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Democratic Opposition Alone Will Not Bring Democracy to Egypt

Amal Mukhtar, Patrycja Sasnal*

The creation of a new, united secular opposition group in Egypt (the National Salvation Front, or NSF) in November 2012 met with a sigh of relief in Europe and the U.S. It is viewed as the only democratic force in a country torn between Islamism and reactionism. The NSF itself, however, represents but a fraction of society, lacks homogeneity, and seems to be driven by basic political motivations rather than a sense of responsibility, just like the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and its affiliates. More than two years after the fall of Mubarak and a year after the first democratic presidential elections in Egypt, only national reconciliation can save the country, which has seen a series of unconstitutional developments, remains without a parliament, and is on the brink of bankruptcy. Without reconciliation, all political parties, including NSF, will continue to lose support.

On 24 November 2012, a number of political parties and leaders announced the formation of the National Salvation Front (*Jabhat al-inqadh al-wataniyy*) as a unified representative of the Egyptian opposition. NSF was created in response to a constitutional declaration by President Mohamed Morsi (Muslim Brotherhood) two days earlier in which he granted himself sweeping powers, including the possibility to override judicial decisions. It was the first time since the revolution of 25 January 2011 that a number of parties and leaders had formed a coalition and issued one declaration in the name of their unified front. It is, however, a particular kind of opposition, one that has three political enemies: the Muslim Brotherhood, the military, and the former regime. Each of these opponents happens to wield greater power at the moment than the unified non-Islamist opposition.

NSF and the Rest of the Egyptian Political Scene

Religious character delineates the most vivid division line between political parties on the Egyptian political scene today. Liberals, leftists, communists and other secular ideologies are united under the NSF umbrella, while the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties form the religious current.

The NSF, as the most organised and strongest non-Islamist opposition entity, consists of 35 parties and groups, including the Constitution party (*Ad-Dustour*), the Egyptian Popular Current (*At-Tayyar ash-Shaabi*), the Egyptian Social Democratic party, the New Wafd Party, the Free Egyptians, the Democratic Front, Tajammu, the Conference Party (*Al-Mutamar*),¹ Al-Karama, the National Association for Change, and Revolutionary Socialists (*Al-Ishtirakiyyin ath-Thawriyyin*). More importantly, NSF has managed to unite

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¹ The Conference Party was formed by Amr Moussa after he lost in the presidential election. His party contains a number of former members of the National Democratic Party (the dissolved party of Mubarak).

significant political figures such as Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (the founder of the Constitution party), Hamdeen Sabbahi, the leader of Egyptian Popular Current who came third in the presidential elections of 2012, Amr Moussa, the former secretary general of the Arab League (and founder of Conference Party), and As-Said al-Badawi, the president of the New Wafd Party.

NSF, however, does not encompass all secular opposition groups. The 6 April Movement,² for instance, the group that started the struggle against the Mubarak regime and after the revolution continued to fight against the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF, which ruled the country between February 2011 and June 2012) and now the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), insists it will continue to work outside of any political party and wants to remain a protest movement without any aim to make political gains or engage in partisan competition.

Likewise, unorganised youth (most likely secular students and unemployed Egyptians between the ages of 15 and 25) remain outside of NSF. These groups of activists that completely reject Morsi and the MB as well as NSF use protests, demonstrations, sit-ins, and sometimes violence to express their opposition. They are uncontrollable and leaderless.

On the Islamist side are Salafists such as An-Nour Party and the Hazimun group (headed by popular leader Hazem Salah Abu Ismail) and moderate Islamists such as those from the Al-Wasat Party (The Middle) and Strong Egypt (Misr al-Qawiyya), formed by former presidential candidate Abdel-Moneim Abul-Futouh. Both groups disagree at times with some of the MB regime's policies, such as government appointments or the *ikhwana*—employing MB members in public offices—but both strongly defend the legitimacy of President Morsi. The popular sentiment is that all of these Islamist groups have strong ties to MB.

