



## **Policy Forum Report: Egypt** **February 21, 2013**

### ***Background***

On February 21, 2013 the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened a Policy Forum for key Congressional and Executive Branch staff and selected representatives of the American Muslim community to discuss the current situation in Egypt. The following is a summary of the views expressed and insights that emerged from that discussion.

### ***Challenges to Egypt's Democratic Transition***

#### *Political Divisions and Distrust*

Many Forum participants expressed the view that despite the broad social cohesion that emerged during the 2011 uprising to oust then-President Hosni Mubarak, there were no viable candidates among those who overthrew him who were prepared to take Mubarak's place and there remains no common vision for the future of Egypt. Ideological differences, a lack of consensus over controversial issues like the new constitution, and increasing distrust have contributed to growing divisions both among and within major political groups. New factions are emerging among Salafist political actors and within the Muslim Brotherhood itself. Opposition actors, which include various non-Brotherhood Muslims, Christians, and secularists, remain divided and consequently weak. Despite the formation of the National Salvation Front (NSF)—a political conglomerate of more than 35 generally secular, leftist, or liberal opposition groups—in November 2012, many participants felt the opposition remains ill-prepared to govern, with the NSF unable to articulate a political platform or offer solutions for pressing problems.<sup>1</sup>

Political divisions are compounded by a growing distrust of President Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood among increasing numbers of the Egyptian public. The current controversy over the Brotherhood-supported constitution, the Brotherhood's broken promises relating to their allegedly limited political designs in the run-up to the elections, and calls for an increase in size of the lower chamber of Parliament (viewed by many as an attempt to increase Islamist influence) were factors cited by participants as contributing to this distrust. One participant also expressed concern that more people have been arrested for insulting the President during Morsi's time in office than happened during the entire reign of Mubarak.<sup>2</sup> In addition, many protestors who led the original uprising have felt marginalized by the current political process, and some have expressed a willingness to return to the streets in the belief that they can oust Morsi as they did Mubarak.

Despite such divisions, some participants felt that such polarization is an improvement over the previous regime, as citizens now feel empowered with a choice to vote, discuss and debate openly, or protest in the streets to pressure for change in a society where dissent was previously strongly repressed.

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<sup>1</sup> The NSF has also been criticized for consisting largely of Mubarak-era officials.

<sup>2</sup> The Arab Network of Human Rights Information (ANHRI) cites 4 cases of prosecution for insult under Mubarak and 24 under Morsi as of Jan 20, 2013. (<http://www.anhri.net/en/?p=10908>)

### *Inadequate Experience and Understanding of Democratic Governance*

Many participants also cited a lack of experience in governing and an inadequate understanding of the wider principles of democracy as obstacles to effective governance by the ruling party. Many believe the Brotherhood views democracy as consisting solely of elections, following which the winning party can simply act as it sees fit, without regard to principles of transparency, accountability, or minority rights.

### *Role of the Military*

Prior to Morsi's election, the interim constitution issued by the military granted the military leaders significant power with little, if any, judicial oversight. The head of the military recently made a statement to the effect that the military is still strong and could enforce its ruling power at any time, which some interpret as signifying the ongoing possibility of a military coup. According to one participant, the military is currently experiencing significant internal tensions, particularly with dissension in the middle and lower ranks, which could lead to a coup precipitated by the younger officers. Some believe the military is waiting for the Brotherhood and opposition parties to fail, at which point the military leaders would take power, while others feel the military has no wish to take on the burden of running the country. While backlash against the military has increased in the past two years, it was also asserted that the military is still deeply respected in Egypt, and that its current concentration of power is providing the country with a measure of security and cohesion that might not otherwise exist. Other participants high-lighted the military's lack of governing expertise and understanding of core democratic principles, much like the Brotherhood, as a further impediment to any concept of enlightened military rule.

### *Economic Challenges*

Lack of effective governance is also seen to be contributing to Egypt's economic woes. The currency is losing its value, and unemployment, particularly among youth, is increasing. The IMF has called for economic reforms in exchange for a loan in its discussions with the Egyptian government. However, the offer of such a loan presents additional challenges: (a) such reforms would likely require getting rid of government subsidies, which could lead to widespread protests, and (b) the Egyptian military is unwilling to increase the country's foreign indebtedness by accepting more money from foreign sources. Yet it has not offered any alternative solution for economic recovery. Participants felt that both the Brotherhood and the military lack a crucial understanding of economics, which could prove to be one of the biggest obstacles to Egypt's future development.

### *US-Egypt Relations*

With the fall of Mubarak, the United States faces the challenge of now having to deal with multiple actors rather than a single center of power—actors which include the Muslim Brotherhood, the opposition parties, and the Egyptian "street". Some participants felt America has dealt with the complexities of Egypt's revolution as well as could be expected by trying not to interfere in the transition and by continuing its aid programs. Others criticized America's quick recognition and support for Morsi's election after a contentious contest and slim margin of victory, its failure to speak out after Morsi rammed through the controversial constitution, and its general "hands-off" approach, which has especially frustrated Egypt's liberal opposition. It was suggested that this approach has contributed to America's current unpopularity in Egypt, where

President Obama is said to be rated more negatively than former President George W. Bush and where the United States appears to be losing natural allies. This unpopularity is compounded by the earlier expectations raised by Obama's 2009 Cairo speech, which were subsequently dashed through his failure to prevent Israel from expanding its settlements in the Palestinian territories, among other policies. Others felt America has welcomed delegations of Islamists from Egypt, Tunisia, and other Arab countries too warmly in the United States and has shielded them from negative press.

Participants were of mixed opinions as to how the United States could engage more effectively with Egypt, especially given the risk that Egyptians who are perceived to be supported by America could face a populist backlash. One participant felt the United States should bolster opposition groups as a counter to the Brotherhood and the military. Another felt America should work with the military to pressure the Brotherhood to have an effective "unity dialogue" with key opposition actors.

The role of US aid to Egypt was also debated. Some members of Congress have supported cutting aid to Egypt due to the government's lack of transparency, in some cases arguing that the Muslim Brotherhood is a "terrorist organization" that should not receive US support. Others have argued that America has an interest in Egypt's economic recovery, that it would be counterproductive to cut longstanding aid at such a critical time, and that such aid could be used as leverage to promote domestic reforms, such as protection of women's rights. Participants also highlighted the distinction between economic and military aid. Some felt existing military aid should be maintained, seeing it as linked to US security through the Camp David accords and without which, Egypt would collapse. It was predicted that cutting economic aid would weaken the Muslim Brotherhood, while military aid was seen as the greatest source of US leverage against it.

It was also suggested that the United States should increase private as well as public engagement with Egypt by fostering cooperation between segments of American civil society and Egyptians who remain outside the existing power structures. However, such engagement could face severe obstacles if new laws restricting local and international NGO activity currently under consideration were to go into effect.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> According to Freedom House, the draft laws would in effect nationalize civil society organizations by defining their funds as public money; create a new interagency committee with the authority to approve or veto foreign funding for local NGOs; raise registration costs for NGOs to prohibitive levels; impose stifling oversight restrictions; and prohibit foreign organizations that receive any government funding from operating in Egypt, driving most if not all foreign NGOs out of the country. (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/article/draft-ngo-law-will-cripple-egyptian-civil-society>)

*The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO that prevents and resolves identity-based conflicts that exceed the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government for the purpose of advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.*