



Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group

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Radical Changes in Egypt since January 2011

Graeme Swincer, Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group, September 2013

The following is a summary of information readily available on the internet using the most reliable sources

Introduction

At the time of writing, September 2013, the situation in Egypt is so volatile that updates are required, almost on a daily basis. What is clear is that although the security forces are currently in power, having ousted the elected government of Mohammed Morsi on 3rd July 2013, the other main players continue to wield significant influence and are ready to act aggressively against their opponents and enemies. Protection of potential victims of this state of virtual lawlessness is not guaranteed. In particular the opponents of the security forces are vulnerable to persecution. In fact the three main players are in mutual opposition, the other two being the Muslim Brotherhood, especially supporters of ex-president Mohammed Morsi, and the supporters of ex-president Hosni Mubarak.

Background

It is important to note that Egypt was almost continuously under an official state of emergency right through the Mubarak years which began in October 1981. During the time that the Emergency Law was enforced, police powers were extended, constitutional rights suspended, and heavy censorship enforced. The law prohibited all non-governmental political activity, street demonstrations and non-approved political organizations, and unregistered financial donations were formally banned. Some 17,000 people were detained under the law, and estimates of political prisoners were as high as 30,000. Under this state of emergency, the government was granted the right to imprison individuals for any period of time, and for virtually no reason, thus keeping them in prisons without trials for any period. The government justified this by claiming that opposition groups like the Muslim Brotherhood could come into power in Egypt if the then-current government did not forgo parliamentary elections, confiscate the groups' main financiers' possessions, and detain group figureheads, actions which would be virtually impossible without imposing emergency law and preventing the judicial system's independence.

It was against this background that, on 25th January 2011 massive protests against Mubarak and his government erupted in Cairo and around Egypt calling for Mubarak's resignation. Egypt's version of "The Arab Spring" had begun, following similar events in Tunisia (protest beginning 17th December 2010, resulting in overthrow of the government on 14th January 2011) and soon to be repeated in Algeria, Lebanon, Oman, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Morocco.

Mubarak stepped down after 18 days of demonstrations, and authority was transferred to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). In April 2011, Mubarak was ordered to stand trial on charges of negligence for not giving orders to stop the killing of peaceful protestors during the revolution. Eventually, on 2nd June 2012, Mubarak was sentenced to life imprisonment by an Egyptian court. After sentencing, he was reported to have suffered a series of health crises. On 20th August 2013 an Egyptian court ordered Mubarak's release.

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Meanwhile the SCAF dissolved the parliament and a parliamentary election to the People's Assembly of Egypt was held from 28th November 2011 to 11th January 2012. The election was proclaimed the first honest national election of any sort held in Egypt since the overthrow of the monarchy in 1952. However, there were widespread complaints of irregularities and fraud. The main focus of the new elected parliament was to be the selection of the members of the Constituent Assembly of Egypt.

A presidential election was held in two rounds, the first on 23rd and 24th May 2012 and the second on 16th and 17th June. On 18th June 2012 the Muslim Brotherhood declared that its candidate, Mohammed Morsi, had won. This was the first victory of an Islamist as head of state in the Arab world. It was the second presidential election in Egypt's history with more than one candidate, following the 2005 election. Morsi was sworn in on 30th June 2012.

The last 12 months

Morsi moved quickly to consolidate his power and on 22nd November 2012 he issued a constitutional declaration making his decrees and laws immune from judicial oversight, and dismissing the sitting public prosecutor, a move greeted with outcry and strikes by the judiciary.

On 30th November 2012 the Constituent Assembly produced a 234 article draft constitution, and this went to a referendum in December. It proved to be extremely controversial, attracting opposition from both left and right. Supporters argued that the recommended constitution would provide stability. However, most opponents argued that it was too favourable to the Muslim Brotherhood and that it did not grant sufficient minority rights. On the other side, the influential Salafi Front opposed it on the premise that it should have been based more closely on Sharia law.