Two other forces complement the political scene in Egypt: the military and the remnants of the former regime, mainly former members of the National Democratic Party. The military formally remains outside of the political process while the latter is scattered among smaller political entities, although their candidate, Ahmad Shafik, scored high in the presidential elections of 2012.³ There is a commonality of political interests between the two as both forces represent the reactionary element of society. For former regime officials, it is self-evident they have lost some of their appeal, but the military's reputation, which projected an image of a neutral, citizen-friendly force, has also been diminished, not least because evidence of military and police malpractice has been recently leaked to *The Guardian* (UK). Despite the leaks, and unlike "the civilian remnants" of the former regime, the army still retains a good deal of popularity in the society.

The Origins of NSF

The political post-revolutionary chaos and social disillusionment in Egypt climaxed in the period between the first and second rounds of the presidential election (May–June 2012), which was to be decided between Morsi (the MB candidate) and Ahmad Shafik (Mubarak's last prime minister). Neither was a candidate the revolutionary camp could unequivocally support. A critical moment came in the second round of the elections (16–17 June) when they had to choose between the two candidates who, in their unanimous opinion, represented reactionary tendencies.

Right after the first round in May 2012, both camps—Shafik's and Morsi's—started a vehement debate about which one of them was closer to the revolution and more palatable to the liberals, the Left, other secular parties and young activists. As an air force marshal, Shafik played the military card, knowing that the army retained popularity in some circles, but at the same time he did not shy away from affiliations with the Mubarak regime, of which he was the last prime minister.⁴ Morsi, on the other hand, was being accused by revolutionary forces of betraying the revolution by cooperating with SCAF for political gains, even though

² The 6 April Movement is an Egyptian activist group established in the spring of 2008 to support workers in the industrial town of Al-Mahalla al-Kubra who went on strike on 6 April. Activists called on the workers to stay home on the day of the strike and, as a form of civil disobedience, to wear black. The movement uses the same raised-fist symbol as the Otpor! movement from Serbia.

³ In the first round, he received 23.7%, and in the second, 48.3%. See <https://www.elections.eg>.

⁴ Shafik remained in office for only one month and resigned on 3 March 2011, one day after a contentious talk show confrontation in which Alaa Al Aswany, a prominent Egyptian novelist, accused him of being a Mubarak regime holdover.

MB had been the main opposition group prior to the revolution, and for breaking public promises of having no intention to participate in the presidential elections.

Nevertheless, both candidates tried to appeal to the revolutionary forces. Shafik emphasised his support for the secular state (*ad-dawla al-madaniyya*) as opposed to an Islamist state (*ad-dawla ad-dinyya*), while Morsi underlined his support for the revolution against Shafik, the candidate of the former regime remnants (*al-feloul*).

Eventually some revolutionary figures such as ElBaradei, Sabbahi and Amr Hamzawy boycotted the elections, while others voted for Morsi under self-inflicted pressure so as not to allow former regime officials to rule again. The tension was such that divisions surfaced even within a single political entity. ElBaradei boycotted the election but other members of his Constitution party supported Morsi.

On the two days of the elections (16–17 June), turnout was significant (43.4%), although substantially lower than that in the parliamentary elections (54%). Even before the official election results but right after the second round, Morsi campaigners and MB's Freedom & Justice Party (Al-Huriyya wal-Adala, or FJP) sought to make their conciliatory position towards the revolutionary forces clear to the Egyptian people. They invited a number of national figures, parties and youth movements to a meeting in the Fairmont Hotel on 22 June 2012.

The Fairmont Hotel Agreement

According to one possible rationale for the meeting, MB wanted to put pressure on SCAF (then still in power) and the electoral commission under SCAF's supervision by showing that a Shafik victory would lead to yet another revolution, this time instigated by the united anti-Shafik front.

The meeting was attended by Alaa Al Aswany (a renowned Egyptian writer, author of *The Yacoubian Building*), Hamdi Qandil (a leftist and a media figure), Abdul Ghaffar Shukr (Social Popular Alliance Party), Hatem Azzam, Abdel Galil Mostafa (National Association for Change), Mohamed Idris (Karama Party), Wael Ghoneim (a popular social network figure), Wael Qandil (Al Shorouk newspaper editor), Shadi Al-Ghazali (liberal youth), Ahmed Maher (a "6 April" co-founder), Islam Lutfi (MB youth), Mohamed El-Shahawi (representative of Abul-Futouh), FJP members and others.

