

Position Paper

Egypt: Analysis of an Arab Military Coup in the Twenty-First Century

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Even after nearly two months of the July 3 coup that toppled President Muhammad Mursi along with the 2012 Constitution and the elected Shura Council, Egypt is still affected by a climate of anxiety, political uncertainty and insecurity. When the elected president was overthrown, many hoped that the July 3 Regime would be able to achieve stability. It was unable to do so, and failed both to sustain its legitimacy in the eyes of the Egyptian public, and to gain significant international support.

So what happened on July 3, why, and how? What are the possible pathways for Egypt today?

Regional and International Relations

Since the victory of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, three major forces gradually appeared in the Arab-Islamic orient. Firstly, a force that is pro-revolution and pro-change emerged, which garnered sympathy and support from Turkey and Qatar. Secondly, a force emerged that seeks to restore the country to the status quo prior to the revolutions. This force is located in Saudi Arabia, UAE, some other Gulf States and Jordan. Thirdly, a force of a more sectarian nature emerged, seeking to preserve the gains of the geopolitical expansion that it achieved in the first decade of the twenty-first century. These forces are located in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah.

These forces have had complex interactions, not strictly through clear geopolitical pathways. Their members are not in agreement on everything, and their interests have intersected in more than one way and on more than one occasion. These intersections could not, however, stop the on-going conflict between the three forces. There are two main reasons for the emergence of this triple group and their fierce conflict. From the summer of 2012 to this summer (2013), the conflict between the three forces has escalated. The important victory for the first force supporting the revolution and change, however, was achieved in Egypt.

1. The stormy Arab movement towards revolution and change, which did not only reach pivotal countries in the Middle East such as Syria, but in the past year, also seemed to reach almost the entire Arab World. This movement

highlighted the underlying strength of mainstream political Islam, with its democratic and peaceful tendencies, and it abandoned the controversial goal of having an Islamic state.

2. The Arab-Islamic east has witnessed the partial withdrawal of the U.S. since Obama took control. Obama's second U.S. strategy after that adopted by George W. Bush in 2002, confirmed that the international priorities of the U.S. have changed, and that the Pacific Basin will be a top priority, rather than the broader Middle East. The partial withdrawal of the U.S. left a significant void that encouraged major regional forces to fill it with effective regional alliances that could share all or most of their goals, aspirations and fears.

Between the summer of 2012 and the summer of 2013, several developments instigated the escalation of the conflict between the three forces. The limited supplies provided to the Syrian rebels helped in several strikes on the regime in Damascus; demonstrations erupted in Sunni-majority provinces in Iraq; and the decline of the political status of Hezbollah in the Arab-Muslim world reached rock bottom. Then again, the Islamic movement emerged as the primary force among the Syrians rebels and the Syrian National Coalition.

In Tunisia, the Islamists have maintained their leadership position in the coalition government, and have overcome one of the biggest crises faced by the country since the victory of the Tunisian revolution. In Libya, the coalition formed by Dr. Mahmoud Jibril has been swayed off balance, and the Libyan rebels imposed the political isolation law which reshaped the new Libyan political class in favour of the Islamists and the allies of the first force. The great victory, however, for the first force supporting the revolution and change, was achieved in Egypt. This was not only due to the rise of Mursi to presidential power and then the end of the power-sharing with the military council in August 2012, but because it managed to face the crisis of the Constitutional Declaration last November with minimal losses; and Qatari, Turkish and Libyan aid packages and loans swiftly helped Egypt's economic crisis.

In spite of the controversies that Egypt witnessed during the few months prior to July 3, unpublished opinion polls carried out by several official and unofficial institutions showed that the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies were aiming to gain the majority of seats in the next parliament, and that they would retain the right to name the Prime Minister of the elected government. Successive developments in the past year thus suggest that the first force was on its way to emerge as the main geopolitical force in the Arab east, which would allow it to direct the region and make its decisions.

It is important that in spite of the partial withdrawal of the U.S. from the region, Western powers that do not wish to see the conflict resolved in favour of the first force, were concerned. This was not only because resolving the conflict in favour of one party is in itself harmful to Western influence, but because the independent tendencies of the first force and its wide popular base, can support these tendencies.

