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EGYPT'S SECULAR POLITICAL PARTIES

A Struggle for Identity and Independence

Michele Dunne and Amr Hamzawy

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Summary

Secular political parties in Egypt have always been caught between an overbearing state and a largely Islamist opposition. The brief, chaotic political opening from 2011 to 2013 offered them unprecedented opportunities, but the violence and intense polarization that followed the military coup have put them under more pressure than ever. Formal politics in Egypt is now a tightly controlled game in which no real independence is allowed, but some secular parties might reemerge as contenders should there be another opportunity for free competition.

State Pressure

- In classifying Egypt's secular political parties, the usual right-to-left spectrum is not particularly useful. It is more instructive to arrange parties based on their relationship with the state—from those formed only to support the state to those that continue to vigorously oppose the state.
- Many secular parties were founded with the goal of being true political competitors but have lost their independence along the way.
- The state has long been undermining secular parties with assiduous campaigns to discredit, co-opt, corrupt, or internally divide them. Such efforts occurred throughout the presidency of Hosni Mubarak and resumed after the 2013 coup.
- Today, even secular parties that supported the coup and President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi have come under attack after trying to preserve any modicum of independence, such as resisting joining the pro-Sisi bloc in Parliament.

Desperate Measures

- Secular parties have done at least as much harm to themselves by taking desperate and often unprincipled actions to merely survive.
- Between 2011 and 2013, secular parties were so concerned about pushing back against the seemingly unstoppable electoral victories of Islamists that they invited the military to intervene in politics, ending the brief democratic opening.

- Several secular parties applauded the 2013 coup and have remained silent about the mass killings that followed, abandoning any pretense of defending the values they claimed to represent. Even still, they are being pressured to show blind allegiance to the state.
- Other parties have criticized human rights abuses and military rule and have boycotted formal politics since the coup.
- Despite the many ways in which secular parties have been discredited—and have discredited themselves—in the eyes of citizens, some of them still hold enough ideological appeal and organizational vigor to potentially share power should Egypt experience another political opening.

Introduction

Throughout Egypt's modern history, political parties have struggled to project clear identities and maintain their independence while operating in environments dominated by fervent rulers. Since the partial democratic framework was abolished in the 1950s following the country's first military coup, Egyptian parties representing different ideological platforms have faced legal and political constraints. This has been particularly true for secular parties, and to analyze their present and future political relevance, a historical understanding of these struggles is needed. However, one must first consider what it means to be a *secular* party in Egypt and how identity and the political environment have shaped the parties' evolution. How secular parties have identified and defined themselves has had—and will continue to have—a direct impact on their capacity to mobilize support and participate in policymaking.

Regarding identity at its most basic level, merely uttering the phrase “secular political party” in Egypt can ignite a debate. What does secular mean in this context? Does it mean the party is atheistic, that it advocates the removal of all mention of God or religion from the constitution, or simply that its doctrine is not based on a religious philosophy? In answering these questions, Merriam-Webster's definition of secular helps as a starting point: “not overtly or specifically religious.”¹ In applying this definition, secular parties' defining characteristic is that they are not based on a religious ideology. Not all of them call for a state whose defining documents make no mention of religious principles—and, of course, many members of such parties are personally religious—but religion is not among the pillars of their platforms. For example, the mission of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, founded in March 2011, is to build “a civil, democratic, and modern state . . . whose people are the source of sovereignty.”² Religion is not mentioned in the party's founding statement. In contrast, while expressing support for democracy, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, founded in April 2011, called for “a civil state with an Islamic frame of reference” and for “the application of sharia (Islamic Law) in all walks of life, as it is the source of wisdom and divine mercy.”³ Recognizing that even core identity issues are complex, for ease of discussion here, a party is identified as secular if religion is not a pillar of its declared identity or mission.

Moving beyond basic identity questions, what specific challenges do secular parties face in carving out their political role? Since their inception, secular parties have operated under exceedingly difficult conditions. Unlike Islamist

parties, they have been unable to benefit from the use of facilities and personnel associated with religious institutions (for example, to organize and collect funds inside mosques). And unlike state-affiliated parties, they have been unable to benefit from the use of state-owned facilities or state-controlled media

Caught in the crossfire between a state dominated by the military/security apparatus and an opposition dominated by Islamists, secular parties have struggled to define coherent identities as well as to build bases of support and funding.

or from the ability to mobilize bureaucrats. These conditions have generally pushed secular parties toward one of the dominant power centers: the military-dominated state or the Islamist opposition—the former generally much stronger than the latter.

Caught in the crossfire between a state dominated by the military/security apparatus and an opposition dominated by Islamists (particularly the Muslim Brotherhood), secular parties have struggled to define coherent identities as well as to build bases of support and funding. Their challenges—leading them to support, oppose, compromise with, or be compromised by the state—have profoundly shaped the parties and their relationships with citizens. Since the 2013 military coup, even those parties that agreed to participate in politics under the once-again-emerging authoritarian framework have been systematically marginalized and have seen their space of autonomous action shrink as the grip of the military/security apparatus over political and economic power has tightened. The ideological and organizational tactics they have used in their struggles offer some indication as to which parties might be more viable than others should a new political opening come along.

The Taxonomy of Secular Parties

While Egyptians know instinctively which party stands for what in domestic politics, for outside observers, taking an inventory can be bewildering. In describing Egypt's secular scene, the usual right-to-left spectrum is not particularly useful. Some parties lean toward social conservatism and others toward liberalism, while some lean toward free market economic ideas and others toward a state-driven economy. Yet, trying to understand the place of secular parties in Egyptian political life in terms of such distinctions would be misleading. In the mid-1970s, then president Anwar Sadat split the Arab Socialist Union (the ruling party established by his predecessor Gamal Abdel Nasser) into three wings, thereby creating the left-leaning Unionist (Tagammu) and right-leaning Liberals (Ahrar) to flank the ruling party (first called the Arab Socialist Egypt Party and later the National Democratic Party). This was an artificial construction that left the pro-military elite conveniently centered in political life. Developments since then have been just as confusing to observers; some parties that appear to be ideologically close to the Egyptian state

are in fact those that oppose the state most strongly, while others that seem ideologically distinct from the state are in fact behind-the-scenes state supporters. Figure 1 shows an inventory of secular political parties active between 2011 and 2017.

Another way of classifying Egyptian parties would be according to the era in which they were founded. One party currently operating in Egypt—Wafd—was founded nearly a century ago (1919) during the country's partially democratic era before the 1952 Free Officers' coup; it thus has had the experience of relatively free elections and an active parliamentary life—albeit one constrained by a monarchy and colonial power. The Free Officers banned political parties in 1953 and Nasser enshrined a single-party rule so no new parties were founded during that time. Presidents Sadat and Hosni Mubarak (1970–1981 and 1981–2011, respectively) restored limited pluralist politics and allowed the reemergence of political parties. The New Wafd (Delegation) Party was founded in 1978, along with other parties. But both Sadat and Mubarak were master manipulators, and thus the parties founded during their eras were shaped by repression and co-optation efforts and less by competition.⁴

Many more parties were born during Egypt's brief post-Mubarak political opening (2011–2013), and a few more were founded after the military coup of 2013. While the founding circumstances and historical experiences of parties are instructive—those founded during eras of political openness and relative competition generally tend to retain more vitality today than those founded during restrictive eras—they do not reveal enough about the actual function of the parties still standing today.

For the purposes of this analysis, a different taxonomy of Egyptian secular political parties was chosen: a scale of proximity to the state—not ideological proximity but proximity in terms of political behavior. In other words, does the party actually aspire to come to power via electoral competition and to lead the state someday, or does it aspire only to support the state and thereby derive patronage?

