

Egypt: The Sisi coup enters its fourth year - “Let us together make this year the beginning of the end for Abdelfattah al-Sisi’s regime”

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This week marks the beginning of the fourth year of the 3 July coup. The events of the last three years have shown, beyond any doubt, that this bloody coup had been planned and prepared by the army’s leadership and big businessmen months before it unfolded, and that the political and popular mobilisation against the Muslim Brotherhood and president Morsi exploited popular anger against him and the Brotherhood’s failures. This mobilisation used tools that seemed revolutionary in form, but that in reality aimed to create a popular base for the coup and the counter-revolution.

The essential goal of the al-Sisi regime was and remains not only getting rid of the Muslim Brotherhood, but more importantly to work systematically towards the liquidation of any form of movement, consciousness or mobilisation linked to the 25 January revolution. This includes the movements and organisations that are linked to that revolution as well as the workers’ movement or any other protest or youth movements that were unleashed by the January revolution.

The reactions of the revolutionary forces and organisations went through three successive phases. During the coup’s first year, many were in denial of reality, and kept on working as if the revolution was still ongoing under the assumption that the coup would not last long. However as it became obvious that the coup was relatively stable and solid, the first reaction of denial turned into one of deep demoralisation and near capitulation. But today as the coup enters its fourth year, we must bring an end to those irrational and unrealistic reactions; our task is to analyse the current political moment in all its aspects and contradictions, in order to enable ourselves to present strategic and tactical proposals that correspond not to the wishes or fears of revolutionaries, but rather to the real possibilities of today.

The last three years saw barbaric repression and media mobilisation against any form of opposition or protest, as well as the passing of laws that restrict all forms of movement or expression, not to mention the judiciary’s filthy role of issuing thousands of prison and death sentences against opponents of the regime and the retroactive imprisonment of those who participated in the January revolution; however in spite of all that, last year’s developments can incite us to cautious optimism.

By cautious optimism, we do not mean blind triumphalism or revolutionary naivety, and we are certainly not indulging in the comic position of some sections of the Muslim Brotherhood as expressed in their slogan of the “faltering coup”. We are well aware that the fight against the regime of the counter-revolution is a long term struggle that will span years, and we have many battles and sacrifices ahead of us before we can go back to the path of the 25 January revolution. What we actually mean by “cautious optimism” is that the developments of the last year incite us to call for organised and diligent work to build a strong and effective opposition capable of facing this regime, all the while insisting that this call is not a mere reflection of unrealistic expectations on our side.

Cracks at the top of the regime

Since the Nasser years, the Egyptian regime has relied on a precise balance between the different security apparatuses: the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Interior (with respectively the Military Intelligence and the General Intelligence on one side, and State Security on the other). The Presidency played the role of the balancing force between these institutions. But the January 2011 revolution wreaked havoc on this equilibrium; the Police, Central Security and State Security collapsed almost entirely. The army had to intervene directly to fill the void, handing over the control of all security work to the Military Intelligence and General Intelligence. Naturally, this exceptional situation was not meant to last very long; one of Abdelfattah al-Sisi’s crucial tasks as Minister of Defence was to rebuild the Ministry of Interior’s security institutions so they could be put on the front line of direct repression and handle the day-to-day management of the security dossier, specially in the wake of the coup and the removal of the Brotherhood and Morsi. Indeed, al-Sisi succeeded in rebuilding the Police and the State Security.

In spite of all these efforts, balance between the security apparatuses, and the Presidency’s capacity to reign them all in and control the rivalry and competition between them, has not been restored. Many indicators of the depth of the crisis at the top of the security apparatuses and the danger it constitutes to al-Sisi’s regime emerged during the third year of the coup.

This was reflected in a series of security-related fiascos as well as quasi overt disputes between the different apparatuses. The coup’s third year alone saw the bombing of the Russian airplane that took off from Sharm el-Sheikh on 31 October 2015, before an unarmed madman hijacked an EgyptAir plane that had taken off from Burg al-Arab airport in Alexandria. Finally, another EgyptAir aircraft crashed in circumstances still unknown.

