Why Did Egyptian Democratization Fail?

Fourteen Experts Respond

Edited by Amy Hawthorne and Andrew Miller
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On January 25, 2011, brave Egyptians began pouring into the streets demanding the resignation of strongman President Hosni Mubarak and "bread, freedom, and social justice." On February 11, in the face of mass protests, the army forced Mubarak to step down, ending his thirty-year dictatorship. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), composed of the military's top leadership, immediately assumed control over the government, promising a democratic transition. Seventeen months later it grudgingly ceded some power to a freely elected parliament and president from the Muslim Brotherhood. Between Mubarak's ouster and the military's July 3, 2013 coup against President Mohamed Morsi, there were moments when a genuine transition to democracy seemed possible. But after the coup, a new military-backed dictatorship took power, led by coup leader and former Minister of Defense Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. His regime has extinguished all politics and taken repression to levels not seen in Egypt in decades.

Egyptians and foreign analysts continue to debate what went wrong after February 2011. To add to these reflections, POMED asked 14 experts to respond concisely to the following question:

> Looking back nine years later, what in your view was the primary reason for the failure of Egypt's short democratic experiment?

We are pleased to publish their responses here.

ZEINAB ABUL-MAGD

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Post-Mubarak Egypt became a more brutal security state instead of a democracy primarily because the military succeeded in exploiting the hidden powers it had acquired during his regime. Hosni Mubarak, an ex-air force officer himself, allowed retired military officials to become a business elite with a monopoly over key economic sectors. He also let military officers infiltrate civilian state agencies, strengthening military control over citizens' daily lives.

The Mubarak regime's civilian façade mostly obscured this military expansion. But immediately after his ouster, senior officers capitalized on their role as security providers, bureaucrats, and entrepreneurs, presenting themselves as the nation's savior at a time of chaos. The armed forces, Egypt's wealthiest and most influential organization, exploited the political vacuum to extend its occupation of public space and to maintain dominance over civilian actors, whatever the cost. From early 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood allied itself with the army and alienated other civilian and secular forces. Once in power, the Brotherhood sought to co-opt and appease the military by expanding the officers' economic and political privileges even further. But the trick did not work, as the military had bigger goals and soon aborted the whole democratic process.

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The main cause of Egypt's failed transition was key political actors' inability to resolve their ideological and strategic differences without vilifying, demonizing, or excluding one another. Secular, liberal, Islamist, and leftist forces all failed astonishingly in making the compromises and concessions required in any democratic transition. After the fall of Hosni Mubarak, deep divisions, a lack of trust, mutual insecurity, and the absence of a genuine commitment to democracy shaped political actors' behavior and decisions. Forces of the *ancien régime*, particularly the military and security establishment, shrewdly stoked and exploited these divisions, paving the way to a well-orchestrated military coup on July 3, 2013 that gave rise to the most brutal regime in the country's modern history.

Democratic transitions are very hard, fraught with political actors' clashing agendas, difficult choices, and many other challenges. Without the key players' ability to navigate these challenges, including by making tough compromises, a transition is destined to fail. Egypt's sad tale has become a guidebook on what *not to do* for countries seeking successful democratization.

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Of the many reasons why Egypt's democratic transition failed, perhaps the most crucial one was that the main players—the army, secular parties, Islamist movements, and Mubarak's men—never sought to reach agreement on how to engineer the transition period after Mubarak's removal. Instead, there was a rush to hold referenda and elections, to selfishly pursue narrow interests, and to exclude Mubarak-associated politicians and interest networks, creating spoilers with a clear incentive to derail the nascent democratic process. There was no serious effort to achieve consensus on the core rules of a democratic transition: how to build a political system that could accommodate ideological differences within a democratic framework; how to regulate competition for power; how to share power; and how to institutionalize the acceptance of election results by the losers.

Without a genuine, inclusive negotiation in which all players would agree on these rules, distrust quickly grew, polarization set in, and spoilers had their opening to collaborate with antidemocratic forces to take power through undemocratic means.

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A grave mistake, that we, Egypt's revolutionary forces, made was failing to realize that our battle for democracy required unity at home and solidarity abroad. The counter-revolutionary forces in Egypt, and their allies in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), immediately saw Egyptian democracy as a fundamental threat and formed a united front to defeat it.

The counter-revolutionary alliance was well funded, coherent, and stable, while the revolutionary forces formed only confused, shaky, and unreliable coalitions. The counter-revolutionary forces went on the offensive to make the regional environment hostile for democratic change, and actively promoted their narrative in Washington and Brussels. Meanwhile, the outside friends of Egyptian democracy had far less enthusiasm in backing Egyptians' democratic choices, culminating in their complete failure to stop the UAE and Saudi-backed 2013 military coup.

The counter-revolution was always one step ahead. The next time Egyptians in our millions take to the streets for democratic change, we must anticipate adversaries' reaction and quickly forge a unified front at home and solidarity abroad. This means chanting for rights and freedoms in Egypt as well as in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and beyond.

