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Army Should Disarm Egypt's Militarized State

By Omar Ashour

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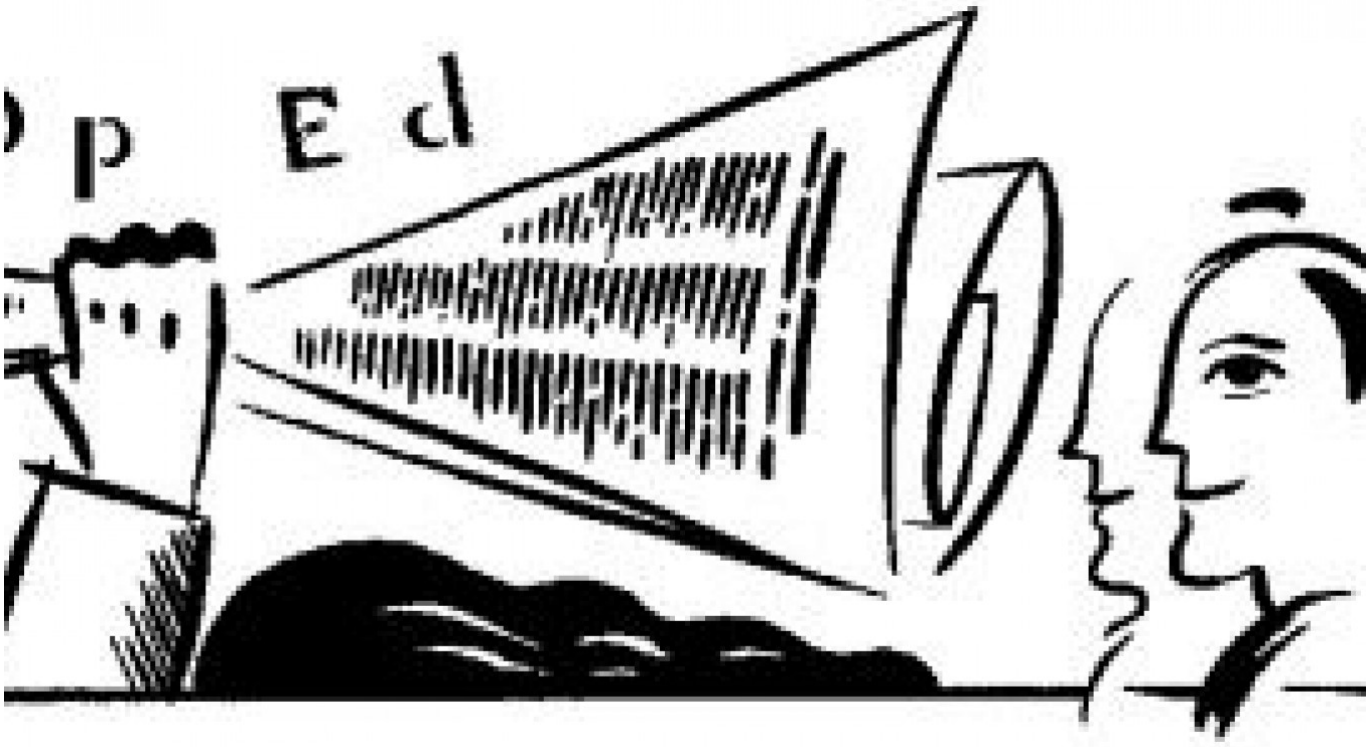

Egypt's crisis has been called the worst in its history. But in fact, it bears a striking resemblance to a previous episode, almost 60 years ago.

On Feb. 28, 1954, almost a million protesters besieged Cairo's Abdin Palace, then being used by Gamal Abdel Nasser and other leaders of the July 1952 coup. The protesters' main demands were the restoration of Egypt's fragile democratic institutions, the release of political prisoners and the army's return to its barracks.

The two-month crisis of 1954 was sparked by the removal of Egypt's president, General Mohammed Naguib, by Nasser and his faction. Like in 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood was at the center of events back then, mobilizing on the side of the deposed Naguib. But following Nasser's promises to hold elections in June 1954 and to hand over power to civilians, one of the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders, Abd al-Qadr Audeh, dismissed the protesters.

