

Egypt's Popular Coup: When Follies are Committed Despite Yesteryear's History

Written by Ehsan Abdoh

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EHSAN ABDOH, JUL 24 2013

The downfall of Mohammad Morsi through military coup is hardly surprising. What is surprising is how the famed Muslim Brotherhood, with its 85 years of political experience, would allow itself to be brought into such debacle which paved the way for the return of the military into the political spectrum by an unprecedented force of popular support. It is also worrying when Egyptian seculars fail to comprehend the dangerous predicament they have created by inviting and praising the military to remove a democratically elected president while sinister threats to civil society, such as the old Mubarak elite and fundamentalist Salafis, are acting as powerbrokers.

It is clear that neither President Morsi, nor the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership had understood that they were walking on knife's edge. Their strong position began to crumble as early as the first round of the 2012 presidential campaign. Morsi secured less than 25% of the popular vote, while he and all Islamist candidates won less than 44% of voters. In the second round many Egyptians found themselves in a lesser of two evils situation. They had to either elect a former minister of the old regime – and a member of the army elite – or vote for a former political prisoner who was considered a moderate Islamist. Morsi would have had a tougher contest if he had to face a candidate other than Ahmad Shafik, whom he defeated by a tiny margin of 51.73%. The fact that close to half of Egyptian voters had rallied behind a former General and minister of the loathed Mubarak regime, demonstrated that the country was already in the process of becoming polarized in two opposing camps.

This kind of social division came to light in Algeria and Turkey in the early 1990's and similarly materialized in Tunisia and Egypt in the aftermath of Arab Spring. In all these countries, a fragile balance of power threatens the transitional process from authoritarianism to democracy. The Islamists are naturally better coordinated and organized than other political groups due to their religious social networking and welfare services. They usually have the support of a considerable but marginal majority of the religious populace who are bitter about their long exclusion from political institutions and policy-making. A cultural-ideological clash soon erupts between them and a huge number of their fellow countrymen and women. The non-Islamist political groups and parties are ill-organized and squabbling but they represent a colourful combination of leftists, liberals, educated middle class, businessmen and religious minorities. They are well connected internationally and hold strong positions in socio-political institutions such as media and judiciary.

The newly empowered Islamists feel entitled to bring their Islamic agenda to the public arena, and their hardliners wish to push this agenda to the very limit. The non-Islamist sections of society are threatened by this and resolve to fight this agenda by any means necessary. They are also galvanized by a vital piece of historical memory; Iran's 1979 revolution and the ensuing Islamic Republic. The Turkish and Arab seculars, nationalists, socialists and liberals remember how their Iranian counterparts were eventually ousted by the popular claim of political Islam and Khomeini's charismatic lure. The psychological element of 'Iranization' is not a baseless paranoia and has strong justifiable reasons, particularly with Islamic fundamentalism as an empowered and aggressive player. However, there are other actors who prey and play on these fears. The elements of the old order that have vested interests in maintaining the status quo frequently use the 'Iranian boogeyman' for their own unscrupulous advantage.

The North-African Islamists needed limited political wisdom and historical memory to comprehend the delicate

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position they faced, particularly with the Turkish and Algerian experience looming as practical roadmaps. Many hoped that they would follow the prudence of their Turkish counterparts under Recep Tayyip Erdogan. But Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood overlords followed the path of Erdogan's failed predecessor, the late Necmettin Erbakan. Securing a marginal parliamentary victory in 1996, Erbakan was able to become prime minister by forming an uneasy coalition with a secular party. From the first day of Erbakan's administration, it was apparent that the ultra-laicists of the Turkish army and judiciary were itching to remove him. Erbakan and his fellow Islamists tried hard not to give them an excuse but their inexperience and ideological zeal provided the necessary pretext just 6 months succeeding. Erbakan travelled to Libya despite the protests of his coalition partner and was humiliated by Qaddafi[1]. Junior members of his party confounded that mistake when they organized a 'Jerusalem Night' in support of the Palestinians and unwisely invited the Iranian ambassador to Turkey who gave an anti-Western speech. Three days later, army tanks were in the streets and Erbakan was soon removed in what was called the 'first postmodern coup'[2].

Erbakan made small lapses compared to Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood who made every mistake they should have avoided. Morsi promised to appoint a Coptic Christian and a woman as his vice presidents, which was conveniently forgotten. Morsi insisted on reinstating the Islamic dominated parliament and sacked the prosecutor general while immunising himself from judicial inquiry. Morsi further outraged the non-Islamists by appointing eight Islamists governors; seven were Muslim Brotherhood members and one was from Gamaa Islamiyya. The same fundamentalist organization, which was held responsible for the 1997 Luxor massacre, was given the governorship of Luxor. And while the Egyptian economy suffered, Morsi and his fellow Muslim Brothers were more focused on matters such as the Syrian civil war and acted with remarkable recklessness. Sectarian violence was already stirring in Egypt and had led to unprecedented attacks on Egypt Coptic Cathedral in April. Morsi's shambolic response frustrated Coptic Church leaders and he further inflamed sectarian divides by announcing a severance of ties with the Assad regime in a 15 June rally, which was dominated by fundamentalist clerics who demanded holy war against the infidel Shiites of Syria. Less than 10 days later, Egypt's miniature Shiite community suffered a deadly attack. Four Shiites were savagely killed by an angry mob and few could shift the blame from Morsi.

Through this long list of follies, Morsi and Muslim Brotherhood effectively galvanized opposition unity. The former anti-Mubarak revolutionary youths formed the Tamarod movement and were swiftly backed by non-Islamic political groups and parties who openly pursued cooperation with their old foes; the hated stalwarts of the 'deep state', Mubarak-era civil service and security apparatus, powerful businessmen and finally the symbol of the old order, the Egyptian army. Even the iconic Franco-Egyptian Marxist and anti-capitalist, Samir Amin, argued for a common front of forces against the project of the Brotherhood. In a matter of days, this uneasy but determined alliance made quick work of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Its precise name can be discussed, but popular or not, a coup is a coup. It has a bitter taste and its organization and swiftness provide plenty of ammunitions for the conspiracy theorists. Furthermore, Egyptian democrats must remain mindful of the sort of bedfellows they are sleeping with. The fact that the fundamentalist Salafi Nour party supported the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood and is effecting interim government decisions is worrying. The Salafi's have already vetoed Mohamed ElBaradei's premiership and their influence is also hinted at in the constitutional declaration of the interim president, which has agitated some Coptic Christians and liberals. Furthermore, very few Egyptians wish to discuss the crucial question of the army's future role in politics.

The recurrence of the grisly episode of the Algerian civil war seems unlikely in Egypt, unless the interim government and army leadership commit follies even greater than those of Morsi's. Be that as it may, Egypt's transition toward democracy is in jeopardy given current vested interests in maintaining Mubarak's status quo. Before his death, Christopher Hitchens produced a shroud analysis about Egypt's revolution and warned that "as was once said of Prussia, Egypt is not a country that has an army, but an army that has a country . . . for centuries; Egypt's rulers have been able to depend on the sheer crushing weight of torpor and inertia to maintain 'stability'. . . I won't be surprised if the machine—with or without Mubarak—is able to rely again on this dead hand." One tries to be optimistic; but for now, the army and old elite are the main winners of Morsi's downfall.

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[1] Carter. V. Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism and Modernity*, Yale University Press, page 35

[2] Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey; a modern history*, I.B. TAURIS, 2004, pages 300-301

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