

## Beyond the Crisis: A Roadmap for Reconciliation in Egypt

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Houdaiby, I. e. (2014). *Beyond the Crisis: A Roadmap for Reconciliation in Egypt*. (DGAP kompakt, 9). Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53811-3>

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# DGAPkompakt

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Otto Wolff-Direktor des Forschungsinstituts der DGAP e.V.

June 2014 N° 9  
ISSN 2198-5936

## Beyond the Crisis A Roadmap for Reconciliation in Egypt

by Ibrahim El Houdaiby



Deutsche Gesellschaft  
für Auswärtige Politik e.V.

# Beyond the Crisis

## A Roadmap for Reconciliation in Egypt

by Ibrahim El Houdaiby

*With the election of a new president, Egypt has reached another milestone in its roadmap for transition, but democracy and peace are still a long way off. The election of Abdul Fattah el-Sisi, former Minister of Defense, is likely to further complicate the country's political crisis, since the Muslim Brotherhood holds him responsible for last year's succession of massacres. Continued polarization fans political violence, impeding stability and much-needed economic growth. Changing the dynamics of the conflict through measures aimed at reconciliation and confidence-building could push the two major adversaries—the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime—to change course.*

Egypt's 2011 revolutionary upheaval led to the ousting of President Mubarak and the ascent to power of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF). Trying to contain an ever-growing wave of protest while sustaining a system based on central elitism and authoritarian guardianship, the SCAF soon partnered with the popular but conservative Muslim Brotherhood and the police—forming a new ruling troika. It was not long before the Brotherhood took the front seat in this troika, holding both the presidency and a plurality in parliament. Two years later, however, political and economic failures led to a rapid decline of popularity, triggering massive protests that eventually allowed the military to dispose of the elected president and to announce a roadmap for transition.

The Muslim Brotherhood ignored the alarm signals in the weeks preceding the military intervention on July 3, 2013. The group's leadership also chose to maintain its organizational unity by claiming victimization, and hence neither offered the opposition any meaningful compromises nor stepped down from power peacefully. It held to this strategy in the aftermath of President Morsi's ousting, contributing to an unprecedented death toll and an ongoing cycle of violence. The state has stepped up its crackdown and there has been a violent Islamist resurgence as well as numerous terrorist attacks. Since July 2013, more than 3,500 Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers have been killed, and some 25,000 are still detained. A court verdict ordered the dissolution of the Brotherhood in September, and the interim government pronounced it a "terrorist organization" in November. While thousands of Muslim Brotherhood support-

ers and others continue their protest, the emergent regime has persistently followed a predefined track. A restrictive protest law was ratified last November, allowing for a massive wave of arrests and suppression of all forms of protest. In addition, widespread defamation campaigns targeting the Brotherhood were orchestrated, constitutional amendments were ratified with a 98 percent majority in a referendum last January, presidential elections devoid of either genuine competition or equal opportunities took place last month, and parliamentary elections are due within the next weeks.

### New President, New Challenges

President El-Sisi's sweeping electoral victory came as no surprise. But the low turnout and subsequent decision to extend the election for an additional day sent alarming signals as regards the regime's popularity and long-term success. At least three factors contributed to the disappointing turnout—each reflecting another aspect of the emergent regime's problems. The first is the decay of the July 3 alliance. Initially including revolutionary and pro-democracy activists, these actors soon found no space in what is becoming an autocratic regime par excellence. Crackdowns on human rights and civil liberties, as well as the militarization of both the state and of public space under the pretext of a "war on terrorism," have left no room for opposition from within the system. Many have therefore chosen to break ties with the regime. Without viable alternatives in the presidential elections, boycott was the only meaningful choice.