The conflict between the three forces manifested in the past two months in several locations:

1. Syria: Iran openly and crudely prompted Hezbollah forces to protect the regime from falling, and to help it regain control over the strategic central region. Syria is also the location in which the Arab countries provided armament and financial aid in order to support the Syrian revolution and control the political process after the fall of the Assad regime.
2. Iraq: certain factors weakened the Sunni protest movement, especially after the separation of the Kurdish autonomy authority from the movement. Factors included political pressures and temptations, on the one hand; and the massive amount of money, on the other; and, in addition, some temporary concessions that were made for the Kurds.

3. Although the Turkish protest movement in Taksim Square, which erupted in early June, was initiated by environmental issues, large Shiite and Alawite groups soon joined the protests, as well as the secular masses associated with the People's Party. The Shiite and Alawite organizations associated with Iran and Syria had a prominent role in this protest movement, and for more than two years, the People's Party groups didn't hide their rejection of Erdogan's policies toward Syria and Iran. The environmental protest movement rapidly turned into a movement to overthrow the Justice and Development Party government.
4. Egypt, where a small and angry group of young people by the name of Tamarod (Rebel), had been active for more than six months. They were employed as a tool to overthrow the Mursi administration and his government and to put an end to the Islamists' strong ruling authority by businessmen, politicians, former statesmen and state agencies working against the president.

In most of the previous cases, the U.S. did not necessarily play a direct role, but it is clear that their positions inclined towards diminishing the influence and role of the first force, and not necessarily towards completely excluding it from the scene. The United States supported the Al-Maliki government, and encouraged the Kurds to cooperate with him; did not oppose the increasing Saudi role in Syria, and perhaps even encouraged it; expressed sympathy with the Taksim Square protesters and criticised the reaction of Erdogan to the protest movement; and sided with the coup against Mursi. It is now pressing against military rule and encouraging the coup regime to offer reconciliation to the Muslim Brotherhood, and to not clash with them.

The Structure of the Coup

The Egyptians were divided before the revolution of January 2011, and these divisions returned after their short general agreement during the revolution and similarly they were divided before the coup against President Muhammad Mursi, and after the coup. Division implies politicization, including in the active political class, whether partisan or non-partisan. There is no doubt that the ousting of President Mursi by the army occurred when this division was at its starkest, after politics in Egypt had failed to provide sufficient space for agreement in the past two and a half years of free democracy. The coup on July 3 was not the result of this division however, and the political forces against the rule of Mursi as well as those supporting these forces were not the ones who ousted the elected President.

During the first year of Mursi's presidency, it was the Egyptian state that worked on making him appear to be a failed president. When the state felt that the President; a stranger to its institution, essence and legacy, was set to take control over the decisions in its various structures, it decided to get rid of him. The aggravation of political division in the country only provided an advantageous moment for the state to re-establish its control over Egypt after the revolution of January 2011. The institution of the modern state, which began to take shape in Western Europe from the second half of the seventeenth century, reached its first stage of maturity at the beginning of the nineteenth century then starting to spread outside the European region as the most effective form of state.

The difficulty to define it arises firstly from the fact that all socio-political phenomena seem more mysterious when there are attempts to define them; secondly, phenomena of history are usually difficult to define. In the early twentieth century, Max Weber offered his famous definition of the state, based on the close link between the institution of the state and the monopoly over the means of violence, implying that the means of violence employed by the state are superior to any other means of violence available to the people.

Weber's definition, however, evidently took into account only the repressive nature of the state, namely the state's ability to command and control the largest source of violence. This definition obviously disregards the other capabilities of the modern state, such as legitimacy, which is a characteristic of the state; and the effectiveness of speech, which plays a key role in the process of control and dominance, which means that in most cases there is no need to resort to the tools of violence. It also overlooks the conformity between the state and the people, which took root during the past two centuries, especially in countries with nationalistic tendencies.

A few decades ago, in the introduction to a book he edited about the emergence of the modern state in Western Europe, Charles Tilly summarised the overall features of the state and the social conditions instituting its modernity. The points are as follows:

1. The modern state, which controls a specific area of land, is the highest source of legitimacy in the country. As such, it is the source of laws and legislation.
2. It is the central control, and its level of centrality and authority is superior to any previous institution.
3. It is superior to, and different from any other social institution.
4. It can impose control through the monopoly on power within governed regions.
5. In democratic Western countries, states ensure types of justice, including the right to assembly; freedom of the press and publishing; the right of recourse; protection of minorities; the defence of life and property in principle and in general, not due to the influence of an individual or private connections.