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The failure of Egypt's democratic transition confirmed that revolution is not possible without transitional justice carried out by independent institutions. Egypt never attempted to create any such accountability process after Hosni Mubarak's ouster. Instead, the authorities tried only a few officials for corruption and human rights violations in the existing judiciary, which was unable or unwilling to carry out credible prosecutions.

This judiciary was composed largely of regime loyalists and social elites who prioritized maintaining their prestige and relatively generous compensation over promoting democratic reform. Most senior judges also were deeply suspicious of the forces pushing for transitional

justice—the revolutionary youth and (at first) the Muslim Brotherhood—and thus acted to support political continuity and a strong state. Consequently, most Mubarak regime defendants got off with undue leniency or were exonerated.

After the 2013 coup, Egypt's rule of law problems were even more glaring, as the regime brazenly used the judiciary as a tool of repression. The regime strategically selected judges known for their support of the rights-abusing military and the police to preside over unjust prosecutions, including many mass trials, of purported regime opponents. Thousands of likely innocents received brutal prison sentences or death, while regime-linked perpetrators of violence walked free. As a result of these failures, the Egyptian state remains emboldened to violate the rights of the Egyptian people.

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With all the twists and turns of Egyptian politics since the January 25 uprising, the reason why the democratic transition failed is straightforward. Despite Hosni Mubarak's removal from office and the disintegration of his National Democratic Party, the uprising did not succeed in overthrowing Egypt's political system and its prevailing social order. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which seized executive power after it dismissed Mubarak, never had any intention of overseeing a transition to democracy. Egypt's armed forces were both a prime beneficiary and the ultimate defender of the system that had been in place since the 1950s. It is true that Egypt's leadership changed, but the regime—the interlocking formal and informal institutions and the social classes whose interests were reflected in this system and this social order—remained intact. The uprising may have weakened the regime for a moment, creating an opening that made a previously unimaginable Muslim Brotherhood presidency possible, but the regime's constituents retained the means to outmaneuver, undermine, arrest, and even kill those who sought a new political system. Under these circumstances, the revolutionaries and their supporters had little chance of success in changing Egypt into a democracy.

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Forces within Egypt that wanted democratization failed to unify behind a plan for the initial phase of democratic transition in early 2011, allowing the antidemocratic military leadership (the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, or SCAF) to outmaneuver them. Liberal, leftist, and Islamist political forces unified during the 18-day uprising around the demand for Mubarak to leave, but none of them had thought much about what should happen next. Pro-democracy activists lapsed into squabbling about whether it would be better to amend the existing constitution or scrap it in favor of a new one. Mohamed ElBaradei advocated an inclusive

roundtable process to write a new constitution, but he received little support for the idea either locally or internationally. The SCAF, by contrast, moved quickly, presenting a plan for limited constitutional amendments barely two weeks after Mubarak was ousted and getting Muslim Brotherhood support. This set in place a dynamic—political forces struggling against one another and losing public support, while the military played each against the other—that caused the Egyptian effort at democracy to fail from the outset.

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The collapse of Egypt's democratic experiment was a triumph of structures over actors. Structurally, Egypt is not a good candidate for democracy. It has weak civilian institutions; a political elite without experience in compromise; an entrenched military-security apparatus; and a foreign-aid dependent economy in which two-thirds of Egyptians live in or near poverty. To overcome these constraints, the Islamists and secularists who led the 2011 protest movement needed skill and luck, but turned out to have neither.

After forcing out Mubarak, they failed to dislodge the military-security apparatus's grip on the state or to forge a sustainable partnership for democratization with the military. Instead, they splintered: Islamists overplayed their hand, alienating their secular partners, who did not pull their weight and melted down. Each preferred to rely on a de facto alliance with the military to survive.

The protest leaders also failed to offer effective solutions to Mubarak's legacy of poverty and state failure. The military did present itself as a viable alternative to the former regime, thereby depriving protest leaders of their main source of power—their credibility as change agents. When the second confrontation between the military and the civilian opposition came, in summer-fall 2013, the military was able to defeat Islamists and then crush remaining pro-democracy secularists.

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The primary reason for the failure of Egypt's democratic transition was the inability of influential civilian actors to unify and demand an end to the military-dominated political system. In 2011-12, when a genuine political opening gave Egyptians their greatest opportunity to change the Mubarak system, civilian actors were split. The Muslim Brotherhood put itself first, making a tacit alliance with the military to secure its own path to electoral victory. Secular forces were divided among themselves over how to deal with the military. Only the young revolutionaries who had launched the January 25 uprising organized consistently against the military's power and prerogatives. Other secular groups did not forcefully challenge the military's coercive power and economic privileges—or were prepared to cut side deals with the Supreme Council

of the Armed Forces. Because of these divisions, there was never any effective pressure on the military to submit to civilian authority, and it was able to remain both security enforcer and political kingmaker. This room for maneuver enabled the military to consolidate its position in 2011-2012 and then, after July 2013, to expand and entrench its power beyond what most observers ever thought possible in those heady days of early 2011.