The answer might seem obvious in some contexts: of course those who form political parties aspire to come into government via elections—why else would they do all the work involved? But it is not obvious in a country with a long and tenacious authoritarian tradition. What many Egyptians found most remarkable during the brief political opening was the changed atmosphere; suddenly citizens who had long been apathetic were politically aware and interested and were applying that awareness in places such as work, schools, and neighborhoods. But for decades before 2011, politics was a highly corrupted domain for Egyptians—and has become one again since the brutal crackdown began in 2013. Some parties were basically hollow shells from the beginning, apparently existing to help authoritarian governments create the illusion of pluralism while in reality offering no competition of any kind.

Figure 1. Egyptian Secular Political Parties Active 2011-2017

Name	Year Founded	People's Assembly Seats (2011)	House of Representatives Seats (2015)	Proximity to the State (2017)
Wafd	1919	36	35	Co-opted
Unionist	1976	3	1	Pro-state
Dignity	1996	6	0	Oppositional
Tomorrow	2004	0	0	Co-opted
Democratic Peace	2005	1	5	Pro-state
Conservatives	2006	0	6	Pro-state
Reform and Development	2009	8	3	Oppositional
Freedom	2011	4	3	Pro-state
Modern Egypt	2011	0	4	Pro-state
Free Egyptians	2011	17	65	Co-opted
Egyptian Socialist Popular Alliance	2011	5	Boycotted	Oppositional
Egyptian Social Democratic	2011	14	4	Oppositional
Egypt Freedom	2011	1	Boycotted	Oppositional
Justice	2011	1	Boycotted	Oppositional
Guardians of the Revolution	2011	0	1	Oppositional
Tomorrow of the Revolution	2011	0	Boycotted	Oppositional
Congress	2012	N/A	12	Pro-state
Egyptian National Movement	2012	N/A	4	Pro-state
Republican People's	2012	N/A	13	Pro-state
Constitution	2012	N/A	Boycotted	Oppositional
Strong Egypt	2012	N/A	Boycotted	Oppositional
Egypt My Country	2013	N/A	3	Pro-state
Nation's Future	2013	N/A	53	Pro-state
Bread and Freedom*	2013	N/A	Boycotted	Oppositional
Protectors of the Nation	2014	N/A	18	Pro-state

*Not yet licensed

N/A = Not applicable

Parliamentary elections (2011):

"Interactive: Full Egypt Election Results," Al Jazeera, February 1, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2012/01/20121248225832718.html>.

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 "Egypt's Islamist Parties Win Elections to Parliament," BBC News, January 21, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16665748>.

Parliamentary elections (2015):

Egyptian High Elections Committee, Summary Report: Legislative Elections (Cairo: Egyptian High Elections Committee, 2015), https://www.elections.eg/images/pdfs/reports/2015HoR-ReportSummary_En.pdf.

"Party Profiles," Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, <https://timep.org/pem/category/political-parties/>.

Nancy Messieh and Ali Mohamed, "Who Is Participating in Egypt's Parliamentary Elections?," Atlantic Council, February 20, 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/who-is-participating-in-egypt-s-parliamentary-elections>.

Noha Hamouda, "'Neda' Masr" Tansaheb men al-Intekhabat al-Barlamaneya be-Da'wa "al-Tahyeez" [Nidaa Masr Withdraws from the Parliamentary Elections], EGYNews, October 24, 2015, <http://www.egynews.net/722505/%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AD%D8%A8-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7/>.

Note: The number of seats won may have changed slightly following the conclusion of subsequent court cases.

In devising a spectrum of Egyptian secular political parties—from those closest to the state to those who most vigorously oppose it—one can imagine several principal points:

- Some secular political parties, while claiming no affiliation with the state, appear to have been formed with the main objective (declared or undeclared) of supporting the state. This applies to most of the parties formed since the 2013 coup, such as the Nation's Future (Mostaqbal Watan) Party, which won fifty-three seats in the 2015 parliamentary elections.⁵ While the pro-state political spectrum was in chaos after the 2011 dissolution of the National Democratic Party, a few parties were formed even in the immediate postrevolutionary period and expanded their operations after the 2013 coup (for example, the Republican People's [al-Sha'b al-Gumhuri] Party, which gained thirteen seats in the 2015 elections).
- Other secular political parties gave, or tried to give, vigorous political competition to the state when they were first formed, but later became partially co-opted or compromised by the state. The venerable Wafd Party—which dominated parliamentary political life and the national independence movement from the end of World War I until the 1952 Free Officers' coup—has exemplified such a party since its second founding (as New Wafd) in 1978. The Free Egyptians Party (al-Misriyyin al-Ahrar), formed after the 2011 revolution as a secular party of businesspeople, is a more recent example. These two parties now have enough seats in Parliament to be useful partners within a larger bloc (Wafd has thirty-five seats in the current House of Representatives and Free Egyptians has sixty-five), but they have been weakened from within by state-inspired leadership struggles and corruption scandals.
- There are a few secular parties—most of them formed post-2011—that continue to try to offer strong ideological or political competition to the state even under the extremely difficult circumstances since 2013. Almost all of these parties won seats in the 2011 parliamentary elections, but most of them either boycotted the 2015 elections or competed at a sharp disadvantage with the pro-coup parties. The largest is the Social Democratic Party, which won fourteen seats in 2011 and four in 2015. Others—such as the Constitution (Dustour) Party and Strong Egypt (Misr al-Qawiya) Party, founded by former presidential candidates Mohamed ElBaradei and Abdel Moneim Aboul Foutuh, respectively—were formed too late to compete in 2011 and boycotted the elections in 2015. They have never held seats but are still considered relevant politically due to their perceived support among young people and their activism on university campuses. All of the parties in this category have been under intense state pressure since the 2013 coup, although some of them sided with the military in the beginning.

Figure 2 shows secular political parties arranged on a spectrum from those closest to the state to those most in opposition to it.

Figure 2. Taxonomy of Egyptian Secular Parties, Based on Proximity to the State, 2017

Active Parties				
Democratic Peace				
Conservatives				
Freedom				
Modern Egypt				
Republican People's				
Egyptian National Movement			Dignity	
Egypt My Country			Reform and Development	Egypt Freedom
Nation's Future	Unionist	Wafd	Egyptian Social Democrats	Strong Egypt
Protectors of the Nation	Congress	Free Egyptians	Constitution	Bread and Freedom*
PRO-STATE	CO-OPTED		OPPOSITIONAL	
Inactive Parties				
		Tomorrow		Tomorrow of the Revolution
				Guardians of the Revolution
				Justice
				Egyptian Socialist Popular Alliance

*Not yet licensed

How the State Has Compromised Secular Parties

Using its wide arsenal of tools extending from co-optation to repression, the Egyptian state has long been a major player in shaping the political party landscape. As a result, the role of political parties has been greatly influenced by the state's behavior. Since the mid-1950s, Egypt's political parties have faced significant legal and extralegal constraints, hampering them organizationally, financially, and ideologically. During the presidency of Nasser (1956–1970), no political parties were allowed besides the ruling party—the National Union from 1956 to 1961 and the Arab Socialist Union from 1962 to 1970. His successor, Sadat (1970–1981), only allowed a limited, artificial party life starting in 1976, and Mubarak (1981–2011) created a party licensing structure so tight that only the most toothless groups could get approval.⁶ That all changed with the brief and chaotic political opening from February 2011 to July 2013, when the floodgates were opened and dozens of political parties of all kinds were officially registered.

However, after the 2013 coup, the largest Islamist party (the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party) was banned, and most other Islamist parties (except the Salafi Light Party, which supported the coup) continue to be

harassed to prevent them from fully participating in political life—for example, their leaders have been imprisoned and their legal status has been subject to lawsuits. While non-Islamist parties are not suffering such a harsh fate, the post-2013 political environment has been corrosive for them as well.