The series of bombings and terror acts went on from Sinai to Helwan, the killing of four judges in Areesh on 24 November 2015 and that of six Helwan policemen in May 2016 constituting non-exhaustive examples. This in spite of the regular proclamations by different army and police forces that the terrorist groups had been definitely defeated!

However, the case that was perhaps the most revealing of this crisis was that of the Italian student Giulio Regeni, who was kidnapped on 25 January 2016 and whose lifeless mutilated body was found bearing signs of horrific torture on 3 February 2016. The consequences of this incident are still unfolding today: after Rome recalled its ambassador in Cairo on 8 April 2016, the Italian parliament voted to stop any military supplies to the Egyptian army towards the end of June 2016. Nobody doubts that it was one of the big security apparatuses that committed this crime, be it the Intelligence or State Security, the army or the police. The high levels of confusion of the different services on this issue have been clearly exposed as they look for a scapegoat or desperately attempt to invent preposterous stories that defy all logic, and finally the contradictory statements on the case all indicate unprecedented levels of confusion and panic among the security apparatuses.

Another sign of the competition and infighting between the apparatuses is their respective relationship with Hamas. Only a few days after the minister of interior announced in March 2016 that investigations had exposed Hamas' role in the killing of the public prosecutor, the Hamas leadership in Gaza was on an official visit to the General Intelligence headquarters in Cairo. Such an inconsistency indicates not only the rivalry and lack of coordination between the two security apparatuses, but also exposes the Presidency's failure to manage this rivalry.

The economic crisis

The third year of the coup saw further economic deterioration and collapse in Egypt. All of al-Sisi's attempts to revive the economy have failed, be it through attracting foreign investment, reviving tourism or even the giant infrastructural projects.

Al-Sisi relies on a blend of economic policies; on the one hand he adopted a form of neoliberalism that is extreme even in comparison to the Gamal Mubarak and Ahmad Nazif period, during the last governments of the Hosni Mubarak era: ever increasing austerity measures, cuts in subsidies, reduction of deficit through curbing public expenses by reducing essential services. These measures are complemented by ongoing privatisations and caterings for big investors from Egypt and the Gulf.

However, the neoliberal policies coincide with a series of giant infrastructural projects – the Suez canal expansion, the energy project in collaboration with German company Siemens, the nuclear power plant project with a number of Russian companies, and other infrastructure-related developments. Huge loans from European banks finance projects that are undertaken by companies based in the same European states, meaning that Europe's banks are financing Europe's companies with the Egyptian government acting as a mediator! The natural result is of course the accumulation of debt on the Egyptian government, and the creation of consecutive monetary crises as the gap increases between the government's revenue in foreign currencies (Euro, US dollar and British pound) and its obligations in those same currencies.

It was only logical for the Egyptian pound's value to plummet in the face of these immense pressures. Indeed, the Egyptian central bank has devalued the pound by more than 13% in March 2016 but this measure did not prevent its further collapse on the black market. What is more, the governor of the central bank has begun talking this week of the necessity of a further reduction in the pound's value! This led to successive waves of price increases, particularly for essential commodities, coinciding with rising unemployment levels and a stagnation in wages – which were low in the first place. All of that means a rapid deterioration of the living conditions for a majority of workers, employees and poor people as there are no real opportunities to bring the economic crisis to an end or for the creation of real sustained growth as long as al-Sisi, his generals and the big businessmen (who are all Mubarak's men) remain in power. It is therefore expected that the coming fourth year of the coup will set the stage for new waves of strikes and protests demanding higher wages and price controls; the political implications are that many of those who supported al-Sisi's coup and believed his promises will join the ranks of the social and political opposition.