Nasser's promises were empty. By November, his faction was victorious. Naguib remained

under house arrest, leftist workers were executed, and liberals were terrorized. Audeh was arrested, and, in January 1955, he and five Muslim Brotherhood leaders were executed. Egypt lost its basic freedoms and democratic institutions for the next 56 years, until Feb. 11, 2011, when President Hosni Mubarak was overthrown.

The similarities between February-March 1954 and June-July 2013 are numerous. In both crises, zero-sum behavior and rhetoric, mobilization and counter-mobilization by a divided public, and deception by the media were the order of the day. More worrying are the similarities in potential outcomes. In 1954, a junta that regarded itself as being above the state destroyed a weak democratic order. That outcome is highly probable now as well.

There are differences between the two episodes, though. In 1954, the conflict was wider than a power struggle between a president and a junta. It was also a battle over who would determine Egypt's future and the relationship between civilian and military institutions.

Surprisingly, the army back then was split between officers who wanted a civilian-led democracy and others who wanted a military-led autocracy. In the first camp were Khaled Mohyiddin, Ahmad Shawky, Yusuf Siddiq and others. Naguib played along. The second camp was led by Nasser and the majority of the junta represented in the Revolutionary Command Council.

The Muslim Brotherhood's relationship with Egypt's military is the result of a few critical events, including the 1954 demonstrations and now the 2013 coup. Bloodshed, particularly Nasser's execution of Muslim Brotherhood leaders, increased the Brotherhood's bitterness toward the army. In June 1957, Nasser's security forces allegedly opened fire on Muslim Brotherhood members in their prison cells, killing 21 and wounding hundreds.

A Muslim Brotherhood intellectual, Sayyid Qutb, started theorizing about a binary world in which the forces of good would inevitably clash with the forces of evil. His writings led directly to his execution in August 1966.

The consequences of President Mohamed Morsi's forced removal, like the consequences of Naguib's removal in 1954, may not be recognized quickly. But once elected officials are removed by force, the outcomes are rarely favorable for democracy. In case after case — for example, Spain in 1936, Iran in 1953, Chile in 1973, Turkey in 1980, Sudan in 1989 and Algeria in 1992 — the results were tragic: military domination of politics with a civilian facade, outright military dictatorship, civil war or persistent civil unrest.

Moreover, the Egyptian military in 2013 has gained more power than the 1954 junta — not just arms and control of state institutions, but also crowds and media cheering for more repression. And unlike in 1954, the army is not divided, at least not yet.

But supporters of the deposed President Morsi are not without their own sources of power. Their mobilization capacity is high. A week ago, Cairo was paralyzed, despite an almost-complete lack of coverage by local media outlets.

And Ramadan, now underway, is mobilization-friendly. After sunset, there is a common program. Observant Muslims gather at sundown for breakfast, followed by evening prayers, social interaction, another late-night prayer, another collective meal and then morning

prayers.

The last 10 days of Ramadan are collective seclusion, during which worshippers gather and spend nights in mosques and open areas. Overall, the socio-religious culture of Ramadan can help keep the Muslim Brotherhood's mobilization of its supporters alive for a while.

This brings us to the junta's tactics to force demobilization. Since 2011, the army's principal strategy has been to make promises and issue threats, which are enforced by shooting live rounds or tear gas. These tactics were used, for example, against Christian demonstrators in October 2011, when 28 died and 212 were injured. They were also used against non-Islamist youth in November 2011 — 51 dead, more than 1,000 injured — and again in December 2011, resulting in seven dead.

The July 2013 massacre was by far the worst: 103 deaths so far and more than 1,000 injured. The army's goal was not only to intimidate Morsi's supporters, but also to disrupt their calculations. The junta wants its responses to remain unpredictable and to demonstrate its willingness to use extreme violence. But such tactics during Ramadan can be problematic, given the potential negative reaction of junior army officers and ordinary soldiers. Mutiny is a possibility.

Any resolution to the current crisis should aim to save the remnants of the only gains made so far in Egypt's revolution: basic freedoms and democratic institutions. That will require ceasing violent repression, stopping propaganda and incitement in pro-junta media and at pro-Morsi protests and trust-building measures.

A credible guarantor, possibly the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama, needs to be heavily involved in this process, given the absence of trust among Egypt's main political actors. Finally, a referendum on any final deal is essential.

In short, the credibility of ballots and democracy must be restored in Egypt and throughout the region. Bullets and violence must not be allowed to rule.

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