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Healing Egypt: Three Steps to Unify a Divided Nation

The uprising of millions of Egyptians since June 30 has led to sharp polarization. Growing up in Egypt, I never saw the country as divided as it is today. Efforts to rebuild the nation must focus on justice, reconciliation, and inclusiveness.

Op-Ed by Ahmed H. Zewail

The uprising of millions of Egyptians since June 30 has led to sharp polarization. Some consider the removal of Mohamed Morsi a coup by the army against an elected president. Others treat it as the second revolution, or the continuation of the January 25, 2011, revolution. The media, especially in the West, is mainly concerned with the definition of a coup and whether the military should be punished by stopping US aid to Egypt.

The picture is not this simple, and the current situation is more than a coup definition; it is the healing of a country that has enormous potential and



Supporters of Egypt's ousted president, Mohamed Morsi, protest before breaking their fast during the Islamic month of Ramadan, in Nasr City, Cairo, July 10. Op-ed contributor Ahmed Zewail writes: 'No civil, liberal government can succeed, even after new elections, if the Islamists are forced to work underground as a foe and the country remains divided.'

(Manu Brabo)

strategic position in the already troubled Middle East.

The real question is: What can be done for Egypt in its democratic transition, with Egyptians being strongly polarized? The proposed immediate action plan presented here can change the current situation and make the country move forward.

Growing up in Egypt, I never saw the country as divided as it is today. We now have two main political groupings: the Islamist parties and the civil, or liberal, political parties. What is also new is the youth movement – more powerful than present liberal parties – that uses the latest in technological tools to lead these street uprisings (millionea) because they want to live in a developed and prosperous Egypt.

On the one hand, the liberals in the country believe that the Muslim Brotherhood failed the democratic process because, although Mr. Morsi won the popular vote, he did not succeed in uniting the nation and serving as president of all Egyptians.

Morsi's appointment of Muslim Brotherhood members in leading positions of the county (so-called "*Akhwanet Egypt*"), his unexpected constitutional decrees, and his insistence on keeping a government seen by many as incompetent all were issues that led the youthful "rebel movement" to collect more than 20 million signatures calling for early presidential elections to remove him.

On the other hand, supporters of Morsi believe that he came to power democratically as the first elected civilian president in Egypt's history. As such, he should only have been able to be removed after completing his term in office. Only such a course, in their view, would protect the constitution (*hematite el-sharia*) that was passed by a national referendum with two-thirds majority. The Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party was a majority in the elected parliament.

The Egyptian army had one of two options: either defend Morsi's claim to power, leaving millions on the streets and the country as a whole sinking economically, and having national security being threatened with chaos; or interfere and put the country on a new course without being directly involved in governance.

So far, the latter is what the army has chosen to do. Unlike the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in the January 25 revolution, First General Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi remains without a political title. The chief justice of Egypt has been sworn in as the new president.

The promise is that within a year's time, parliamentary and presidential elections will be completed, with the army only protecting the process.

But the central question is how this predicament of division can be solved. I propose a plan of three specific points:

First, and immediately, a council should be formed to consider the latest constitution and the articles of disagreement. Within three months, the constitution should be amended and approved by the people in a referendum vote so the country can be united on future binding principles of society and the election processes that follow.

Second, the parliamentary election should precede the presidential election. Again, within another three months, Egyptians will know the political identity and spectrum of their parliament, and from this new election will emerge the majority and minority parties, inclusive of civil and Islamic parties.

Third, and most important to end the current polarization and violence, is the formation of a supreme presidential council, a board of trustees, made up of three groups. This council should have one-third representation by the civil parties, one-third representation by the Islamist parties, and one-third representation by wise men and women who are independent and not politically associated with any party.

Perhaps five to a maximum of 10 people from each group would be sufficient. This body would have the authority to discuss in depth the upcoming proposed changes to the Constitution and the proposed election process, and to vote on them. This way they are part of shaping the future; from the beginning they are included in the political process at the highest level. Disagreement may occur, but in the end, a vote among the members will be binding for all.

It is critical that during this transitional period the leadership does not repeat the past, and must deal with the Islamists fairly and inclusively. Also, Morsi must be treated justly in accordance with the law. Finally, the media must live up to the occasion. It must stop “reverse polarization” and work toward convergence, not divergence.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Salifist parties are a real force in the Egyptian society. No civil, liberal government can succeed, even after new elections, if the Islamists are forced to work underground as a foe and the country remains divided. In fact, this is evident even after the June 30 event, when the Salifist al Nour party had a final say on who became the prime minister for the translational period.

Reducing Egypt’s predicament only to the issue of a coup without realizing the central issues of division and violence in today’s Egypt is too simplistic and dangerous. Every effort should be made to help build the new democratic nation with reconciliation and forgiveness, for the sake of Egypt and not for the benefit of one party or one group.

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