

Egypt in Year Three

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Was the gathering of millions in Egypt on June 30 the continuation of a revolution or the occasion for a coup d'état? The answer is "both," but the question is not the right one to ask.

There is, first of all, no necessary contradiction between the two terms. All of the revolutions in human history have involved the overthrow of heads of state by force or the threat thereof. The revolutionaries, whether they wield weapons themselves or not, must commandeer a portion of the state's army or persuade the soldiers to lay down their arms. The French Revolution — the canonical model — took nearly a century to complete, during which period there were three republics with three different constitutions, two empires, two restored monarchs and plenty of interceding events that might be called "coups" and "counter-revolutions." The Iranian revolution — closer to the Egypt of 2013 in space and time — has been "hijacked" by authoritarian elements (or thus declared) several times over. Yet the upheavals in Iranian society that began in 1979 proceed apace.

In Egypt on July 3, the army deposed an elected president, arrested him and several other members of his party, closed down the media outlets sympathetic to him and set about installing a new government. On July 8, the army fired live ammunition on the ex-president's demonstrating supporters, killing more than 50. These actions were flagrantly anti-democratic, and no one with a pluralist vision for Egypt can applaud them. As during its direct misrule in 2011-2012, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has torn a hole in the national fabric and set back the development of "normal" participatory politics. Yet there remains ample reason to believe that their coup is a moment in a long process of social and political transformation that will continue for years to come.

The movement aiming to compel Muhammad Mursi's resignation, for one thing, was not bent on achieving its goal through military intervention, although a number of activists knew that was a possible outcome. The coalition was exceptionally broad and diverse — women and men, young and old, opponents of Husni Mubarak's regime and dregs of it, Coptic Christians and hardline Islamists, communists and free marketeers, anti-American nationalists and State Department darlings. Incredibly, its street presence was larger than the epochal 18-day uprising that unseated Mubarak in 2011. The Tamarrud campaign that provided the movement's formal program claimed 22 million signatures on its petition. Whether one credits this figure or not, there is no doubt that anti-Mursi organizers tapped a deep vein of fury in the population.

The bill of indictment against Mursi included complaints about Islamism, but otherwise looked rather like the list of grievances against Mubarak. After prevailing at the ballot box in 2011-2012, Mursi and the Muslim Brothers had enacted a purely majoritarian view of democracy: We won fair and square, so the rest of you should quiet down and trust us to protect your prerogatives. When this message, understandably, alienated Egyptians secular and pious, liberals, Copts, many women and even some unaffiliated Islamists, the Brothers reacted with clumsy efforts to concentrate power in their own hands. Meanwhile, they made no attempt to defang the Mubarak-era police state, instead cutting sordid deals with the SCAF and the various security services. Not only freedom but the other main revolutionary demands, as well, went unaddressed — there was no more bread than under Mubarak and certainly no more social justice. The Brothers, in fact, had no economic ideas beyond what they inherited by default from Mubarak's neoliberal cabinets. They may very well have

pursued the dismantlement of the welfare state in cooperation with the International Monetary Fund and global capital.

In Parliament, the Brothers eviscerated legislation that would have introduced more progressive taxation. They spurned a draft labor law that would have guaranteed the right to form independent unions through free workplace elections. Instead, they proposed to “regulate” strikes and sided with employers in the wildcat work stoppages that persisted after Mubarak’s ejection. In early summer, the International Labor Organization blacklisted Egypt in for failing to live up to the labor conventions to which it is a signatory. The Brothers stymied a popular drive to “drop the debt” of the Egyptian state on the grounds that much of it is “odious,” that is, derived from loans that were embezzled or used to bolster the coercive apparatus. The Mursi government ignored a court order to revoke several selloffs of public-sector firms at shamefully low prices and conducted with little or no competitive bidding. It retooled Mubarak’s “Cairo 2050” plan that, among other things, aimed to expel poor residents from prime real estate in the capital in order to make room for five-star hotels. Such schemes met with vociferous community opposition.

Notwithstanding the circumstances of Mursi’s removal, there was thus something profoundly democratic about the June 30 mobilization. Much of the Western media could only conceive of the choice before Egyptians as a dichotomy — the army or the Muslim Brothers, imposed liberalism or elected fundamentalism. It is a centuries-old trope, of course, rooted in Orientalism, propagated by modern Arab states from Algiers to Riyadh and reprised today by insufferable pundits in service of their own agendas. But Egyptians have spent more than two years demanding more and better choices, whether in national politics, in their neighborhoods or in their workplaces. Contra David Brooks and sundry, many Egyptians have a very clear sense of what democracy should be about. It is not merely a trip to the voting booth every four years.

Hence one pressing question is why it was that disparate strata within the anti-Mursi movement were willing to countenance — indeed, cheer — such anti-democratic means to their preferred end. Egypt is not the only place where citizens have openly or tacitly backed military intervention in times of acute crisis. Nancy Bermeo, a scholar of interwar Europe, argues that material hardships and breakdowns in “civic order” — the perception of security and predictable rules — led many Italians, Spaniards and others to support coups d’état. To cite a mundane Cairene example, it was heady at first to live without traffic cops, but the resulting gridlock lengthened everyone’s work day, rich and poor, often by several hours. With no progress in creating a civilian police force, and mutiny or indecision rampant in the ministries, the Brothers’ year in charge was one of steady decay in urban life — except in prices of basic commodities and fuel, which rose. These conditions were crucial to keeping a very large cross-section of Egyptian society in a revolutionary mood. Ironically, therefore, the events of late June and early July are evidence of both radical democratization and the failure of institutions — including elections — to arbitrate popular demands, much less deliver on them.