Second, El-Sisi's own performance during the campaign also contributed to the low turnout. After months of being portrayed as a savior who could pull Egypt out of its economic, security, and political woes, the presidential candidate finally spoke—only to disappoint his supporters. His demand of more patience from Egyptians without either presenting a roadmap for reform or promising any improvement in their everyday lives disenchanted a considerable segment of his supporters. The third and most important factor is the fallout of intra-regime conflicts within a failing system. While combatting the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamist allies helped unify the emergent regime, economic interests have been rather divisive. Reports on El-Sisi's campaign meetings with business tycoons revealed a profound conflict between the need for socioeconomic changes to sustain the system on the one hand and a business class fiercely battling for crony privileges on the other. Capitalizing on large-scale clientele networks and an influential media establishment, corrupt businessmen appear to have fought their battle by demobilizing voters, distorting the new president's image of invincibility. Their message was straightforward: you owe your success to our networks, so maintain our interests.

This is not to suggest that El-Sisi's power base has been seriously diminished. He will still walk into the presidential palace with unprecedented power. While his image of invincibility is probably gone for good, he retains three powerful assets: a strong popular mandate, sufficient understanding of the challenges of the complicated Egyptian state—accumulated through a long history within its ranks—and the support and backing of the country's strongest institution, the armed forces. Nonetheless, his presidency will encounter grave structural and political challenges. A malfunctioning bureaucracy and increasingly dysfunctional state institutions will impede efforts to provide public services at acceptable levels. Deteriorating economic conditions, including income disparity and mounting levels of poverty and unemployment, will continue to destabilize the system—against the background of ever-growing social protests. The threat of terrorism also destabilizes the system, paralyzing the vital tourist sector and draining

the state's already scarce resources. The persistent political crisis increasingly contributes to the system's fragility, scaring away investors. Moreover, the narrowing of the political space, together with economic hardship, further hinders efforts to integrate young people—mobilized during the revolutionary upheaval—and contributes to their radicalization, both religious and political. Collectively, these pressing challenges put the long-term success of the emergent regime at stake.

## An Organizational Paradox

The Muslim Brotherhood is also facing great challenges. Both leaders and members argue that last summer's coup was inevitable, as it had been plotted by the “deep state” (the hidden interests dominating Egypt's gigantic public sector) ever since President Morsi's ascent to power. In this view, the coup was facilitated by engineered failures (including economic failures, electricity cuts, and energy shortages) that provoked large-scale dissent and provided cover for the military step-in. The Muslim Brotherhood therefore hopes that paralyzing the economy and exhausting the emergent regime by prolonging the conflict will lead to government failure—hence restoring the Brotherhood's power, or at least putting it in a better position to negotiate.

While it is true that the persistence of economic challenges will uproot the pillars of regime stability, the political comeback of the Muslim Brotherhood is unlikely anytime soon. Since the events of last summer at the latest, a media campaign has tarnished the group's reputation by tying it to violent groups, accusing it of attempting to enforce a strict model of sharia, highlighting cases of corruption and misconduct, and positing the Brotherhood's transnational networks as a threat to Egypt's national security. Further, the ongoing crack-down—while helping the organization maintain its unity—undermines its organizational and political power. In fact, once again, the regime is using the Muslim Brotherhood as a bogeyman—representing the Brotherhood as the only alternative has been the single most important factor deferring protest

and keeping the disparate actors within the regime united. However, while a weakening of the emergent regime might allow more space for the Muslim Brotherhood, the group might not necessarily be able to exploit it. The Brotherhood is challenged by both growing radical tendencies within its ranks and the emergence of other Islamist alternatives.

Nevertheless, Brotherhood involvement in violent activities is still highly unlikely. The group's commitment to non-violent engagement is one of the few foundations holding it together. For historical, organizational, and practical reasons, the probability of the group discarding this principle is very low. But the bloody summer of 2013, when some jihadist groups protested together with the Muslim Brotherhood, has produced growing radical tendencies. While radical voices were marginal in terms of numbers and influence during the sit-ins, since that time excessive use of violence against protestors alongside harsh court verdicts and a media campaign dehumanizing the Brotherhood have all contributed to mainstreaming radicalism. This radicalization poses two serious organizational challenges. First, it undermines the leadership's ability to compromise. Second, its grip on the organization has loosened since the massacres. This lack of a strong leadership and members taking the organization into their own hands could put organizational unity at risk in any move toward reconciliation.