Except during the brief political opening from 2011 to 2013, when parties formed and operated with significantly more freedom, the Egyptian state has often taken legal or extralegal steps to compromise secular political parties. During the Mubarak era, there was a complicated legal regime for party licensing controlled by the largely appointed upper house of Parliament, which de facto meant that the ruling National Democratic Party decided which of its potential competitors should be licensed. Beyond the initial gateway of licensing, there were a number of cases in which state actors secretly fostered splits within parties, likely because those parties were perceived to have transgressed unwritten limits on acceptable opposition activity.

One such case was the Socialist Labor Party, formed originally in 1978 as part of Sadat's controlled restoration of limited pluralist politics. In 1990, however, the leftist party formed a surprising electoral alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood. While the original intention of the Laborites might have been to push the Brotherhood in a socialist direction, it seemed that the opposite occurred. By 2000, the Socialist Labor Party and its newspaper *al-Sha'b* were leading the call for the application of sharia in Egypt and voicing charges against writers viewed as blasphemous. The state fostered a leadership split within the party and then used the restrictive parties' law to suspend the party and its newspaper in May 2000.⁷

More famous was the state-inspired split of the Tomorrow (Ghad) Party, formed in 2004 by Ayman Nour, a young member of Parliament from Wafd who had emerged at that time as a leading voice for liberalism. Why Tomorrow was licensed—at a time when only the tamest groups could get permission to form parties—was a bit mysterious, but it might be that the Mubarak regime underestimated how seriously Nour planned to take his role as a new force within the opposition. While Nour was soundly defeated in his challenge to Mubarak in the country's first multicandidate presidential election in September 2005, his sharp public criticism of Mubarak still apparently resonated with many Egyptians and irritated the regime.⁸ Nour was imprisoned on forgery charges in December 2005, and a leadership split emerged within Tomorrow that smacked of state involvement. Although Nour was released on health grounds in 2009, the party remained mired in court cases related to the leadership split. Eventually Nour founded a new party, Tomorrow of the Revolution (Ghad al-Thawra), after Mubarak's removal, but he was later forced into exile after opposing the 2013 coup.⁹

Beyond the initial gateway of licensing, there were a number of cases in which state actors secretly fostered splits within parties, likely because those parties were perceived to have transgressed unwritten limits on acceptable opposition activity.

State manipulation of parties abated during the chaotic political opening but then reemerged strongly after the coup.

State manipulation of parties abated during the chaotic political opening but then reemerged strongly after the coup. Parties that strongly opposed the coup were repressed openly and harshly: the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party was banned outright in 2014, most other Islamist parties became entangled in lawsuits and arrests of their leaders, and smaller secular parties

such as the Justice ('Adl) Party and Egypt Freedom (Misr al-Hurriya) Party were nearly hounded out of existence.¹⁰

As time passed and the post-coup authoritarianism increased, even some of the secular parties that initially supported the coup were subjected to subversion by the state. The first major secular party targeted was the Constitution Party, founded by former International Atomic Energy

Agency director general Mohamed ElBaradei. Although ElBaradei was a leading spokesman for liberal democracy, he at first supported the coup against then president Mohamed Morsi and agreed to serve as interim vice president in July 2013; this lent significant credibility to the military's initial claim that the coup would restore democracy. After the mass killing at Rabaa al-Adawiya Square on August 14, 2013, ElBaradei abruptly resigned and left the country, leaving his party leaderless. The party has since struggled, wracked by leadership conflicts. Its first leader elected after ElBaradei left, Hala Shukrallah (the first woman and Christian to head a party in the country), complained that she was unable to operate the party according to the preferences of its mostly youthful constituents due to persistent interference from senior members with links to the state.¹¹

A similar phenomenon emerged within the Social Democratic Party in 2015 and 2016, when those who had founded the party in 2011—political liberals with a center-left economic orientation—began to face competition and controversy from members who wanted to bring the party more into a complete alliance with the post-coup state. The Social Democrats had supported the coup and enjoyed a strong representation in the post-coup cabinet, as well as in the Constituent Assembly formed in 2013 to draft the country's new constitution. In light of the growing repressive policies implemented by the military/security apparatus, several politically liberal members of the party distanced themselves from the post-coup state—including the party's former chairman, Mohamed Abou El Ghar, and former vice prime minister, Ziad Bahaa Eldin. However, other members—some of whom were post-2013 newcomers, whose outlook was decidedly more conservative and pro-state than that of its founders—pushed in the opposite direction.¹² Right-leaning and left-leaning members of the party struggled openly for leadership, weakening the party and tarnishing its reputation as one of the more viable, broad-based post-2011 parties.

The Free Egyptians Party, with significant support in the business and Christian communities, suffered an even more dramatic fate in late 2016 and early 2017. Formed in 2011 by Naguib Sawiris, a Coptic Christian and one

of the country's most prominent business leaders, the well-funded party won seventeen seats in the 2011 parliamentary elections. Vocal opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Free Egyptians enthusiastically supported the coup and won sixty-five seats—the most of any single party—in the 2015 elections. Although generally supportive of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's policies and apologist for massive human rights abuses since the 2013 coup, the party declined to join the pro-regime bloc within Parliament in favor of maintaining a modicum of independence. Before long, an alternative leadership began to emerge within the party, pushing for strong support of the state, reducing party membership to those deemed loyal to the new pro-state leaders, and expelling two female parliamentary deputies (Nadia Henry and Mai Mahmoud) who insisted on opposing state policies seen as anti-liberal.¹³ Party founder Sawiris' relations with the state became more and more contentious, and he was reportedly forced to sell off ONtv, the popular satellite television channel that had been an important asset to the party.¹⁴ By early 2017, Sawiris was voted out of the party leadership and later expelled from the party. In a single year, the Free Egyptians had lost their founder, some major funding sources, a television channel, numerous members and supporters, and two parliamentary deputies, leaving the party rudderless and adrift.

In the undermining of the Free Egyptians—a party supporting Sisi but with enough funding and organizational capacity to have pretensions to power—Egyptian observers saw proof of the state's determination to prevent a pluralist environment, even one that excluded most Islamists. In noting the use of political infiltrators as a well-known tactic from the Mubarak era to undermine opposition parties, analyst Mohamed el-Agaty remarked that targeting the Free Egyptians went beyond that, showing that the regime would accept no less than “blind obedience” from its political partners.¹⁵ The anonymous political commentator “Newton,” writing in the *al-Masry al-Youm* newspaper just after Sawiris' ouster from the party, bemoaned that the Free Egyptians were meeting “the end of every party,” as had many before them.¹⁶ The commentator warned that relentless state efforts to discredit and undermine secular parties delivered the political field to Islamists.

As time passed and the post-coup authoritarianism increased, even some of the secular parties that initially supported the coup were subjected to subversion by the state.

How Secular Parties Have Compromised Themselves

It is not only the state that has compromised secular parties. During the Sadat and Mubarak eras of limited political freedom, Egypt's secular parties were often criticized as being elitist, internally undemocratic, financially corrupt, and unwilling to do the hard work of building real constituencies outside the

country's major cities. Once politics opened up after 2011, secular parties also took actions that undermined their credibility and the democratic opening they claimed to prize.

A Rough Ride From 2011 to 2013

Old and new secular parties adapted differently to the chaotic political opening of 2011 to 2013. Those founded with the principal objective of supporting the state and creating a fake image of party pluralism were caught off balance, not knowing how to fulfil their mission in a changing environment.

The resignation of Mubarak on February 11, 2011, after an eighteen-day popular uprising was followed by the ascendancy of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to the top echelons of executive power.¹⁷ The former ruling party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), was banned.¹⁸ The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups of different ideological convictions—from Salafis to former members of the Brotherhood—were founding

parties.¹⁹ New secular parties were also licensed and permitted to operate relatively freely.²⁰ The SCAF seemed for a while to accept democratic competition and the rotation of power as the pillars of post-Mubarak politics.