The political struggle that ensued, combined with fuel shortages and electricity outages (seemingly orchestrated by Mubarak-era Egyptian elites, aiming to trigger military intervention) led to mass protests on 30th June 2013. The protests, which erupted across Egypt, called for the President's resignation. These were followed by the army's threat that if the protesters' demands were not met by 3rd July it would remove the democratically-elected government including Morsi and build a road map for the country, while insisting that it did not want to rule the country. The plan set up by the military included suspending the constitution, dissolving the parliament, and establishing a new administration headed by the chief justice.

On 3rd July 2013 Morsi was declared unseated by a council consisting of defence minister Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, opposition leader Mohamed ElBaradei, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb, and Coptic Pope Tawadros II. **A new caretaker president, Adly Mansour, was named immediately. Had been head of the Supreme Constitutional Court for just two days.** Ironically he was named by Morsi himself to Egypt's top judicial post, and this appointment then catapulted him into political power.

The term of the Morsi regime had lasted little over a year.

Aftermath of the 3 July Coup

- After toppling Mohammed Morsi the military immediately launched a massive crackdown on the Islamist movement, arresting 300 officials of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood and shutting down Islamic TV networks. The interim council led by defense minister Sisi froze the Islamist-drafted constitution. The Brotherhood's supreme guide Mohammed Badie said "millions" of protesters would stay mobilised until Morsi's return.
- On 9th July caretaker President Mansour presented a charter for a political transition and promised fresh elections by early 2014 – rejected by the Brotherhood. On the same day liberal economist Hazem al-Beblawi was named prime minister. On 16th July an interim government including no Islamist parties was sworn in.



- Through July and August clashes escalated between Morsi opponents and the security forces and between supporters and opponents of Morsi. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood built camps around Cairo to sustain their opposition. But the military cracked down on the demonstrations, killing at least 72 protesters in one day in late July.
- Huge rival rallies were maintained across Egypt. Thousands of troops and police officers patrolled the streets of Cairo, tanks and armoured vehicles were deployed, and parts of the city were cordoned off. The death toll has now passed 1,000, with thousands more suffering injuries. The security forces and police have also suffered considerable losses.
- August 25th was set as the opening date for the trial of six Muslim Brotherhood leaders for "incitement to murder". This provoked new expressions of outrage from Morsi supporters.
- Wednesday 14th August has become famous as Egypt's deadliest day in recent history. The bloodbath in Cairo left 525 people dead and thousands wounded. The authorities declared a month-long state of emergency and a curfew in several provinces, notably Cairo and Alexandria.
- That was the beginning of what has been called "Egypt's cruellest week".¹ On Friday 16th August almost 200 more people were killed across Egypt, including more than 20 of the crowd who had gathered in the the al-Fath mosque in central Cairo to combine Friday prayers with protest at the Wednesday massacres.
- Mohamed ElBaradei, a Nobel laureate and Egypt's leading liberal politician, resigned as interim vice-president in protest over the violent tactics of the military and especially the 14th August massacre of Islamists, but received strong criticism for his stand, even from former allies.
- Al Qaeda-inspired militants based in the Sinai have attacked security forces in the area almost daily. The army has responded with air and ground attacks.
- On 1st September, prosecutors referred Mohammed Morsi to trial on charges of inciting deadly violence. No date was set. The authorities have alleged that Morsi supporters are committing acts of terrorism and point to a string of attacks against churches and government buildings. Morsi's supporters deny their protests are violent or that they attack churches, accusing authorities of smearing their movement.
- A failed suicide bombing against the interior minister on 5th September and attacks on police in Cairo raised fears that militant violence may take hold beyond the Sinai.
- After a month of relative quiet, violence flared again starting with a raid on the central Egyptian town of Delga in Minya province, which was held by hardline Islamists for more than a month. Then, on 19th September, a police general was killed when Egyptian security forces stormed a village on the outskirts of Cairo on in the latest crackdown on "Islamist militants". Military and police vehicles surrounded Kerdassah in the shadow of the Giza pyramids after dawn, as police special forces deployed to confront "terrorists" in the village. Authorities slapped a daytime curfew on the village as they went door to door searching for 140 wanted men, including those behind a "massacre" in Kerdassah in which 11 policemen were killed on August 14, amid heavy gunfire.
- The crackdown was widened when on 23rd September a court ruling banned the Muslim Brotherhood and ordered the government to seize all its assets. The court's decision, which can be