This model of the state took root in Istanbul, Cairo and Tunisia during the intermediate decades of the nineteenth century through the determined endeavour of Ottoman modernisation in the three capitals; and in India and Algeria, through the force of the British and French imperialistic will. After a century, in the mid-twentieth century, the institution of the modern state became the prevailing model in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and globally. Without a state institution in the modern sense of it, a country is considered to be a failure, and isn't allowed to join the international system or gain membership to the United Nations.

All the institutions of the modern state seek to dominate and control its land and people, and the institutions of the state regenerate themselves generation after generation. The democratic system does not undermine the ability of the state to command and control. Rather, the democratic system with varying degrees differs from one country and culture to another, rationalises the relationship between the state and its people. As such, it involves the people in decision-making, and provides the people with frequent opportunities to hold their political representatives to account and to manage state affairs.

The attributes of the state however, and the relationship between the state and the democratic system, are not fixed. A state with a long history, such as in Egypt, Turkey, Algeria and Tunisia, have their own conditions and features, which were developed in the historical, geographical and social context of the state. For example, a state that was not exposed to a long-term foreign occupation, such as Turkey, differs in from a state that is still closely connected to the imperialistic metropole, such as Tunisia and Algeria.

As Turkey fought a long struggle for democratic transformation, lasting more than six decades since the first multi-party elections in 1950, the idea of democracy is deeply rooted in the political culture of the country, despite a series of military coups that plagued the country and the formation of dominant socio-political elite.

Egypt, which is governed by a well-established modern state institution and maintains a relatively large national army which occupies a privileged position in the structure of the state, lacks the same kind of democratic culture and tradition. In the January 2011 revolution, Egyptians overthrew an authoritarian regime as well as figures of the ruling class which accounted for the regime and spoke in its name. The revolution did not however, affect the prevalent, enormous institution of the Egyptian state.

The revolution in Egypt was swift, and there wasn't a need for a long collision between the forces of the revolution and the institution of the state. Immediately after the victory of the revolution, it was therefore necessary to immediately begin a comprehensive reform of the state apparatus and subject it to the will of the revolution. The process, however, did not begin; firstly, for the transitional period, the country chose a constitutional framework or quasi-constitutional framework and did not pursue a revolutionary pathway. President Hosni Mubarak stepped down from office, and handed over the reins of power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which was accepted by the country and its political forces. For many reasons, not least of which is that the Supreme Council is one of the most important institutions of the state, there was no motivation during the transitional period to carry out any sort of reforms. The fleeting moment of unity and agreement between the political forces, and the return of the sharp division that marred the Egyptian political scene before the outbreak of the revolution, also aggravated the situation. Since the mid-nineteenth century, division has been a feature of the political forum of the Arab-Muslim world, but in this particular context, the modern state and the dilemma of its reform and adaptation, holds crucial significance.

All Arab elites, Muslim and non-Muslim, whether they identify themselves as liberal, nationalist or patriotic, have been shaped by the modern state; its education, constitution, judiciary, culture and arts. There is no single type of relationship between these elites and the state however, and the state's viewpoint towards them differs. For many decades, the state viewed the Islamic political forces as external forces and as the radical opposition whose place was in the remote margin at best. This made Mursi's presidential victory a blatant coup, as it took place on the legacy of the modern state, and its relationship with the Islamic political force. Due to the severe political division after the victory of the revolution, not enough pressure was formed during the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to reform the state and adapt it to the democratic rule instigated from the revolution of January. Mursi's presidential victory saw the political division becoming a great obstacle to reform. Mursi was aware that the major mission of his presidency was the process of reforming and adapting the state, and that in its importance and urgency, this outweighs the general economic and financial crisis. Mursi was most likely aware of the state's viewpoint of his presidency, but he was also restricted by the legal and constitutional pathway chosen by the country after overthrowing the former regime. The severe political division and the inclination toward the old state apparatus by the traditional Egyptian political forces— liberal and semi-liberal, nationalist and patriotic — imposed additional restrictions. The reform steps were thus slow and disrupted, and the steps toward reform turned into a deep political crisis in the country.