The meeting, which lasted seven hours, ended with the formation of the so called National Front (NF), a revolutionary movement against Shafik, and the signing of an agreement with a set of promises given by Morsi to other national forces in case he won. These included promises to:

1. Form a national unity government headed by an independent figure drawn from outside MB and FJP;
2. Include members from all national movements in the presidential team;
3. Reject the constitutional declaration issued by SCAF on 17 June to limit presidential powers, which benefited SCAF;
4. Reject the judicial ruling on the dissolution of parliament;
5. Balance secular and Islamist members in the Constituent Assembly;
6. Bring transparency and clarity for the sake of the Egyptian people.⁵

Surprisingly, very soon after the agreement, on 24 June, Morsi was officially declared winner of the presidential elections with a narrow 51.7% votes to his name. The developments over the two months of May and June left many speculating whether Morsi had won the elections in reality or whether Shafik was the real victor but SCAF feared another revolution.

Just a month later, on 24 July, Hesham Qandil was appointed prime minister by President Morsi, a move that surprised the National Front. Qandil lacked the necessary experience⁶ to manage the government at

⁵ W. Qandil, "Fairmont Agreement between Morsi and the National Forces," 7 July 2012, Al Shorouk, www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?id=a87dcc81-d96c-42f1-afe4-d2b5db538938.

⁶ Hesham Qandil is the youngest prime minister since Gamal Abdel Nasser and has a degree in irrigation and drainage.

a difficult time, which effectively meant that he would be under the tremendous influence of the president, and hence the MB, even if he claimed not to be an MB member. The choice of Qandil was made without any consultation with NF, which began to be seen as the first broken promise.

Then, in another development Morsi cancelled the constitutional declaration issued by SCAF as agreed at the Fairmont Hotel. The NF members did not accept this decision either, growing more and more suspicious towards every decision taken by Morsi and considering them to be part of the MB's plan to monopolise power. The NF members thought of themselves as the most important part of the "revolution," without which Morsi would never have become president, and so they demanded to be included in the decision-making process, even though both MB and Morsi had proved twice that they enjoyed the biggest amount of popular support (via the parliamentary and presidential elections). All in all, right from the beginning of his tenure the president was constantly under scrutiny for failing to keep his promises, and not merely to NF. A website called the Morsi Meter found that after a hundred days in office Morsi had only kept 10 out of 64 of his promises. Popular discontent with his policies grew rapidly, and NF was only waiting for a suitable moment to strike back.

That moment came in November 2012 when Morsi issued a controversial constitutional declaration monopolising all powers: legislative, executive and judicial. The secular parties found it a good excuse to openly revolt against Morsi and form NSF, especially since people willingly and in large numbers took to the streets. On top of the unacceptable steps taken by the president, society was aware of the deterioration of the economy and security, a significant decrease in tourism and investment, high crime rates, a projected budget deficit of around 11%, the further shrinking of foreign currency reserves and a shortage of fuel. Additionally, 40% of Egyptians already were living on less than \$2 per day.

The mistrust between MB and NSF has since deepened and both parties regularly play the blame game. Morsi and MB accuse NSF of destabilising the country with protests and violence. The security deterioration adds to the economic downturn, which can easily make Morsi and his government look dilettantish and force early elections. The NSF members for their part claim that Morsi and MB are responsible for these security and economic difficulties because of the poor performance of the Qandil government.

Faced with dwindling support and given Egypt's increasingly dire security and economic situation, on 9 April NSF issued conditions for starting a dialogue with the government, including the designation of a neutral and credible government, an independent Attorney General, and the formation of a committee in charge of drawing up a new electoral law. The dialogue proposal may seem like a conciliatory move on the part of NSF but not all of its members accept it. Some reject any dialogue with Morsi on the grounds that he lost legitimacy when he sent MB youth to disperse a sit-in in front of his palace last November.