¹ Patrick Kingsley, the Guardian, Wednesday 21 August 2013
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/20/egypts-cruellest-week-muslim-brotherhood>



appealed, raises the possibility that some Brotherhood members will lose faith in peaceful resistance and take up arms against the government.

- More than 2,000 Islamists, mostly from the Brotherhood, have been arrested since the 3 July coup.

Current Situation

Egypt's state and private media now portray the Brotherhood as a terrorist group and an enemy of the state. Authorities installed by army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi have vowed to end the wave of "terrorism" which they attribute to Morsi supporters. "Security forces are pursuing their campaign in Kerdassah and will not stop until they clear [the village] of all terrorist and criminal elements," Interior Ministry spokesman Hani Abdel Latif told reporters.

Patrick Kingsley, the Guardian's Egypt correspondent, summarises:

"The country is increasingly polarised between, on the one hand, those who believe their livelihoods and way of life were threatened under Morsi's incompetent and divisive presidency, and that his Muslim Brotherhood are violent traitors who must be destroyed – and, on the other, the Brotherhood and its dwindling Islamist allies, who remained camped in Cairo's streets after Morsi's ousting to defend his democratic legitimacy.

The split is not even. Millions marched on 30 June to call for Morsi's departure, and the vast majority of the country is firmly behind the army who deposed him days later. But perhaps less than 25% of Egyptians now have strong Islamist leanings, if Morsi's quarter of the vote in the first round of last year's presidential elections is anything to go by."

Here and there, activists prominent from the 2011 uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak reject this binary division and express disgust at both the new fascistic army-backed regime and the authoritarianism of Morsi's own government. Army rule may be counter-revolutionary, they argue, accompanied as it is by a return to favour of figures, institutions and policies that buttressed the Mubarak era. But so too was Morsi, who tried to co-opt corrupt state institutions, rather than reform them – and who had little interest in building consensus, reining in police brutality, or increasing social freedoms beyond those of his once-oppressed Islamist allies.

Yet few share this nuance. Most so-called liberals have thrown their lot in with the army, since the current environment has forced almost everyone into a with-or-against-us mindset.²

Kingsley goes on to despair of any prospect for short term improvement in the situation:

"Amid the rhetoric about Islamic terrorism, few seem to recognise that most of the terrorising has in fact come from the state. The government justifies the state-sponsored violence as a necessary step towards avoiding civil war. But it does not seem to realise that its provocative brutality is the thing that makes such a horrific outcome more likely – further alienating and radicalising Islamists, and pushing some towards violence. (One commentator suggests that this may, in fact, be the state's desired outcome – a heightening of extremist violence, which gives the government more cover to increase their powers.) Similarly, few seem to have seen the irony in appointing a new cabinet whose primary objective is to fix Egypt's economy, but which has since given its full backing to the state massacres that have further frightened away the very investors on which a revived economy would depend.