The regional context

The other political consequence of the economic failure and the spiralling debt and financial crises is ever more dependency on the Saudi sponsor, who was of course the principal funder of the coup from the very first moment. The Saudi monarch's visit to Egypt in April 2016 was a farce that saw al-Sisi and his men beg and bow before the king and his entourage; nevertheless, we could hardly have

expected the gift of the two islands, Tiran and Sanafir to the Saudi kingdom! This confirms that the regime is in a state of total bankruptcy and will gamble what is left of its political legitimacy, even among its supporters, for some riyals and dollars. Here we should remember that the coup and the counter revolution were built on a propaganda campaign that essentially invoked Egyptian nationalism, the Egyptian flag and Egyptian sovereignty through slogans like “saving Egypt”, “war on terror”, “the eradication of traitors” and other hysterical expressions. But the surrendering of Egypt’s sovereignty over Tiran and Sanafir in favour of Saudi Arabia exposes the emptiness of such slogans, and throws all those who supported al-Sisi for reasons of patriotism and protecting the country into a violent crisis; how can you support al-Sisi for patriotic reasons when he surrenders national sovereignty?

Splits in the 30 June alliance

The 2013 coup was based on a wide political alliance – dubbed ‘30 June alliance’ at the time. This alliance included a large spectrum of political forces that had previously constituted the ‘Salvation Front’ in opposition to Mohammed Morsi’s presidency; it was composed of various political currents, from liberalism and nationalism to left wingers and salafists as well as what was left of the National Democratic party (Mubarak’s party). This political grouping not only supported the coup, but endorsed and mandated the army, thus supporting the ensuing massacres, repression and arrests.

This wide alliance was set up under pretenses related to the Muslim Brotherhood and the necessity of getting rid of president Morsi, even by way of a military coup. Here we will not argue with those pretenses, or tackle the fact that this alignment with the army constituted a betrayal of the 25 January revolution that was no less deep and dangerous than the Brotherhood’s past treason when they aligned with the military.

What we want to emphasize however is that as we enter the fourth year of the coup, the political picture is wholly different. The Brotherhood scarecrow no longer suffices to hold the 30 June alliance together, and the regime’s repression against all opponents – even the anti-Brotherhood forces, its economic failures, its dependency on Saudi Arabia as well as its open alliance with Israel, and finally the islands’ catastrophe, all those factors have indeed shattered what was left of the 30 June alliance. This was made clear by the April 2016 protests against the islands sell-out as well as in the declarations by various leaders of that alliance.

The retreat of the Muslim Brotherhood

Perhaps the most significant development of the third year of the coup was the weakened, fragmented and divided state that the Muslim Brotherhood found itself in, and the retreat of its influence as the opposition to al-Sisi. The violent repression that the Brotherhood suffered has greatly weakened and fragmented it, but it was not the only reason behind that. The same internal contradictions that had paralysed the Brotherhood during Morsi’s presidency and led it to yield to its reactionary Salafist wing and seek to appease the state institutions – primarily the army and the police – have grown more severe after the coup and the successive waves of repression. The failure of their strategies to oppose the coup and their incapacity to mobilise an effective popular movement against the regime has only deepened the rifts inside the organisation, which has effectively been split into many distinct antagonistic and rival factions that all issue contradictory public statements in the name of the Brotherhood.

Therefore, counting on the mobilisation of political forces and sections of the popular masses on the

basis of confronting the danger of the Brotherhood has lost its effectiveness. The ready-made accusation of belonging to or supporting the Brotherhood, which is issued against any and all opponents of the regime, is now exposed as a ridiculous proposition that no one believes. Sections of the opposition to the regime's policies that were sensitive to fear-mongering and reluctant to move, now feel more confident to be outspoken and build the protest movement.

The new rise of the workers', trade unions' and political protests

All of the above must be understood in the context of last year's surge in a series of large protest movements, indicating an important development on the political scene. In August 2015, thousands of civil servants and workers demonstrated outside the Journalists' Union against the Civil Service law. In November 2015, hundreds of postgraduates demonstrated after false promises of employment by the state, and even succeeded in reaching Tahrir square before being dispersed by security forces. In February 2016, over ten thousand doctors gathered around their syndicate to protest against the brutal aggression of their colleagues by the police as they worked in the Mattaria hospital, and the same month saw huge numbers of inhabitants of the Darb al-Ahmar neighbourhood demonstrate outside Cairo's security directorate against the killing of a taxi driver by a policeman.