This was a disorienting change for pro-state secular parties formed before 2011, which were generally small and lacked a popular base. Between 2011 and 2013, their principal objective became to survive. Some of them, such as the Democratic Generation Party (*al-Geel al-Dimuqrati*),

joined the electoral coalition led by the Muslim Brotherhood's party in 2011–2012 and landed one seat in the Consultative Council (upper house of Parliament, partially elected and partially appointed).²¹ Other pro-state parties—mainly newly established parties such as the Egypt National (*Misr al-Qawmi*) Party, Freedom (*al-Hurriya*) Party, and Egyptian Citizen (*al-Muwatin al-Misri*) Party—ran former NDP members in the parliamentary elections and won a few seats.²²

Older secular parties with some pretensions of independence—including the Wafd, National Progressive Unionist (*Tagammu*), and Democratic Front parties that had partially competed with and partially been co-opted by the state—were eager to participate more freely in post-2011 politics. Their ideological and policy preferences charted the course, and various organizational and financial assets defined their fortunes. Under the chairmanship of ElSayed Elbadawy, Wafd opted first for building a grand electoral alliance with the Muslim Brothers, named the Democratic Alliance for Egypt.²³ The alliance, which was announced to contest the 2011 parliamentary elections, included several small Islamist parties such as the Civilization (*Hadara*) Party, as well as secular parties including the Nasserist Dignity (*Karama*) Party and Tomorrow

Those [secular parties] founded with the principal objective of supporting the state and creating a fake image of party pluralism were caught off balance, not knowing how to fulfil their mission in a changing environment.

of the Revolution Party (both of which were licensed only after Mubarak's removal) and the Democratic Front Party.²⁴ However, differences between Wafd and the Brotherhood regarding the total number of candidates fielded by each of them and regarding the place of religion in the election platform led to the failure of the alliance.²⁵ Wafd pulled out, along with most secular parties, including the Democratic Front. The Dignity and Tomorrow of the Revolution parties, however, continued to coordinate with the Brotherhood and ended up fielding a few candidates on its electoral list.²⁶

After leaving the Democratic Alliance, Wafd decided to run its candidates independently in the parliamentary elections. The party's well-developed organizational apparatus—with branches in most Egyptian governorates and major cities—and its stable finances enabled it to field as many candidates as the Brotherhood.²⁷ Other secular parties, including the new Social Democratic Party and Free Egyptians Party, along with the older Unionist Party, vowed to compete in the parliamentary elections against the Muslim Brotherhood-led Democratic Alliance, as well as against an additional Islamist alliance that was established by the Salafi Light Party.²⁸ The Egyptian Bloc emerged as an anti-Brotherhood secular electoral coalition and it was financially backed by secular business leaders such as Sawiris.²⁹ The Bloc, which attracted to its ranks the Democratic Front and a few even smaller secular parties, fashioned a secular platform insisting on separating religion from politics and state affairs.³⁰ However, it coordinated heavily with Egyptian churches to ensure that the Coptic Christian vote would go to its candidates. As a result—and counter to the initial objectives of involved parties—the political environment approaching the 2011 parliamentary elections was polarized along religious lines, with the Democratic Alliance seen as representing mainstream Egyptian Muslims and the Egyptian Bloc perceived as representing the Coptic community.³¹ This harmed the electability of the Egyptian Bloc and deviated from the secular nature of its platform.

Adding to the difficulties of the Egyptian Bloc was that the Social Democratic and Free Egyptians parties were new, with no track record of election participation and limited organizational assets—unlike the Muslim Brotherhood and Wafd. The Bloc was also challenged to find enough electable candidates to run a nationwide election campaign.³² Former NDP members—embedded in the social fabric in rural areas due to kinship ties with big families and due to the role they played in soliciting public services in their communities—were attracted to running on Wafd's lists and to a lesser extent the Brotherhood's lists.³³ Young secular activists emerging as a powerful group in the 2011 revolution and its immediate aftermath were generally less interested in organizing for the parliamentary elections and sought to continue their activism from outside the formal political process. To the extent some of them became interested in the elections, they were not driven to join the Egyptian Bloc despite its

secular orientation due to the perceived dominance of powerful businesspeople.³⁴ Challenged to find electable candidates, the Bloc did not field lists and individual candidates in all districts and limited itself to big cities (for example, Cairo and Alexandria) and to a few rural governorates.³⁵

Breaking away from the Muslim-Christian polarization in which the Egyptian Bloc was involved, a group of small leftist and liberal parties founded a second secular electoral coalition in 2011 by the name of The Revolution Continues (al-Thawra Mustamira).³⁶ Mostly newly established parties—for example, the leftist Popular Alliance (al-Tahaluf al-Sha‘abi), the Egyptian Socialist (al-Ishtiraki al-Misri) Party, and the Egyptian Communist (al-Shiyou‘i al-Misri) Party—joined forces with the liberal Egypt Freedom Party and young revolutionary platform the Egyptian Current (al-Tayyar al-Masri).³⁷ Although The Revolution Continues managed to steer away from the religious polarization and articulated a clear secular and democratic platform, its electability was rather minimal for multiple reasons. The limited organizational and personal assets of the coalition did not drum up the funds needed to participate in the elections. The clear secular message—combined with criticism leveled against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian Bloc for their use of religion for political purposes—did not resonate well with wide segments of the electorate. The Revolution Continues fielded a small number of lists and individual candidates in the 2011 parliamentary elections and was largely perceived as comprising a bunch of idealistic small parties that could not win elections.³⁸

At the time of the 2011 parliamentary elections, secular parties were fragmented. Their various coalitions confused voters, and the involvement of some of them in religious polarization delivered considerable segments of the electorate to the Muslim Brothers and Salafis. In the end, Wafd’s organizational and financial assets and long-standing legacy helped it to win thirty-six seats in the People’s Assembly.³⁹ The Coptic vote, along with strong funding and aggressive media campaigns, enabled the Egyptian Bloc to win thirty-four seats.⁴⁰ The Revolution Continues gained only seven seats,⁴¹ and the Dignity Party secured six seats running on the Muslim Brotherhood’s lists.⁴²

The Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party and the Salafi parties dominated the new People’s Assembly (which began its session in January 2012) with about three-quarters of the seats.⁴³ The fragmentation of secular parties continued inside the new assembly. Whereas Wafd

was inclined to collaborate with the Brotherhood and Salafis, the Egyptian Bloc’s members of Parliament (MPs) and most other secular MPs opted for an opposition strategy. Wafd’s calculation was based on its pragmatism inherited from the Mubarak era. Islamists seemed in 2012 to have the blessing of the military establishment and to be on their way to becoming the new political

Their [secular parties’] various coalitions confused voters, and the involvement of some of them in religious polarization delivered considerable segments of the electorate to the Muslim Brothers and Salafis.

power house in Egypt. Wafd, which always reconciled itself to the limited pluralist realities of Mubarak's rule, was willing to participate in post-2011 politics under the premise of Islamist hegemony and of Islamists and the military establishment forming the new ruling establishment.⁴⁴

The secular parties of the Egyptian Bloc adopted a different strategy. Rather than seeing their modest gains in the elections as a good beginning for mostly newly established parties, they, along with their funders and voters, perceived the Islamist domination of the assembly as a major defeat.⁴⁵

It was indeed looked at as the second defeat in a row, after they failed to defeat a SCAF-imposed constitutional referendum in March 2011.⁴⁶