This enormous entity, which we abstractly call the state, has its own essence and retains its own speech, traditions and legacies; to establish a very complex network of interests. It is not easy for a political movement that is unfamiliar with the institution of the state—a movement that was considered for many decades to be a marginal or hostile enemy—to move to the centre, and thus hold the reins of the state. Indeed, the transition was only theoretical, or legal and constitutional, and did not become a reality at the end of the first year of Mursi's presidency. With the state's escalating worries about that stranger sworn in as president, it found allies among the Egyptian liberal, nationalist and patriotic forces, which, regardless of their previous criticism of the state, found—in the midst of political division and conflict—the state's position to be a reassuring protection from the presence of Islamists in power. This alliance led to July 3, and compelled the state to take steps towards regaining its dominant role.

After the Coup

On the evening of July 3, the coup was announced through a speech by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and the Minister of Defence. During his speech, Gen. al-Sisi was surrounded by the two highest religious figures in the country, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and the Patriarch of the Coptic Church; a number of senior army officers; Dr. Muhammad ElBaradei for the National Salvation Front (NSF); two activists of the Tamarod movement, which called for demonstrations on June 30 against President Mursi; and the head of the Salafi Nour Party. This was intended to demonstrate a national consensus, and an assertion that what had occurred was not a military coup. The General's announcement promised the return of democracy, to allow space to all political forces, and to ensure national reconciliation.

Those who planned July 3 could, of course, have succeeded in promoting their reformative democratic goals. A series of developments and procedures however—some attributed to the coup leaders and others to forces beyond their control—demonstrated the military nature of the new regime. This undermined any efforts to establish legitimacy, and prevented attempts to build a new political stability:

1. Mursi refused to resign from presidency, as President Mubarak had on the evening of February 11, 2011.
2. The announced roadmap by the political alliance on the evening of July 3 did not only include the appointment of a temporary president (an indirect mention of the overthrow of President Mursi), but also the suspension of the 2012 Constitution, and the resolve of the elected Shura Council which was the only legislative institution in the country. As it turns out, President Mursi and a number of his assistants were arrested illegally.
3. The disagreement between the parties of the July 3 regime about clearing Raba'a al-Adaweya and al-Nahda sit-ins led to the resignation of Dr. Muhammad ElBaradei, the interim vice president, on the bloody evening of August 14. ElBaradei was the most important civilian figure in the new regime. He worked from the beginning to justify the overthrow of the elected president and on opening channels of communication between the regime and Western capitals. ElBaradei's resignation signalled the exit of the last figure of importance that could provide civil and international cover for the regime.
4. The army officers did not occupy apparent positions in the new regime, and the head of the Supreme Constitutional Court was chosen as the interim president in a considerate, constitutional move. A civilian prime minister was appointed, but all Arab and Western officials visiting Cairo after July 3, whether to get to know the new situation or to intervene, discovered that Gen. al-Sisi is a strong statesman and the sole decision-maker determining the regime's steps.
5. General al-Sisi's roadmap included a tendency to amend the constitution. Later, an appointed commission was formed by the interim president, which consisted of a dozen experts making amendments, providing that another committee of fifty representatives of political, civil and syndicalist forces and religious institutions will have to approve the final draft of the amended constitution, and then put it to a referendum. The Commission of Ten already finished the amendments on August 25; and, thus the constitutional side of the new regime is clear. This includes a return of the armed forces budget to its former secrecy; a removal of articles of Islamic content from the constitution, an inclusion of Article 219 which was meant to explain the principles of Islamic law in Article II, and the removal of the article that was legislated to form a national body to fight corruption, etc.
6. In the weeks following the announcement of the roadmap, the country has witnessed a campaign of mass arrests of leaders and cadres of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice Party, al-Wasat Party, Jama'ah

Islamiyah, and other involved forces. In some cases, these were through orders of the prosecution based on unreasonable accusations and in other cases; these were without any order from the prosecution. The campaign of arrests preceded the deadly clearing of Raba'a and al-Nahda sit-ins, and continued after the clearing. Due to the use of extreme violence by the state apparatus against its opponents however, the country deteriorated into a climate of fear.