Conclusions

The NSF lacks popular support. In a poll conducted by the Egyptian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion, "Basira," in April 2013 a third of Egyptians had never heard about the NSF.⁷ Out of the remaining two thirds, only 30% supported them, which translates into a quarter of society if the polls are to be believed. Some NSF personalities score a meagre 1–3 points in polls, including Hamdeen Sabahi (3%), ElBaradei (1%), Amr Moussa (1%). Meanwhile, Ahmed Shafik (8%) and MB are losing popular support, too: today, only 37% would vote for Morsi and just 47% approve of him (compared with 49% in March 2013 and 78% in June 2012). Among those polled, 39% have a higher education, while 51% have less than that. Most likely, MB will not lose its diehard support very fast—they do possess a popular base that still holds but would need to improve their standings if they wanted to repeat the good results from the previous elections. The post-presidential election paradigm is that all parties are losing support, including NSF, MB and the Salafists. The only force capable of gaining ground in these circumstances is the army, which is not involved in politics.

The NSF is heterogeneous, prone to internal divisions and does not encompass all secular forces. The NSF's different ideological forces came together without any advance planning and in very exceptional circumstances. The only unifying factor among them was anti-Islamism. There is little chance that the NSF

⁷ A. Ibrahim, "Polls: Support for Morsi at 37% ... and 1% of Egyptians Would Vote for ElBaradei," 7 April 2013, www.elsaba7.com/NewsDtl.aspx?Id=117032.

will remain a united front in the next elections as it would be simply counterproductive politically. Therefore, it is bound to lose further support.

NSF has an image problem as an entity affiliated with the so called “remnants” of the Mubarak regime because initially the goals of the NSF were compatible with those of the former regime. They both wanted to confront MB, albeit with slightly different reasoning behind their motivations. NSF wanted to demonstrate that Morsi had not achieved the revolution’s demands (food, freedom, social justice, dignity), while the “remnants” tried to prove that Morsi’s regime had been worse than Mubarak’s. Cunningly, the “remnants” joined the anti-MB protests last November to make the public think that the main friction line was between the Islamists and non-Islamists and not between them and the rest. Recently, NSF spokesman Hussein Abdel-Ghani announced that it would not accept a merger with Ahmed Shafik and his as-yet-unlicensed Egyptian Patriotic Movement Party.

Possibly the gravest NSF deficiency is that it refuses genuine dialogue with other political forces, who for their part can be blamed for doing exactly the same. A sector of the Egyptian people, including both those in favour of MB and against it, accuse NSF of repeatedly refusing to join the national dialogue with the president. Even though the fact is that NSF did not completely reject any dialogue but set conditions for it, Egyptians still want it to end the daily clashes in the streets and accept the government’s invitation to talk, given the gravity of the situation in which the country has found itself. NSF’s actions are undoubtedly politically motivated, even though it declares the contrary is the truth. They use the momentum of street unrest and social dissatisfaction to gain ground, and for that they were recently branded as “National Desolation Front” (*Jabhat al-kharab*)⁸ by detractors.

Despite these drawbacks, NSF is still the most important liberal opposition in Egypt today. The EU seems to realise this fact well. During her recent visit to Cairo on 8 May, HR Catherine Ashton met both President Morsi and members of NSF. Likewise, the IMF mission visiting Cairo to negotiate the delayed \$4.8 billion loan also met with members of the government and the NSF. Undoubtedly, the EU and international community should make contact with NSF but not as an alternative to the MB regime. However uncomfortable to the EU it may be, MB enjoys widespread support, and all outside influence, if there is any, should definitely be used to encourage bridge-building between the government and NSF.

The country is at a critical economic and political moment that necessitates a joint effort in convincing people that a big share of the brunt of the austerity measures that need to be undertaken will have to be borne by Egyptians themselves. Neither MB nor NSF, and not even the army, will be able to do this alone. If they fail to convince people that the changes in 2011 can lead to a better future, reactionary forces will undoubtedly gain traction, postponing most democratic processes and discrediting the notion of democracy in general. Indeed, a national reconciliation dialogue and then a joint government need to be formed even before the parliamentary elections scheduled for the fall if Egypt’s economy and society are to be renewed.

⁸ The term is widely used by the Muslim Brotherhood. For example see: www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=144884&SecID=230.