Secular groups, with the notable exception of Wafd, had urged the electorate in the spring of 2011 to vote no on the referendum in which amendments to the constitution of 1971 were put forward for voters' approval. Hoping that a no vote would pave the way for drafting a new constitution prior to holding parliamentary and presidential elections (rather than vice versa), secular politicians and activists ran a strong media campaign to mobilize voters against the suggested amendments.⁴⁷ However, a clear majority of the electorate—almost 78 percent—voted in favor of the amendments, which were promoted by Islamists and the military establishment.⁴⁸ Islamists, especially Salafis, deepened the sense of defeat among secular groups by portraying the outcome of the constitutional referendum as a vote for Islam, a sweeping mandate for Islamists, and a rejection of any notion of separation of religion and politics—despite that none of the suggested amendments pertained to the role of religion in politics or in state affairs.⁴⁹

Coming to an Islamist-dominated People's Assembly in early 2012 and having had their second defeat in a row, the secular parties of the Egyptian Bloc declined to collaborate with Islamists and attempted to articulate an opposition platform in Parliament. From day one in the parliamentary session, tensions and mistrust between Brotherhood and Salafi MPs and secular MPs of the Bloc were noticeable. Caught between Wafd's willingness to collaborate with Islamists and the Bloc's opposition, other secular parties represented by a handful of seats in Parliament were doomed to political insignificance.⁵⁰

Facing a fragmented and somewhat hostile secular spectrum, the Muslim Brothers—who originally viewed the Salafis as their competition and toyed with the idea of collaborating with secular groups—moved closer to the Salafis and, in doing so, endorsed more of the Salafis' ultra-conservative platform. They called forcefully for the application of sharia and denounced secular views as blasphemous.⁵¹ In the short-lived session of the 2012 Parliament—the People's Assembly was dissolved in June 2012 after a ruling of the Supreme Constitutional Court⁵²—no episode illustrated Islamist-secular tensions and

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the drifting of the Brotherhood toward Salafis more than the conflicts linked to the formation of the Constituent Assembly tasked with drafting the country's new constitution.⁵³

The constitutional amendments approved in the spring of 2011 stipulated that Parliament, including its two chambers (the People's Assembly and the Consultative Council), would form the Constituent Assembly. Initially wary of Salafis, Brotherhood MPs reached out to secular MPs to agree on the modality to form the assembly consensually. However, as was the case for the Democratic Alliance for Egypt, differences regarding the number of seats given to Islamists as opposed to secular parties in the Constituent Assembly prevented consensus.⁵⁴ The assembly was formed with an Islamist majority and a very small secular minority. Secular MPs elected for the assembly withdrew.⁵⁵ In April 2012, an administrative court struck down the Constituent Assembly before it could even begin its deliberations.⁵⁶ A second assembly was formed, preceded again by failed negotiations between Islamist and secular parties. The formation once again secured a majority for the Brotherhood and Salafis, but included a slightly enlarged number of secular members both from Parliament and from outside. Islamic and Christian religious institutions were represented, along with the executive and judicial branches of government.⁵⁷

The conflicts surrounding the Constituent Assembly further undermined trust between Islamists and secular parties. The Egyptian Bloc, in particular, assumed an obstructionist attitude and embarked on an effort to delegitimize the emerging post-2011 political framework. As early as the spring of 2012, parties such as the Free Egyptians, Democratic Front, and Unionist parties were urging the military establishment to interfere in politics and to postpone drafting of the constitution and all elections until a different bal-

The army's constitutional declaration, tailored to undermine pluralist and election-based politics and the dissolution of the People's Assembly, represented two frontal attacks by the military on the country's infant democratization process.

ance of power between Islamists and secular forces was reached. More events were to follow, reinforcing the secular obstructionist attitude.⁵⁸

In the spring of 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood announced that it would field a candidate in the presidential elections scheduled for June. This ran counter to the position the movement asserted multiple times in 2011, as well as after the parliamentary elections, that it would not attempt to monopolize both the legislative

and executive branches of government and that it would restrict itself to participation in Parliament and the Constituent Assembly. The Brotherhood's announcement shocked secular parties, but more significantly, it shocked the military establishment.⁵⁹

The SCAF generals, who still held executive power at that time, responded variously and were cheered by most secular parties. The generals tried to undermine the constitutional drafting process by announcing a constitutional declaration in which the military was made the true sovereign of Egyptian

politics, tasking it with the duty of “preserving the constitutional order and the separation of powers.”⁶⁰ The generals disqualified, via a quasi-judicial process, the strongman of the Brotherhood, Khairat al-Shater, who was first nominated to run in the presidential elections.⁶¹ Finally, they used a ruling by the Supreme Constitutional Court to dissolve the People’s Assembly only six months into its session.⁶²

The army’s constitutional declaration, tailored to undermine pluralist and election-based politics and the dissolution of the People’s Assembly, represented two frontal attacks by the military on the country’s infant democratization process. However, most secular parties, including Wafd, sided with the military and justified their actions. Parties such as the Free Egyptians and Unionist parties, and increasingly the Social Democratic Party, let anti-Islamist sentiments shape their political roles and justified the military’s anti-democratic actions as being necessary to pressure the Muslim Brothers and Salafis.⁶³ In doing so, secular parties compromised themselves and undermined the democratization process to which they claimed to be committed. Exactly the same underlying sentiments and dynamics became once again relevant in shaping secular parties’ positions toward the 2013 coup.

With Islamist-secular tensions at an all-time high, the military establishment engaged in a power struggle with the Brotherhood; Egypt was approaching the 2012 presidential elections at a dangerously chaotic moment. Yet, secular parties were as fragmented as ever. Although most of them did not nominate candidates for the presidential elections, they endorsed directly or indirectly various independent candidates. Wafd supported the candidacy of the Arab League’s secretary-general, Amr Moussa, a former foreign minister under Mubarak,⁶⁴ whereas the Dignity Party nominated its founder, Hamdeen Sabahy.⁶⁵ The leftist Popular Alliance supported the candidacy of veteran parliamentarian Abou El-Ezz El-Harriri, and independent secular MPs put their signatures on the nomination of pro-labor lawyer Khaled Ali.⁶⁶ The Free Egyptians and Democratic Front parties saw former prime minister Ahmed Shafiq as the secular best bet to win the presidency and indirectly supported him.⁶⁷ Other parties, such as the Social Democratic Party, did not endorse any candidate and left their members to vote their consciences.

Once again, fragmentation resulted in a heavy loss for secular parties. The first round of the elections ended with the Brotherhood’s candidate, Morsi, and the old regime’s candidate, Shafiq, in a runoff. Secular party candidates, such as Moussa and Sabahy, were defeated. Morsi won the runoff election and became Egypt’s first democratically elected president and its first Islamist president.⁶⁸ With Morsi’s ascendancy to power, Islamists assumed control of the executive branch of government, adding to their control of the remaining chamber of the legislature—the Consultative Council—and the Constituent Assembly. The defeat of secular parties was crushing, and their fears of an Islamist takeover

**Fragmentation resulted in a heavy loss
[in the elections] for secular parties.**

through the ballot box became a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, instead of acknowledging the negative impacts of factors such as party fragmentation, intraparty competition, obstructionist attitudes toward the Muslim Brothers, and promotion of the military's anti-democratic measures, secular parties drifted into increasingly obstructionist and pro-military directions.