The June 30 mobilization, further, had but a single unifying slogan — *irhal*, or “get out” — directed at Mursi and his confreres. The protesters had neither a coherent organization for the post-Mursi future nor any agreed-upon policy prescription for a new government seeking to provide bread, freedom and social justice. Arguably, as well, they had no more convincing solution to the problem of representation in a democratic Egypt than did the Muslim Brothers. It was effectively an open invitation for the army to step into the vacuum.

As for the SCAF, it plainly saw the June 30 protests coming, unlike in 2011. The generals do not want to rule the country *de jure*. Nor do they want to surround the presidential palace with tanks every so often; they view such bald-faced interference in public affairs as a sign of weakness. They greatly prefer to find civilian partners who will protect their economic interests, wink at their

unaccountable habits and, best of all, absorb the criticism for the relentless deepening of Egypt's many problems. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the SCAF's bargain with Mursi was insincere or at best contingent. What the Muslim Brothers had, alone among the post-Mubarak political forces, was a party structure to match their ambitions. This advantage made the Brothers the best available civilian partners but also the only ones who could have, eventually, posed a credible threat to the army's black budget and other privileges. In 2011, the generals had no plan when the opportunity presented itself to tighten their invisible grip. Today, they have one.

Phase one was the rapid deployment of helicopters trailing the Egyptian flag over Tahrir Square. The army put its nationalist credentials on display again in phase two — the enlistment of the Coptic pope, the sheikh of al-Azhar and prominent personalities like Mohamed ElBaradei, the former UN nuclear watchdog, to flank Gen. 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi on stage as he proclaimed the dispatch of Mursi's tenure to oblivion. Phase three was the wave of arrests and the massacre of tens of the Brothers' constituents, blanketed in a disinformation campaign reminiscent of the lies about the murder of civil rights demonstrators outside the Maspero building in October 2011. Meanwhile, police magically reappeared on the streets and gasoline at the filling stations. Phase four was the quick handover of the reins of government to a civilian prime minister. Make no mistake: The army is not holding hands with revolutionaries or democrats. The army is at the core of a revanchist alliance of unrepentant Interior Ministry personnel and assorted Mubarak-era holdovers wearing silk suits instead of khaki, including a number of crony capitalists. This confederacy of reactionaries is sometimes dubbed Egypt's "deep state."

All of the major political forces in Egypt seem to be playing a winner-takes-all game where the prize is total control of the state. The rhetorical indicator is the ubiquitous offer to shed one's own blood; everyone is primed to be a martyr to the cause, whether the purge of Muslim Brothers from government or Mursi's reinstatement. Almost no one appears ready to face the messy and time-consuming task of power sharing. In this scenario, typical and absolutely logical in societies that have been heavily repressed, the true victor tends to be the entrenched power broker, here the military and its fat-cat friends.

And the United States salutes "the transition," along with most of the "international community," notable exceptions being Iran and Turkey. There is talk in Washington of putting conditions on Egypt's military aid package, but the proposed bar of a return to civilian rule is so low that the SCAF has already cleared it. Bashar al-Asad welcomed the coup with a reminder that he, too, is battling the dark hordes of political Islam. But perhaps the strongest endorsement of Mursi's ouster came from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which offered an immediate \$8 billion infusion into Egypt's ailing fiscal system. Kuwait promised another \$4 billion. And just in time — according to a Reuters story on July 6, the Egyptian central bank has exhausted all but one third of its cash reserves since Mubarak fell in order to prop up the pound. Together with the violence in the streets, the approval of this constellation of counter-revolutionary forces will strengthen the sway of the Muslim Brothers' narratives of global conspiracy against them. The Brothers swiftly rejected the plan announced by the interim president for another constitutional referendum to be followed by legislative elections in 2014.

Distrust between the Brothers and other civilian actors, whether reformists or revolutionaries, has likewise received a hefty shot in the arm. Some of the latter may see the destruction of the Brothers' experiment as peeling away a layer of authoritarian dominion: Eliminate a non-democratic rival, keep up the mobilization and retarget the "deep state." But the political arithmetic does not work. In 2011, the revolutionaries needed the Brothers to topple Mubarak; in 2013, they needed Mubarak loyalists and salafis to toss out the Brothers. What coalition can now form to tackle the structures of inequity, arbitrary rule and social strife in Egypt? In the near term, none leaps to mind.

In the long term, however, and perhaps the medium, the very structures that oppress Egyptians will generate resistance as well as confusion and despair. Several members of the June 30 amalgamation have registered their own objections to the constitutional decree, an index of Bermeo's other finding that citizens backing coups rarely support what the coupmasters do after they seize power. Having come so far, the country seems unlikely to accept a restoration that does not respond to at least some of the calls for bread, freedom and social justice. Perhaps the "deep state" will acquiesce in the foundation of a more robust parliamentary democracy than Egyptians knew under Mubarak. Perhaps it will find ways of easing Egypt's economic pain, including the poverty, joblessness and truncated life chances that are the primary concern of most Egyptian citizens. And perhaps not. The downfall of Husni Mubarak is best described as half-revolution, half-coup; in Mursi's case, the proportions may differ. The generals might like to write the revolution's obituary, but it is too soon, and ultimately the pen is not in their fingers.

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