Second, one needs to consider the medium- and long-term impact of radicalization on organizational unity, even if leadership makes no move towards reconciliation. The radicalization of young people, students and peasants has become a reality. Recent events and pressure from the grassroots have forced the Brotherhood's leadership to redefine non-violence to include "all defensive measures that do not involve the use of bullets." The underpinning argument is that violence is still condemnable, but legitimate self-defense is not violence. The leadership hopes to thus reduce young people's incentive to listen to jihadists. But if the cycle of violence continues, the state will increasingly repress Brotherhood members, making any

compromise on the part of the group's leadership unacceptable for its more radical camp. The Brotherhood would then be split between radicals openly advocating violence on one side, and a conservative leadership and traditional constituency on the other. The organization therefore needs to walk down a reconciliatory path to cure the causes of divisive radicalization while at the same time—paradoxically—abstaining from concessions in order to maintain unity. Contextual changes could therefore catalyze a shift in orientation and facilitate reconciliation.

The emergence of Islamist alternatives is another major challenge facing the Muslim Brotherhood. Islamism has already moved from the core to the periphery of Egyptian politics, and a growing number of actors are competing over diminishing space. The regime-allied Salafi Nour Party hopes to capitalize on the Muslim Brotherhood's exclusion and to take its place as the hegemonic Islamist actor, but persistent Islamist-secular polarization hinders these efforts. Although politicized Salafis are more inclined to join the Brotherhood and its Islamist partners due to the persistent polarization, the Nour Party is nevertheless a major domestic rival for the Muslim Brotherhood. As a reconciliation process would soften polarization, the Brotherhood would have to compete with Nour for the Islamist constituency. Aware of this upcoming battle, the organization's leadership is currently focused on discrediting Nour's political positions, labelling them sellouts and traitors.

## Toward Reconciliation

Political reconciliation is only one—albeit crucial and problematic—component of Egypt's roadmap out of its current crisis. Structural deficits in both the state and the economy pose more serious challenges to stability than the current conflict. Nevertheless, reconciliation remains a prerequisite for approaching these challenges and the conflicting parties are paying a heavy price for its delay. It should therefore be dealt with as an integral component of building a new, more democratic and equitable polity.

The first step toward reconciliation should be to maintain a polity with minimal barriers to inclusion. While advocates of violence must not be tolerated, others (both Islamist and secular) should be allowed to organize themselves and participate actively in the political process. The state should not deal with the terrorist threat by closing political space (which only radicalizes dissent by pushing it underground), but through a sophisticated strategy that undermines Islamists' isolationist tendencies. This also requires revisiting the centralist state structure. The empowerment of diverse groups can help overcome the zero-sum game between "state identity" and "Islamist identity," and empowered local governments and municipalities could act as important platforms in this regard. Legislation enabling more public participation in decision making—particularly at the local level—should be pursued to broaden the system's legitimacy and make democracy more meaningful within local communities.

Revisiting socioeconomic policies is an integral component of both reconciliation and building a sustainable polity. Owing to deep structural deficits, the new president will soon need to choose between stability and stagnation. While facing clear resistance from business tycoons and the status quo forces that dominate the bureaucracy, delaying such reforms will only complicate El-Sisi's presidency. He has already reached the peak of his popularity, and as time passes, he will be less able to capitalize on his strong popular mandate to challenge these networks. He should therefore swiftly revisit the state's socioeconomic biases to allow for the inclusion of larger segments of society, consequently decreasing the incentive for isolation. Other essential measures include serious efforts to decrease income gaps through the imposition of maximum and minimum wages without exceptions, restructuring subsidies and lifting those directed at energy-intensive industries, and wider state responsibility for social services, most importantly healthcare and education.