During Morsi's year in office (June 2012–July 2013), most secular parties declined to collaborate with his government and stepped up their calls on the army to interfere in politics. After a brief honeymoon in which Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood courted secular parties to move beyond the polarization that surrounded the presidential elections, conflict made a quick comeback.⁶⁹ A few weeks into his term, Morsi removed the serving minister of defense and army chief of staff, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi and Lieutenant General Sami Hafez Anan, respectively. They were replaced by the generals Sisi and Sedki Sobhy.⁷⁰ Although this move was celebrated by young revolutionaries—who demanded holding the old army leadership accountable for human rights abuses committed between Mubarak's resignation in February 2011 and the beginning of Morsi's term in June 2012—most secular parties interpreted it as an attempt by the Brotherhood to control the army.⁷¹ Fears of a grand Islamist scheme to hijack the state and to undermine the perceived neutrality of the army were rising high. Rumors were circulating that Sisi was not only a pious Muslim but was also close to the Brotherhood.⁷²

A major conflict arose with Morsi's announcement of a constitutional declaration on November 22, 2012, in which he situated legislative and executive prerogatives in the presidency and breached his promise not to interfere in the judiciary by appointing a new general prosecutor.⁷³ The next day, secular politicians such as ElBaradei and Moussa, as well as leaders of most secular parties, met in the Cairo headquarters of Wafd to underline their rejection of Morsi's declaration. The National Salvation Front (NSF) was formed during this meeting as a secular opposition platform, bringing together parties such as the Wafd, Unionist, Free Egyptians, Social Democrats, Democratic Front, newly founded Congress Party of Moussa, Popular Alliance, Dignity, and various other smaller parties.⁷⁴

Backed by broad segments of the urban middle class, which were becoming increasingly wary of the Brotherhood's actions, the NSF organized large rallies in Cairo and Alexandria to demand that Morsi rescind the constitutional declaration and launch a national dialogue to address key challenges facing Egypt's democratic transition.⁷⁵ Surprised by the strong popular participation in the NSF rallies, Morsi repealed some components of the declaration. He delegated the legislative prerogatives to the sitting Consultative Council and annulled the immunity of presidential decrees and decisions. However, he refused to take back the appointment of the new general prosecutor.⁷⁶

Feeling empowered for the first time after successive election losses and, to an extent, inspired by the popular participation in the NSF rallies, secular

parties stepped up their pressures on the elected president. They rejected Morsi's repeal of some components of the declaration and demanded its complete annulment and the reinstatement of the former general prosecutor. Resorting once again to obstructionist tactics, most secular parties declined the invitation of the president to attend a national dialogue conference.⁷⁷ Morsi and the Brotherhood responded by moving closer to Salafi parties such as the Light Party and to the grassroots Salafi movement that was organized by charismatic politician and former MP Hazem Salah Abu Ismail.⁷⁸

Only a few months into Morsi's term, the Islamist-secular polarization was back in full force. Whereas rural Egypt, with its Muslim majority, remained supportive of Islamists and felt represented by Morsi, Copts and many in the Muslim and Christian urban middle classes were becoming firm opponents of his "Islamist rule," as it was labeled in 2012. Demonstrating their changed positions, urban middle classes took to the street in NSF rallies and made repeated calls for the army to intervene in politics and remove Islamists from power. Most public- and private-owned media outlets voiced pro-military sentiments and ridiculed Morsi day and night.⁷⁹

A second major conflict soon followed the episode of the constitutional declaration. This time it was over the country's new constitution. After an administrative court ruling struck down the first Constituent Assembly formed by Parliament in 2012, Islamists of the Brotherhood and Salafi parties used their control of Parliament to form a second one. Wafd, as well as a group of secular politicians including Moussa, accepted membership in the assembly and, together with representatives of the executive branch of government and of the Egyptian churches, attempted to voice secular concerns during the constitutional drafting process.⁸⁰

The legitimacy of the second Constituent Assembly was questioned openly by most secular parties. Courts considered various legal appeals to bring it down. Secular members of the assembly came under attack from anti-Islamist media outlets, and calls for Moussa and church representatives to resign gained popular traction in urban Egypt. Salafi members of the assembly made no secret of their determination to "Islamize the constitution" and to pave the way for the application of sharia. The growing Islamist-secular polarization enabled Salafis to convince Brotherhood members in the assembly to include articles in the constitution that go beyond traditional references to the basic principles of sharia. Together, the Muslim Brothers and Salafis had a comfortable majority in the assembly. When it became clear that at least one of these articles would be enshrined in the new constitution,⁸¹ Moussa and Wafd members in the assembly resigned in November 2012 and were followed by representatives of the Egyptian churches.⁸²

Despite secular resignations, Islamists moved forward with their plan to adopt the new constitution. On December 1, 2012, Morsi announced that Egyptians would be called upon to accept or reject the constitution during

a referendum on December 15 and 22, 2012. Calls from a few secular politicians for the Brotherhood and Salafis to allow more cross-ideological consultation prior to the referendum went unheard. Secular parties, which were mostly organized within the NSF, debated whether to participate in the referendum with a no vote or to boycott it.⁸³ Secular fears surrounding the vote were significant in the NSF, and the prospects of a new electoral loss to Islamists loomed large in the background. However, the NSF, in a democratic decisionmaking process and in a significant departure from obstructionist tactics, settled on participating in the referendum with a no vote. Benefiting from strong funding that was flowing from those segments of the business

The retreat to obstructionist and pro-military attitudes gained momentum and ultimately brought secular parties to endorse the military coup in the summer of 2013.

community critical of Islamists and from a mobilized urban middle class that saw the constitutional battle as a fight for the true identity of Egypt, the NSF engaged in elaborate citizen outreach activities and media campaigns to convince the majority to vote against the constitution. For a while, it seemed that secular parties were not only transcending their traditional fears of the ballot box and their obstructionist tactics, but that they were also leaving their fragmentation and paralysis behind.⁸⁴

The referendum ended with 63.8 percent in favor of the Islamist-backed constitution and 36.2 percent against it.⁸⁵ Although the result represented a remarkable surge in anti-Islamist voters—from a mere 20 percent in the 2011 constitutional referendum to more than one-third of the voting electorate in the 2012 referendum, the majority in the NSF failed to recognize this as a gain and saw the result as one more inevitable loss to Islamists at the ballot box. The retreat to obstructionist and pro-military attitudes gained momentum and ultimately brought secular parties to endorse the military coup in the summer of 2013.

In the months between the adoption of the new constitution in December 2012 and the coup in July 2013, the NSF, apart from a few politicians in the front, rejected all calls coming from Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafi parties for national dialogues, constitutional consultations, and participation in the executive branch of government.⁸⁶ Clearly, to offer constitutional consultations after the constitution was adopted seemed little more than a bad joke. However, the other calls for dialogue and secular representation in the cabinet represented an opportunity to reduce the paralyzing Islamist-secular polarization in Egypt. But the majority within the NSF rejected all calls categorically and engaged in an undemocratically spirited effort to bring the army back into politics. As early as January 2013, leaders of the NSF were negotiating with the generals on ways out of “Islamist rule.” A few members of the NSF drifted increasingly toward favoring a military coup over democratic forms of opposition to the elected president and the popularly approved constitution.⁸⁷

Egypt was approaching a point of uncontrolled instability in the spring of 2013. Scenes of street violence between supporters of Islamist and secular parties were unfolding, while key state institutions (for example, the security services and judiciary) were also beginning to adopt obstructionist tactics vis-à-vis the Morsi administration. Sisi began to issue political statements and signal the army's willingness to interfere to safeguard the Egyptian state.⁸⁸ After a massive popular mobilization on June 30, 2013, in which thousands of urban Egyptians participated and called for early presidential elections, the army executed its coup on July 3, 2013.⁸⁹ The elected president was removed and arrested, the cabinet and the sitting Consultative Council was dissolved, the 2012 constitution was annulled, the chairman of the Supreme Constitutional Court was installed as an interim-president, and no early presidential elections were announced. Sisi presented these steps to Egyptians during a press conference attended by dignitaries of Islamic and Christian religious institutions and by the most prominent figure of the NSF, ElBaradei.⁹⁰ Secular approval of the coup and betrayal of democratic principles could no longer be doubted.

