Egypt's Shiite Muslims saw the Sunni hatred grow under Morsi
Few groups view the ouster of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi with as much relief as Shiite Muslims.
By Shashank Bengali
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CAIRO — When Hosni Mubarak ruled Egypt, Ahmed Helal was locked up four times in Tora prison, officials' favorite detention facility for perceived enemies of the state. Each time, he was arrested in the middle of the night and thrown in with scores of others whose only offense, they believed, was being Shiite Muslims.

But Egypt's Shiite community — a small, reticent minority in a country dominated by Sunni Muslims — would come to view Mubarak's three-decade reign almost as the good old days.

In the year that recently ousted President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood held power, the threats grew graver. Brotherhood officials denounced Shiite practices and declared that the sect had no place in Egypt. Lawmakers pushed through a new constitution that made Sunni religious doctrine the basis for most laws. One young preacher who converted to Shiism was jailed on charges of insulting Islam.

The trouble culminated in a gruesome lynching in a village outside Cairo in June, when a mob dragged the bloodied bodies of a prominent Shiite cleric and three others through the streets while police officers stood by.

As the gulf between Morsi's supporters and opponents grows wider and more perilous, few Egyptians view the July 3 military coup against him with as much relief as Shiites, who say the Brotherhood emboldened hard-line Islamists and stoked hatred of religious and ethnic minorities.

"The people gave them a chance to rise, but God was against them," said Helal, a robust silver-haired psychiatrist in Cairo. "They showed who they really are; they created scandals and they lost everything."

Morsi is in military detention now, his top aides besieged by arrest warrants and travel bans, as a military-backed interim government charts a path to fresh elections. But many opponents of the Brotherhood worry that the group has left a legacy of deeper sectarianism in Egypt.

Since the coup, Christians, who make up an estimated 10% of Egypt's 83 million people, have been targets of deadly attacks by Islamists who accuse them of supporting Morsi's overthrow. Shiites, believed to number less than 1 million, fear reprisals from Salafists, a long-repressed radical Sunni sect that rose to prominence under the Brotherhood and views Shiite Islam as heresy.

Helal, 67, said he's never been able to worship openly in Egypt, but under Mubarak's police state he felt little physical danger. Now he's afraid to carry the clay brick upon which many Shiites rest their heads during prayers. For months, his phone buzzed with text messages warning, "We know where you live."

"It is worse now," said Helal, whose second-story home in an eastern suburb is lined with books and Islamic curios. "Now the Brotherhood and the Salafists are occupied by the struggle against those that removed them from power. But you cannot guarantee that later they won't come after us, because they still hate us."

The centuries-old rivalry between Sunnis and Shiites has been reignited in recent years by political and religious leaders grasping for power in the changing Middle East. The sects are on opposite sides of civil strife in Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon and, deadliest of all, Syria. Rebels backed by Syria's Sunni majority are battling to bring down the government of President Bashar Assad, which is dominated by Alawites, an offshoot of Shiite Islam. Shiite Iran is one of Assad's biggest backers.

As the Syrian conflict has expanded into a proxy war between Iran and Sunni-led Saudi Arabia, it has dragged in much of the Muslim world, including Egypt.

In June, Morsi attended a rally at a Cairo stadium where a succession of Salafi clerics called for holy war in Syria. One described Shiites as "filthy"; another called them "nonbelievers who must be killed."

When Morsi took the stage, he drew cheers by announcing he would break diplomatic relations with Assad's government. And he said nothing about the anti-Shiite rhetoric.

"Those remarks were so unacceptable to most Egyptian people, but they were 100% acceptable to the president," said Ahmed Samih, head of the Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies in Cairo. "Because of those words, the extremists felt free to act."

A week later, on June 23, two dozen Shiites gathered for a religious ceremony at a home in Abu Mussalem, a village south of Cairo not far from the Great Pyramids. Among them was Sheik Hassan Shehata, 66, a well-known cleric who had been imprisoned during the Mubarak era.

According to accounts compiled by human rights groups, the worshipers began to notice a crowd collecting outside, calling for Shehata. Suddenly several men broke through the front door. The worshipers ran upstairs, but the assailants chased them, ransacking the house along the way. The mob began hurling Molotov cocktails into the house, starting a fire.

Shehata, two of his brothers and a fourth man went outside to placate the crowd, but attackers set upon them with sticks and metal rods, beating them until they collapsed. Video made at the scene shows one man, motionless, his arms and legs bound with rope, being dragged through the street as a mob cheers, "God is great!"

The attack stunned many Egyptians. Morsi and top Brotherhood officials condemned it. But in a pointed omission, they did not specify that the victims were Shiites. Activists would say later that sectarian tension had been building in Abu Mussalem, where, a few weeks earlier, Salafi clerics had led a march through the village chanting that Shiites were heretics.

Bahaa Anwar, a Shiite activist in Cairo, said he received a call from the village that afternoon as the mob was gathering. He notified the police, but witnesses said that though officers in riot gear arrived before the worst of the attack, they waited to intervene until Shehata and the three others were killed.

Anwar called it "an assassination."

His organization, the Fatimid Human Rights Center, on the sixth floor of a grand, moldering office building downtown, was an early supporter of Rebel, the youth movement that organized protests that led to Morsi's ouster. Although some in that movement have expressed concern about the post-coup political transition, Anwar had only praise for the military's road map to elections and a new constitution.

His group has called for Shiite representation on the committee that will finalize constitutional amendments. And it is preparing lawsuits that aim to dissolve the Brotherhood and the Nour Party, the Salafists' main political arm.

"They are dangerous," Anwar said, "but we have to free our country from them."