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Sweeping Unrest Under the Rug in Tahrir Square

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By [Jared Malsin](#)

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Last Wednesday in Cairo's Tahrir Square, more than a dozen landscapers watered freshly lain swatches of grass and hauled in brand-new potted plants. On **one side** of the square, riot police sat in green trucks, watching as workers repainted lampposts and scraped away the last remnants of twine used to hang banners during past protests. Under the watchful eye of news cameras, the epicenter of the **2011 Egyptian Revolution** was getting an urban facelift, and the tumultuous times and bloodshed that had come before were being slyly swept under the rug. Nafisa Fuad stood in the middle of the raised "pancake" at the heart of Tahrir Square, directing these efforts to revamp the area. Nafisa is the head of the Cairo Governorate's Beautification Center. When I asked her what the thinking was behind all the landscaping, she said, "It expresses a return to the appearance it had at first, before the revolution."

The newly planted grass and shrubbery was a startling change for Tahrir—a focal point of the uprising that toppled dictator Hosni Mubarak, several subsequent waves of protest **against military rule**, and the **opposition to President Mohamed Morsi's** Muslim Brotherhood-backed government. There were times, during the height of revolutionary protests when the state **ceded control** of the square to the protesters, erecting walls to protect government buildings rather than mobilizing the force it would take to drive them out. Until last week, police were still removing small cadres of protesters and tents from past demonstrations. Looking at it last week, it was hard for me to imagine the days when street vendors and luggage shops had their wares spilling out onto the sidewalk and the flames of righteous discontent were fanned by thousands of demonstrators.

"What [the Egyptian government] is trying to convey is that the city has been dysfunctional and disruptive because of the revolution," said architect and urban planner Omar Nagati to me in his downtown Cairo office. "Now, it is going back

to functionality. The message is that with the new regime, we go back to normalcy."

The urban makeover is not limited to Tahrir Square. Egyptian authorities have attempted to restore Cairo by repaving a bridge, repainting curbs, and covering over some of the **iconic graffiti murals on Mohamed Mahmoud Street**—a site of frequent confrontation between police and protesters. The fresh coat of paint has coincided with preparations for celebrations marking the 40th anniversary of **Egypt's 1973 war with Israel**, the watershed event in the nationalist mythology.

A beautification operation is also taking place in Rabaa Al-Adawiya Square, where on August 14 **at least 377 people** died during the government's crackdown on protesters opposing Morsi's removal. Last Thursday, weeks after the apocalyptic scene that took place during the clampdown, government workers were busy renovating the Rabaa Al-Adawiya Mosque, which had been gutted by fire. In the center of the square they are erecting a monument, consisting of two large metal claws protruding from the pavement. **One official, quoted** by the Egyptian news site Mada Masr, said the monument was meant to express "the unity of the army, the police, and the people."

The renovation is not entirely cosmetic. Some changes are permanent, including the removal of one wall blocking a stretch of **Qasr Al-Aini Street**, a main thoroughfare leading south from Tahrir that had been used by protesters in the past. Several other walls remain, but traffic flow in the area has eased noticeably. Urban planner Omar Nagati suggested the changes would result in the government "winning over huge segments of society who are looking for stability and functionality."

Some of the merchants around Tahrir welcomed the new order. "The days that are coming will be better," said Ramadan Faris, the longtime operator of a Tahrir newsstand. "They're cleaning the square. It is going to go back to the days of tourism. People will know they can walk through it."

Egyptians long so much for stability that they would likely support General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi for the **the presidency** if he could at least foster the illusion of security. However, electing the military strongman under the guise of a well-landscaped mirage could cost the country two and a half years of groundwork toward democracy.

The 2011 military government and Morsi's government also attempted to beautify Tahrir. Each time, the square was overrun again during waves of unrest. Again last week, the stability envisioned by the authorities did not last long. By Friday, the square was locked down by the security forces, **who fired at demonstrators opposed to the military government.** On Sunday, the planned war commemoration went ahead as planned, as did antigovernment protests. While pop stars sung patriotic anthems to flag-waving crowds inside Tahrir, thousands of demonstrators opposed to the military coup marched toward the square. The marchers made it within several city blocks of Tahrir before they were driven back by tear gas and bullets. At least 57 people were killed in protests across Egypt. Omar believes that even if the new government succeeds in establishing order on the streets in the short term, Egypt's unresolved problems of inequality and social exclusion would result in more unrest. "Maybe there's another moment of implosion," he said. "Maybe there will be gradual change. But there will be change. And you can see it. There's a sense of desperation. You can smell it in the air."

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