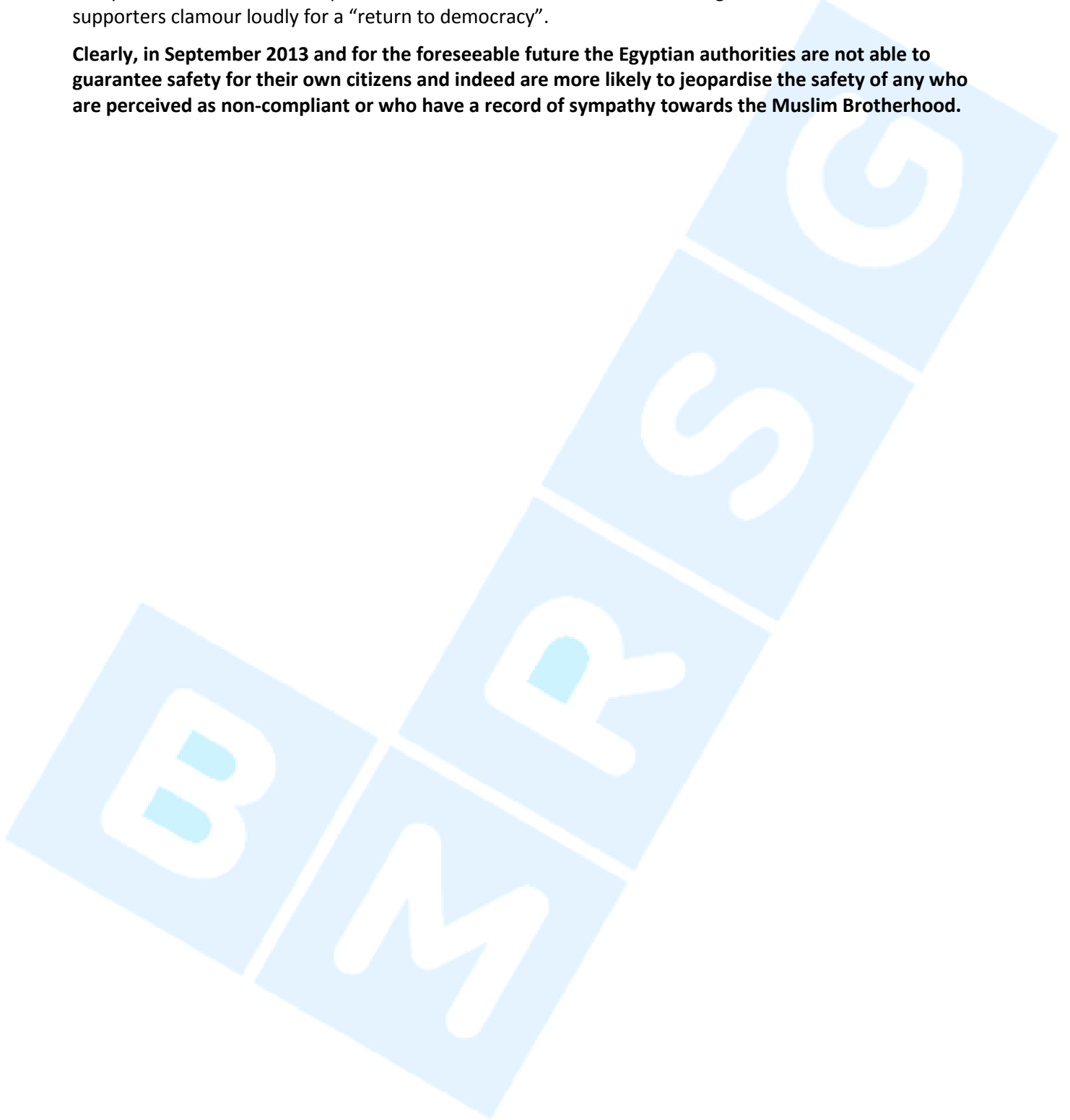
With the state seemingly unwilling to rein in its violence, the Brotherhood unlikely to curtail its street presence, and unwilling or unable to prevent its allies and harder-line followers from violence, the future looks utterly bleak."

² Patrick Kingsley, op cit.



The “Morsi Constitution” that was so controversial is now being amended, even completely rewritten.³ Morsi supporters have boycotted the process and it will be many months, even years before a generally acceptable constitution is adopted. Meanwhile no date has been set for a general election as the Morsi supporters clamour loudly for a “return to democracy”.

Clearly, in September 2013 and for the foreseeable future the Egyptian authorities are not able to guarantee safety for their own citizens and indeed are more likely to jeopardise the safety of any who are perceived as non-compliant or who have a record of sympathy towards the Muslim Brotherhood.



³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/22/us-egypt-protests-constitution-idUSBRE98L0F120130922>