Since 2013: The Decline of Party Politics

Most secular parties sided with the military in the summer of 2013. They rationalized the coup as an act of national salvation and hailed the removal of the elected president as a necessary step to end "Islamist rule." Domestically, secular approval, coupled with the broad mobilization on June 30, 2013, enabled the generals to claim that they were riding on a wave of popular support. Internationally, the NSF's legitimation of the coup—best symbolized by the appearance of ElBaradei behind Sisi as he announced Morsi's removal and in ElBaradei's acceptance to become the interim vice president in the post-coup power arrangement—helped the military to avoid sweeping sanctions from Western democracies that were traditionally attentive to Egyptian secular parties.

After the coup, the military wasted no time in asserting its control over politics. Although it accepted a strong presence of secular parties in the cabinet formed in July 2013 and appointed secular public figures in the Constituent Assembly tasked with drafting the country's new constitution, the military began to call all the shots following the annulment of the 2012 constitution. The military and security forces swiftly arrested leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. Sisi, whom many citizens saw as the new savior in uniform, called on Egyptians to grant him a popular mandate to fight terrorist groups whose agendas he systematically conflated with the Brotherhood. On July 26, 2013, pro-Sisi marches and rallies were organized across the country, characterized by Islamist bashing and defamation of the few secular voices of dissent that rejected the coup.⁹¹ The results were horrifying. State-sponsored

They [secular parties] rationalized the coup as an act of national salvation and hailed the removal of the elected president as a necessary step to end "Islamist rule."

violence was used systematically against Islamist protests; notably, army units and security forces brutally disbanded the Brotherhood's sit-ins in Cairo's Rabaa and Nahda squares on August 14, 2013, killing close to 1,000 citizens.⁹²

Apart from ElBaradei's resignation as interim vice president following the disbanding of the sit-ins, secular parties either publicly supported the military and security services or at least remained silent about the human rights abuses. Several secular politicians and intellectuals busied themselves with propagating Sisi's savior image—frequently comparing him with former president Nasser who has always had a sacred persona for the secular left—whereas others collaborated with state-controlled media outlets in pushing forward a witch hunt

Secular preferences and actions in the immediate aftermath of the coup helped deliver Egyptian politics to the military and stripped away democratic credentials from parties that once claimed to be the true guardians of freedom in Egypt.

targeting Islamists and liberal critics of the coup. Secular preferences and actions in the immediate aftermath of the coup helped deliver Egyptian politics to the military and stripped away democratic credentials from parties that once claimed to be the true guardians of freedom in Egypt.

Gradually, however, most secular parties have come to take one of three positions since the 2013 coup: (1) blind support of the state and the new authoritarian power arrangement that the military put in place, (2) general endorsement of the state combined with attempts to preserve some margin of independence or space for criticizing

specific government policies, or (3) condemnation of the military control over politics and opposition to government policies. None of these positions has prevented the decline of the secular parties' political role. As indicated above, even those parties that generally have endorsed the state but tried to preserve some space have suffered for it almost as much as parties that have openly opposed military control. The decline in party effectiveness has accelerated while the number of registered parties has continued to rise; there were eighty-three parties as of early 2017—up from seventy-eight parties in the summer of 2013.⁹³

New Parties Supporting the State

Secular political parties that were formed after the 2013 coup tend to share similar characteristics, with small variations on the theme of blind support of the state. Sisi has not chosen to form a new ruling party to replace the NDP, and so former NDP members and their allies have used their state connections and access to patronage to form parties such as Nation's Future (Mustaqbal Watan), We Are the People (Ehna al-Sha'b), and Egypt My Homeland (Masr Belady). Similarly to the NDP, these parties operate in a way that reinforces state policies, echoing the rhetoric of the regime and providing no meaningful competition. The Nation's Future Party, for example, was originally billed as a youth movement, but during the 2015 parliamentary elections, many of its candidates were older, former NDP members who also happen to be the party's

main source of funds. Party leaders have stated that there is no room for ideological diversity in Egyptian politics,⁹⁴ contradicting the quest for pluralism and democracy that has characterized Egypt's youth since 2011.

The platforms of the post-coup political parties mirror state rhetoric, focusing on combating terrorism and countering Islamism and saying little about political or economic reforms. Although many of these parties claim to support social justice and equality, they have supported the government crackdown on civil society, which is justified as part of counterterrorism. While these groups won the lion's share of seats in the 2015 parliamentary elections, it was not clear that they enjoyed widespread voter support. Voter turnout in the 2015 elections was lower than in the 2011 elections,⁹⁵ and the electoral system directed voters toward individual candidates rather than party-based lists. As of 2017, none of the pro-state parties formed since 2013 appear to be building a strong organizational base, constituent network, or patronage distribution system akin to those once deployed by Mubarak's NDP. In some ways, it is more the military than any political party that has taken the NDP's place in Sisi's Egypt.⁹⁶

Parties Attempting to Preserve Some Independence

Secular parties such as the Wafd, Social Democrats, and Free Egyptians have opted to collaborate with the military to embed themselves in the post-2013 legislative and executive branches of government. Realizing that the military did not perform its coup to liberalize Egyptian politics in a sustained manner or to accept a power-sharing arrangement with secularists, these parties accepted their subordination and tried to carve out an independent framework of activism at the margins of the generals' domineering position.

Both the Wafd and Free Egyptians parties promoted Sisi's ascendancy to power and endorsed his candidacy for the presidency in 2014. The Social Democrats declined to take a party position in the presidential elections, but pro-state members supported Sisi openly and, as noted earlier, ended up leaving the party and accusing its leadership of failing to stand behind the country's savior.⁹⁷ However, neither endorsement nor reluctance meant that leading figures of the three parties were to be included in the various cabinet reshuffles under Sisi. Once the first post-coup cabinet—headed by former prime minister Hazem el-Beblawi—was dissolved, secular politicians were kept away from the executive branch of government.

In the 2015 parliamentary elections, which were closely controlled by the security and intelligence services, secular parties eager to preserve some independence ran both electoral lists and independent candidates. The Free Egyptians Party landed sixty-five seats, while Wafd won thirty-five seats.⁹⁸ In what seemed to be a state-sponsored retaliation for their reluctance to endorse the presidential aspirations of Sisi and for a few statements criticizing human rights abuses and restrictive laws, the Social Democrats won only four seats in

the House of Representatives. But, even the bigger blocs of the Wafd and Free Egyptians parties appeared ineffective considering the sweeping majority of the pro-Sisi bloc, In Support of Egypt.⁹⁹

Since the beginning of the session of the House of Representatives in January 2016, MPs representing the Wafd and Free Egyptians parties have asserted once more their overall support of the state. Attempts to use the parliamentary space to develop a platform critical of some government policies have resulted in obstructionist tactics from the pro-government majority and direct security interference in the two parties to stir up leadership conflicts and internal disaccord. As noted earlier, MPs representing the Free Egyptians sided with the security-backed party leadership centered around Chairman Essam Khalil in excluding Sawiris and his group who have grown critical of some government economic and social policies. Wafd has been struggling with leadership conflicts between its current chairman, ElBadawi, and former vice chairman, Fouad Badrawi, resulting in an internal paralysis and the drifting of Wafd MPs toward stronger collaboration with the pro-Sisi bloc and with MPs representing parties such as the Nation's Future Party and Congress Party.¹⁰⁰

Parties Opposing the State

A third group of secular parties has taken an opposition stance toward the military's control over politics and become openly critical of Sisi and his government. The Constitution, Dignity, Strong Egypt, and Bread and Freedom parties and the Popular Alliance have championed this stance since 2013, while the Social Democratic Party has been moving in this direction.

