

The poison in Egypt's political life

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As year two of the revolution comes to a close, one can scarcely escape the conclusion in media circles that Egypt is polarized. Without question, the result of the referendum has left countless Egyptians, not least the revolutionaries who were the motive force behind the Tahrir sit-in from 25 January 2011 onward, deeply disappointed and cynical about the country's purported transition to democracy.

But I would insist, among those who are eager to forget year two of the revolution after the trauma of the referendum, that this is a year worth celebrating.

Indeed, in year two, Egyptians witnessed the end of the military dictatorship that had, for 60 years prior, dominated political life in the country. This was one of the principal demands of the revolutionaries, and with the election of a civilian president, this critically important demand was finally realized.

In the revolutionary camp, there is an altogether understandable reticence about celebrating the end of military rule. Egyptians remain largely in the dark about how exactly the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces withdrew — or was withdrawn — from executive authority. The lack of clarity on this point leads to legitimate questions about a possible "understanding" or "deal" between the civilian and military authorities. Further, that the [Constituent Assembly](#) has made the military essentially exempt from civilian oversight likewise raises the ire of those who wanted a transparent accounting of the military's economic empire, to say nothing of accountability for the crimes committed by SCAF during the junta's time in power.

As much as I accept these caveats, I nevertheless view the end of the military dictatorship as a milestone. Indeed, the military may well still play a role in governance behind the scenes, but that Egypt has a civilian president matters a great deal. Year two saw the aura that had surrounded the military finally shattered. The fractures began to emerge in year one, not least with the Maspéro massacre; but the persistent failures of the SCAF leadership, and the Sinai debacle of August 2012 that saw the killing of Egyptian soldiers, irreparably battered whatever goodwill Egyptians had retained toward the military from the days of the revolution.

As a historian of modern Egypt, I cannot help but regard the military's return to the barracks as an unqualified good. Simply put, military rule was poisonous to Egypt's political life. For even if one concedes that the military has always had the best intentions for Egypt, the fact remains that military organizations have little tolerance for discussion, debate and deliberation.

Nasser's military solution to the "problem" of politics was the Arab Socialist Union, through which he sought to conceal control with a facade of participation. For their part, the following presidents Sadat and Mubarak found that emergency law afforded them the "efficiency" of military justice in the civilian realm. When in power, military rulers cannot suddenly rid themselves of the martial ethos of control and containment that has hitherto guided their actions.

No doubt Egypt still faces a long struggle to ensure civilian rule is preserved and military

prerogatives are curtailed. But year two saw the first tangible victory in that struggle.

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