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Two factors together caused the failure of Egyptian democracy in 2011-2013: the detrimental role of the Egyptian military and the U.S. role in enabling the military's repression. From the uprising's outset, the military worked to undermine the democratic transition. It succeeded in part because, since the 1952 revolution, the military had cultivated its status as "guardian" of the state and of Egyptian identity. Thus, when the generals moved against the Muslim Brotherhood in mid-2013, they were more likely to gain the support of liberals and secularists who believed the Brotherhood represented a breach with what Egypt had been. By contrast, when secular forces in post-revolution Tunisia called for a military intervention against the elected Islamist-led government there, the Tunisian army, proud of its nonpolitical image, declined to act.

For its part, the Obama administration neglected to use U.S. leverage in favor of democracy. Well before the 2013 coup, it missed critical opportunities to rein in the military's antidemocratic moves, such as the 2011-12 crackdown on pro-democracy NGOs and the June 2012 dissolution of the democratically elected parliament. And, as David Kirkpatrick's book documents, key U.S. officials gave the military a de facto green light in the run-up to the coup, leading to a crowning failure of U.S. policy.

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The swift collapse of the tactical alliance between the Islamist and non-Islamist forces that had led the 2011 protest movement represents the chief cause of Egypt's catastrophic political failure. The post-Mubarak transition faced serious structural challenges, but failure was not inevitable. Contingency and choice should be seen as central factors.

The Egyptian military was never and could not have been a force for democratization. But especially in the early stages of the transition, its leadership was confused, reactive, and susceptible to pressure to make certain concessions when civilian political forces remained aligned. These forces, tragically, were unable to maintain the unity and focus required to shape what could have

been a transformational democratic opening. That collapse was an outgrowth of the fundamental lack of trust and deep-seated fears that colored relations between and among civilian political movements and leaders. The quick shift by the Muslim Brotherhood to maximize its own political power above all else set the stage for the zero-sum interactions that came to poison Egypt's nascent politics, which the military exploited to advance its antidemocratic agenda.

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January 25 led to a military dictatorship instead of a democracy because most political actors were naive about the military. They believed it would be a neutral player—when in fact the military was the institution most hostile to democracy. Rather than create a united front against the military, these actors were unable, or unwilling, to reach compromises with Mubarak regime remnants and among themselves that could have laid the groundwork for a successful democratic transition.

The leadership of the Egyptian Armed Forces was prepared for January 25, seizing a golden opportunity to scuttle Mubarak's plan to pass power to his son, Gamal, who would have been Egypt's first civilian leader since 1952. By pushing out Mubarak, the military also reversed the decline in political influence it had suffered since Egypt's disastrous defeat in the June 1967 War.

After forcing out Mubarak, the military employed a mixture of strategic ambiguity regarding its aims; alliances with Islamists and later with secular actors; and brutal repression. Other political actors lacked the organization, leadership, unified vision, and trust required to seize what was their own golden chance to forge a democratic order.

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Many analysts correctly blame Egypt's military, above all, for the country's democratization fiasco. But civilian actors had agency, and none made more devastating mistakes than the Muslim Brotherhood. Democratic transitions require strong political movements pushing steadily for democratic change. As the biggest such movement during the 2011-13 democratic opening, the Brotherhood could have led this effort—indeed it had a responsibility to do so. Upon Mubarak's ouster, the group could have formed a cross-ideological coalition with secular forces against the military to demand core and early democratic reforms. This would have required the group to moderate some of its positions and to exercise restraint in its pursuit of immediate influence. But such a pro-democracy alliance would have made it much harder for the military to divide and then to conquer the opposition.

Tragically, the Brotherhood instead chose to expand its own power by cutting a deal with the military in March 2011. At every subsequent key juncture through July 3, 2013, the Brotherhood appeased the deep state, sided with ultra-conservative Islamists, alienated liberals, and failed to champion democratic reforms—except for free elections that it won. Absolutely *none* of this justifies the coup or the subsequent bloody crackdown on the group. But imagine how different Egypt might be today had the Brotherhood had wiser leadership in 2011.

WILLIAM QUANDT

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Looking back nine years later, Egypt's failure to make a democratic transition following the 2011 popular protests now seems overdetermined. The protesters sought the ouster of Mubarak and his cronies from power, but did not have a clear strategy for what should come next. The Muslim Brotherhood, who joined the protesters, did have an agenda, but it was to gain a position of power in the new, post-Mubarak era, not democracy *per se*. And the military, plus the other parts of the Egyptian deep state, wanted to ensure that Gamal Mubarak and his businessmen colleagues would not take power and start to dismantle their privileges. No one put democracy high on the agenda. So, one answer to why there is no democracy in Egypt is that there were too few genuine democrats. First the Brotherhood, having barely won the 2012 presidential election, had its shot at power, but was undermined by the deep state, the military in particular, and by several powerful external powers—mainly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. When President Mohamed Morsi was ousted, the military seized all the keys to power. As is true of militaries elsewhere in the region, the Egyptian army cares more about order than about democracy.