The Constitution and Dignity parties and the Popular Alliance joined with smaller parties, such as the Justice Party and Freedom Egypt Party, to form a coalition platform called the Democratic Current in 2013.¹⁰¹ Since then, the Democratic Current has been vocal in its opposition to the post-coup authoritarian arrangement, to the anti-democratic laws issued under the watch of Sisi, and to human rights abuses. The platform, for example, rejected both the protest and the terrorism laws and called for their amendment.¹⁰² It called on the government to end human rights abuses including torture, forced disappearances,¹⁰³ and the continuous referral of civilians to military trials.¹⁰⁴ It made it clear that the involvement of the security services in human rights abuses is backed by the country's real powerholders in the military.¹⁰⁵ In the 2014 presidential elections, the Democratic Current declined to endorse the candidacy of Sisi and backed the bid of Sabahy.¹⁰⁶

With Sisi's ascendancy to the presidential palace and the wide-scale repression performed by the security services against not only Islamists but also secular activists and pro-democracy groups, the Democratic Current has moved into openly calling for finding an alternative to Sisi. Several press conferences have been held and press statements issued decrying the government's

prosecution of young activists and students opposed to Sisi and expressing solidarity with professional associations, such as the Syndicate of Doctors and Syndicate of Journalists, that were fending off the interference of the security services in their internal affairs.¹⁰⁷ The Democratic Current has backed independent labor activism and supported the demand of victims of human rights abuses for holding the security services accountable and ending the practice of impunity.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, leaders of the platform, including Sabahy, have been critical of the government's social and economic policies and have defended independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) facing rising security pressures.¹⁰⁹

In the House of Representatives, the Democratic Current has been mobilizing the MPs representing the Popular Alliance, Social Democrats, and some independents to organize an opposition platform in Parliament.¹¹⁰ Dissenting voices were heard in the overall submissive Parliament during the 2016 passing of the draconian NGO Law and the 2017 dismissal of former MP Anwar ElSadat, whose mild criticism of government policies was enough to mobilize the majority against him.¹¹¹

On the other side, parties such as Strong Egypt and Bread and Freedom, which neither endorsed the 2013 coup nor Sisi's presidential aspirations, have stepped up their opposition; they now support a full-fledged rejection of the military's control over politics and have openly demanded that Sisi be held accountable for human rights abuses.¹¹² The two parties have tried to collaborate with young activists, student groups, professional associations, and the labor movement to salvage a degree of freedom of expression and association.¹¹³ Boycotting the 2014 presidential and 2015 parliamentary elections because of their undemocratic nature, Strong Egypt and Bread and Freedom have prioritized activism in informal political spaces. Strong Egypt has established close links with opposition student groups in public universities and consciously worked across ideologies to bring together secular and Islamist pro-democracy students. Bread and Freedom has systematically sponsored young activists' initiatives to defend victims of human rights abuses. For example, the Freedom for the Brave initiative, which was established in 2013 and has since lobbied for the release of political detainees and prisoners, draws primarily on leading members in Bread and Freedom.¹¹⁴ The party—not yet licensed—has also organized legal teams to defend arrested young activists, students, and labor activists.¹¹⁵

However, the growing opposition of these mostly small and poorly funded secular parties has not been a game changer in the post-2013 authoritarian power arrangement. Indeed, the government has only tolerated the role of opposition secularists when it has remained restricted to holding press

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conferences and issuing press statements. Attempts to reach out to significant constituencies (for example, professional associations, independent labor groups, student groups, and NGOs) have been met with security pressures and repressive measures, including the arrests of party members and public defamation of their leaders.¹¹⁶

The Role of Secular Parties in a Future Political Opening

Since 2013, the choices of secular parties to support or oppose the new authoritarian government have not affected official policies. Human rights abuses, such as the mass killings of Muslim Brotherhood supporters, have occurred despite a strong secular representation in various executive positions.¹¹⁷ The opposition of the Democratic Current and other supporting parties to ongoing human rights abuses, such as the detention of thousands of young Egyptians for political purposes, has not stopped the government from committing them. Put differently, the actions of secular parties, whether in support of the new authoritarianism or in opposition, have brought neither real change in the policies implemented after the 2013 coup nor in the power arrangement that emerged to subjugate citizens and society to the domination of the military establishment and the security services.¹¹⁸ They have not mattered.

What the tortured positions of many secular parties since 2011 may have accomplished, however, is to persuade Egyptians more than ever of secularists' perfidy. The parties attempted to ride in on Islamists' coattails or shunned them, applauded the coup in the mistaken belief that the military would allow secularists political free rein once the Brotherhood was eliminated, and overlooked massive human rights abuses as long as they were inflicted on political rivals. This would be a difficult legacy to overcome, but it is worth considering

whether some of today's secular parties might yet redeem themselves and win future votes should there be another political opening.

Which secular parties would have a chance to compete freely for office? Which might succeed in building or at least retaining what they won in the past? Answering these broader speculative questions requires examining a more

narrow set. First, which parties showed enough integrity between 2011 and 2017 to command respect from voters in the future? Second, which parties promoted ideas that appeal to broad constituencies in the country? And third, which parties showed the organizational and financial capacity to translate their ideas into votes?

The choices of secular parties to support or oppose the new authoritarian government have not affected official policies.

Regarding integrity, as noted earlier, only the few parties who boycotted the 2015 parliamentary elections (Strong Egypt, Bread and Freedom, and Constitution) have maintained a consistent, principled objection to the new authoritarianism, which would serve them well should authoritarianism be overcome at some point. It is also true that Egyptian voters might be less critical than this paper's authors regarding the compromises secular parties have made under pressure. For instance, Wafd took a number of steps during the Mubarak era that appeared opportunistic and contradictory to the party's secular ideology (for example, allying in elections with Brotherhood independents), yet the party won a respectable number of seats in the first post-Mubarak elections—due perhaps to brand recognition and organizational capacity.

Regarding ideological appeal to broad constituencies, segments of the Egyptian public that have voted for secular parties include middle-class businesspeople, industrial laborers, Coptic Christians, urban elites, university students, and other youth. Looking at the current parties, those that appeal to businesspeople include Wafd and the Free Egyptians—both of which advocate a free market economy. The Social Democratic and Dignity parties, with their liberal politics and left-leaning economics, appeal to laborers and also to some urban elite. The Constitution, Strong Egypt, and Bread and Freedom parties appeal to various segments (liberal, Islamic-leaning, and leftist) of the country's young voters, including students. Other segments of Egypt's voting public, particularly in rural areas and lower-middle-class urban areas, are more socially conservative than most secular parties and are likely to continue to lean toward either pro-state or Islamist parties.

Who can mobilize the available constituencies raises the question of organizational and financial capacity. Among the secular parties discussed here, Wafd has the deepest organizational structure and is one of the best funded. The Free Egyptians were also flush with funds while Sawiris was at the helm; they are unlikely to be as well funded if he remains outside the party. None of the other parties had much funding to work with but some showed organizational capacity that might have borne fruit were it not for persistent and pernicious state interference. The Social Democratic, Constitution, and Strong Egypt parties all made credible efforts at building organizations but were thwarted by the state's security apparatus. It is worth noting that almost all of the parties that still retain some vigor were formed during periods of relative political freedom: either before 1952 or between 2011 and 2013.

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Conclusion

Egypt's secular political parties have been operating in a difficult political environment, and they have in many cases made things worse for themselves in their desperate attempts to survive and improve their standing. Their desire to have a clear shot at political power without having to compete with Islamists in elections since 2013 was unrealistic and made them complicit in closing the

Their desire [secular parties'] to have a clear shot at political power without having to compete with Islamists in elections since 2013 was unrealistic and made them complicit in closing the democratic opening.

democratic opening. Excluding Islamists, a large segment of Egypt's political spectrum, opened the door for renewed authoritarianism and notably led to the repression of secularists as well.

Secular parties won a quarter of the seats in the first post-Mubarak parliamentary elections—the ones in which Islamists had the greatest advantage due to their long exclusion from power. Secularists might exceed that share in future elections if they learn from their mistakes and improve their organizational capacity. The question is whether they will be given a chance, or whether Egypt will experience either a consolidation of today's authoritarianism or an upheaval far less inclined toward democracy than the 2011 uprising.

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