Transitional justice is an integral component of any meaningful reconciliation process. It should focus on the structural causes of injustice on at least three different fronts; namely widespread human rights violations, structural deficits that have led to a political gridlock, and deficits that have led to the growth of crony capitalism. This process should also deal with government crimes committed under the SCAF, Morsi's presidency, and the post-Brotherhood interim regime. While the balance of power does not necessarily allow for punishing criminals, investigation and fact-finding and equal access to amnesty for all parties through a truth and reconciliation process could help cure some of the woes caused by the cycle of violence. Additionally, a multi-partisan anti-terrorist bill that upholds human rights should be coupled with training and capacity building for security personnel.

Another key step toward reconciliation is inclusion of a new political leadership. President El-Sisi's electoral victory has sent provoking signals regarding the revitalization of Mubarak's regime, and reliance on Mubarak's entourage and political aides will legitimize Islamists' claim that the "coup" was planned to restore his regime. New political faces are less burdened with deep enmities and hostilities and therefore more capable of walking down a path of inclusiveness and reconciliation. Instead of relying primarily on officers, bureaucrats, and businessmen (as was the case during the previous decades), the new leadership should reflect societal diversity in terms of religion, ethnicity, gender, class, and political views. Empowering local governments will help breed this new leadership in the medium and long term, while a short-term strategy should be based on minimizing reliance on Mubarak's elite and giving more space to a vibrant civil society and to young people.

In order to regain its place in the polity, the Muslim Brotherhood should pursue a multi-dimensional strategy. A change in leadership is both necessary and overdue. The current leadership, with its political failures and tarnished reputation, has become a heavy burden that poses an obstacle to inclusion in

society and in the political arena. Instead of using the moment of crisis as an excuse to postpone internal restructuring, it should be grasped as an opportunity to change the leadership if it does not willingly retire.

However, it is key that the Muslim Brotherhood also acknowledge the legitimacy of the emergent regime. In fact, the ratification of constitutional amendments with overwhelming majority turns the page on Morsi's regime, and provides the new regime with constitutional legitimacy, the only form of legitimacy previously claimed by the Brotherhood. Acknowledging the new regime's constitutional legitimacy would pave the way for a more credible criticism of its political legitimacy. These claims are not unfounded, given recurrent police violations, laws restricting basic rights and freedoms, and the authorities' failure to observe the constitution on several occasions.

The upcoming parliamentary elections could be another milestone. In a recent statement, the Muslim Brotherhood made clear that it has not yet decided whether or not to boycott the elections. While the decision to boycott threatens the Brotherhood as it gives Nour the upper hand in winning the Islamist constituency, announcing candidates will only increase polarization and impede reconciliation. The Brotherhood would be well-advised to not present candidates, but to actively—through its local networks—support whoever it believes to be the best candidate for every seat. Decentralized decisions will help the group regain its legitimacy at

the local level and take away its stigma as the Other. Further, decentralization would empower the group's local constituency, boosting organizational democracy and allowing for the ascent of new leaders. Rather than competing in the parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood should focus on developing a new, more competent generation of politicians through participation in elections for local governments.

However, these reforms can only bear fruit if the group undertakes one major organizational change: it needs to adjust its structure to the country's constitutional framework. A genuine separation of the social organization and the political party is overdue, and necessary to regain political legitimacy. In terms of funding, activities, membership, and discourse, the Freedom and Justice Party should clearly distinguish itself from the Muslim Brotherhood. The social organization should register as a civil society organization to ensure a higher level of transparency and accountability, especially if it wishes to effectively counter charges of capitalizing on foreign funds, money laundering, and corruption. In parallel, the group—alongside other civil society and political organizations—should press for changes in the restrictive NGO laws. Finding these common denominators with other political and societal forces can be part of a lengthy, but much-needed path toward societal salvation.

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The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the German Council on Foreign Relations.

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