What is more, the 15 April 2016 protests indicated an important qualitative shift compared to previous mobilisations, which were partial or sectoral in character, whether limited by location or profession. However, 15 April was political in every sense of the word, as the opposition to the abandonment of the islands made the link between sovereignty, democracy and free speech. It was organised through a wide united front that did not only include revolutionary forces like the 6 April movement, Masr al-Qawiya party or the Revolutionary Socialists, but also a number of political factions that had joined the 30 June alliance, most notably the Dustoor party, the Egyptian Democratic party and the Karama party. The regime was unsuccessful in its attempts to fragment this front under the pretense of the participation of youth sections of the Brotherhood; indeed as we have clarified earlier, the Brotherhood is no longer an effective actor and thus those arguments are no longer convincing the youth of the political movements.

Everybody paid the price on 25 April, as the repressive security forces and the judiciary did not discriminate between revolutionary opponents of the coup and the opponents that formed until very recently an integral part of the pro-coup 30 June alliance. The regime's repressive backlash acted as a deterrent to a larger movement when the security forces raided the journalists' syndicate for the first time in its history, arresting journalists who were protesting inside. The subsequent journalists' protest was another step in the qualitative shift in the opposition to the Egyptian regime.

However, the journalists' protests and the preceding protests and demonstrations of civil servants, doctors and workers have exposed some fundamental weaknesses of last year's protest waves. The first is the hesitations and divisions of the trade union leaderships - whether from the professional associations, or the independent workers' unions - as well as the leaders of the popular movements in the neighbourhoods. These hesitations and divisions are the result of a number of essential factors.

The first is the leaders' attempts to find a balance between the sections that still support the regime, even if this support is beginning to dwindle, and between sections that have become ready for an escalation in the confrontation with the regime, even if it is around specific demands.

The second factor is the weakness of organised rank-and-file pressure to impose more radical and effective positions on trade union leaders. This necessitates organised and persevering work by revolutionary organisations inside the rank-and-file.

The third factor is the weakness of support, solidarity and pressure by trade union and popular leaders to drive the movement forward. For instance, there were some solidarity initiatives with the journalists by some workers and political leaders, but they were ineffective and did not succeed in creating a framework that would unite all the sections around specific objectives, while there was no notable stance taken by the independent workers unions around this issue.

Naturally, this hesitation and fragmentation is reflected in the ambivalent and contradictory stances taken by the political forces that are currently shifting from the ranks of the ruling alliance to those of the limited and shy political opposition. This greatly limits the size of the victories and even the pressure that is put on the regime until now. This also enables the regime to use the arm of repression and arrests to disrupt the movement for now.

Organising the ranks

This article started with an invitation to cautious optimism on the basis of an analysis of the developments seen during the third year of the 3 July 2013 coup. This year exposed the rifts at the top of the regime and the failure of economic policies that has resulted in a stifling crisis and sustained increases in prices and unemployment. We also saw an important rise in the protest movements against police brutality, against the regime's economic and social policies and finally for democracy, free speech and national sovereignty.

However those movements are only beginning and are characterised by a large degree of hesitation of their leaderships, and fragmentation in their attempts to mobilise. For the coming year, we need to unite the revolutionary ranks and organise their effective participation in the economic, democratic and national sovereignty-related struggles. We also need to build united fronts that include all the opponents to the regime's current policies, whether or not they had been part of the 30 June alliance. The state of fragmentation that was imposed by the regime using the Brotherhood scarecrow is no longer justifiable in any way. All those who refuse dictatorship, emergency laws, political arrests, the crackdown on public and personal liberties, all those who reject the capitalist policies of impoverishment imposed by al-Sisi, his generals and businessmen, and all those who reject the dependency on Saudi Arabia and Israel must stand united to confront the regime.

Let us show solidarity with the Alexandria Shipyard workers who are facing military trials for merely attempting to organise a protest demanding their legitimate rights in the face of a government that has only offered them impoverishment and repression, let us show solidarity with the state high schools students who almost instinctively headed to Tahrir to express their anger and rejection of the failed, corrupt and clientelist school system that they have fallen victim to. Let us make these two causes that ended the third year of the coup the introduction to a new year of struggle. Let us together make this year the beginning of the end for Abdelfattah al-Sisi's regime.

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P.S.

* <http://global.revsoc.me/2016/07/the-sisi-coup-enters-its-fourth-year/>