On another note, despite early expectations that the conditions of the country would stabilise and that the political forces opposing the overthrow of the president and the July 3 roadmap would soon accept fait accompli and join the new political process, the popular protest movement led by a coalition of political forces named the National Alliance for Supporting Legitimacy, continued unabated. The regime faced the crowds gathered at Raba'a al-Adaweya when they tried to stage a sit-in in front of the Republican Guards' Club on July 5, where it was rumoured that President Mursi was being detained. It is believed that the deadly attack against the protesters in front of the club was in cooperation between the special forces of the army and security forces. On July 8, when protesters tried to expand the sit-in to the area around the Unknown Soldier monument at Raba'a al-Adaweya, they were attacked for the second time by the security forces near Raba'a al-Adaweya square.

There is no doubt that excessive use of the means of violence against the opposing crowds was firstly an attempt to put a quick end to the protest movement of the opposition, which surprised the leaders of the new regime. When violence failed to suppress the opposition movement, security apparatus resorted to a double approach; a campaign of mass arrests, and a fundamental way to deal with the two main sit-ins in Cairo: Raba'a al-Adaweya and al-Nahda. The clearing of the two sit-ins was carried out with extreme force, unprecedented in the modern history of Egypt, and it continued throughout Wednesday August 14, ending with the killing of thousands of protesters and injuring another thousands. The consequences of clearing the two sit-ins in Cairo, which saw the protest and the opposition movement returning stronger and with more tenacity, reaching all parts of the country and using new tactics of mobility in the streets, were different to those expected by the leaders of the regime. The frequent deadly means of spreading violence and the increasing feeling of repression in the country led to more political forces disagreeing with the regime. By the end of August, the daily popular protest movement was increasingly attracting more people who cannot be accounted for as Islamic forces.

Where Is Egypt Heading?

There are four main possibilities of where the situation in Egypt can lead to:

1. The July 3 regime can establish itself and restore stability by force of arms and through different methods of repression, regardless of whether it succeeds in convincing the majority of Egyptians of its legitimacy. This is the scenario that the new regime leaders hoped for, but the continued popular protest movement and resorting to violence to suppress it, and the failure of the new regime officials to gain international and regional support, made this less likely. With the continued instability, the country's persisting financial crisis will deteriorate, and a direct relationship between politics and the economy will arise.
2. Reversing the coup and the procedures taken by the July 3 regime since the overthrow of Mursi. This cannot be achieved without the decision of the General Command of the Armed Forces, the dominant force in the new regime. It also requires the popular movement to significantly escalate and expand, increasing aggravation of the financial crisis, and significant foreign pressure. Although the country is not yet ready to achieve this, it is unwise to eliminate the possibility of it being achieved in the future.

3. Reaching a negotiated agreement between the new regimes, especially the leadership of the armed forces on the one hand and the National Alliance for Supporting Legitimacy, which leads the popular protest movement, on the other. The first attempt to reach a negotiated solution was undertaken by foreign mediation in the first week of August, including through the US Deputy Secretary of State, the European Union Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean, and the Qatari Foreign Minister. Mediators tried to persuade the parties to accept a number of procedures that would help create the atmosphere for negotiations on a solution to the crisis. Scarce information about the attempt however, suggests that Gen. al-Sisi refused to initiate the procedures. Reports were published in the last week of August about a more detailed initiative, which is being carried out by Turks, Europeans and Americans, and channels of communication with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; the two Arab countries supporting the coup. There is no evidence though, of the beginnings of a serious negotiation process. To achieve such a possibility, it is necessary that the new regime leaders realise that they can't solely establish the legitimacy and stability, and the National Alliance for Supporting Legitimacy have to understand that they can't defeat the coup and return the country to pre-July 3.
4. The country can fall into deeper levels of political instability, coupled with increasing levels of armed violence. In the event that attempts to reach a negotiated agreement fail, and that the new regime inclines towards eliminating the Muslim Brotherhood and the political forces supporting them, whether in a constitutional and legal manner or otherwise, Egypt will move towards a seemingly endless phase of political instability in a climate of political repression and terrorism. Although the incidents of armed violence in the country are still limited and only occur in the Sinai, where there have been armed groups against the state for years, as well as in some provinces in southern Egypt; and the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies adhere to peaceful popular movement, there is the potential for the armed violence to escalate. Egypt has a large population, and not all politicised sides are involved with political forces and parties, or comply with their orders and directions. Among the Islamic movement, there is a deep sense of injustice, amongst other calls, to take revenge on the security forces for the fallen victims among the peaceful demonstrators. If the country moves in this direction, the deterioration of the political and security situation of Egypt will reflect badly on the whole Arab world.

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