and Christian clerics and a number of youth from the 25 January revolution. The meeting concluded with a statement of values rather than being political. It stressed the sanctity of blood and the renunciation of violence and called for the maintenance of a peaceful political struggle. The conferees also agreed to form a sub-committee of political leaders to continue the dialogue between opponents in the political arena. There is no doubt that the statement, known as the 'Azhar document for the renunciation of violence', constitutes a public embarrassment for the opposition, but it is not expected to lead the dialogue to tangible progress.

What added to the embarrassment of the opposition was that they could not mobilise more than a few thousand people in the demonstrations of 1 February, whether in Tahrir Square or in the vicinity of the presidential palace where the opposition planned to demonstrate and sit-in. The demonstrations ended, in spite of the Azhar document, with demonstrators using Molotov bombs, setting fire and throwing stones at security personnel and the Republican Guard.

Behind these political manoeuvrings, however, there are deep-seated convictions and positions that it seems unlikely any of the parties are prepared to retreat from. Unless these convictions soften, Egypt will remain in need of a quick resolution to the sharp political polarisation to put an end to the continuing crisis, before it can deal with the economic and huge financial challenges that burden the country, the people and the state.

Which road for Egypt?

Within a week of the outbreak of the most recent crisis, the opposition's control of the crowd diminished incrementally. What began on 25 January with tens of thousands of people ended on 1 February with only a few thousand. In both cases, the protesters did not stop at peaceful protests. It seems that only a few Egyptians are aware of the motives behind the latest escalation of political turmoil.

From this point of view, it can be said that Mursi succeeded tactically in dealing with the crisis. What helped him was that the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters generally avoided the street or confrontations with the NSF supporters, regardless of the number of the latter. But this is not the real problem since the president has succeeded in

dealing with the challenges imposed upon him since his accession to power. The bigger challenge is that the president's camp seems to have become accustomed to dealing with matters in crisis management mode. The question they have to answer is how to end this continuous crisis so that the country can be granted an opportunity to address its economic and financial challenges.

Evidence suggests that the parties to the crisis differ on issues that a democratic system cannot address. One of the parties considers the new constitution to be good and unprecedented while the other views it as a disaster that must be rejected, regardless of the millions of people that approved it. When one party considers Egypt's president to be legitimate and serving the interests of the country while another thinks he must be overthrown, the democratic process becomes impossible. The crisis is exacerbated by the fact that the various role players have political and financial interests and influences that stretch beyond Egypt and into the region as a whole.

How can Egypt emerge from this mode? One possibility is that Mursi continues on his current trajectory of pushing the process of dialogue to get agreement on some amendments to the constitution and electoral law, while keeping the Muslim Brotherhood off the streets, holding the state apparatuses responsible for carrying out their duties when dealing with violence and chaos and moving towards parliamentary elections, so that the opposition forces know that, in the end, they have to accept the political reality and abandon the idea of toppling the president and changing the regime by force.

The second possibility is that the president resolves the chaos and lawlessness by using the security forces or by allowing the masses of the Muslim Brotherhood and other supporters to take to the streets to resolve the situation. This option will certainly lead to violent clashes and casualties, even if it succeeded in restoring security and order. This may spark international reactions for some time but will give a definitive message to opposition leaders regarding the balance of forces on the streets. It could push the opposition to reconsider objectives, methods and activities.

Probably the best and most rational option, however unlikely, is to get the opposition to approach the situation through negotiation and a national dialogue without conditions, while getting the president and his supporters to commit to the results of the dialogue and to work, politically and legislatively, on the application of these results.

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