



Transcript

Egypt: Democracy in the Balance

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Jonathan Rugman:

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for abandoning a beautiful day in London for the basement of Chatham House. We're delighted to have so many of you here. My name is Jonathan Rugman, I'm a reporter with Channel 4 News. I've just come back from Egypt, which I hope helps.

The event is being held on the record. I should tell you that the event is being live streamed, which means that people outside this room can participate via Twitter if they wish to.

I'm going to briefly introduce our speakers, starting on my left. Maha Azzam is an associate fellow here at Chatham House, an expert on the Middle East and political Islam. I thought we might particularly ask her about the Muslim Brotherhood. On my immediate right, Dina Wahba was in Tahrir Square on 30 June, when the protests reached a tipping point. She also participated in the 2011 revolution and is a women's rights activist. My far right, Jane Kinninmont, known to many of you, a senior research fellow on the Middle East and expert on the international relations of the Middle East. We thought we might turn to her at the end to talk about the regional implications of what has happened and a little bit about the economic implications as well. Basically what's going to happen is we're going to give each speaker five to seven minutes and then we will turn over to questions.

I don't know if you've seen the cover of the latest issue of *The Economist*: 'Egypt's Tragedy'. A quite contentious cover, I think, because a lot of Egyptians – millions of Egyptians – would not regard this as a tragedy at all, and I'm not sure I would either. The situation is that Morsi had a year in power; in the eyes of many Egyptians and indeed in the eyes of some of his supporters, although they won't necessarily admit it, he blew it. He blew that opportunity. I've started calling this a 'revo-coup-lution', in a desperate attempt on Twitter to try and satisfy all parties – an attempt which has failed, because if you call it a revolution you exclude the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters, who won 51 per cent of the vote last year and will never accept that this is a revolution. They will always call it a coup. And of course the protesters in Tahrir Square who say this is not a coup, this is the army doing the bidding of the people. That would be their argument. It struck me while I was there that it was a marriage of convenience between the army and the protesters until the army went back to barracks and the protesters went back to bed. It's a marriage of convenience which can easily resurrect itself. This is not over, by a long shot.

I put out two tweets last week before Morsi fell to describe my reporting approach to Egypt, and I thought I would give them to you so you would know where I was coming from. My first principle of reporting Egypt is never interview somebody in an office, because they don't count. Throughout our coverage I think we only interviewed one person in an office and that was Adly Mansour, the interim president who was sworn in last week. It's an interesting state of affairs when a man in a suit and tie in an office is not where you go. We often talk about the 'Arab street' but Egypt became its street during crucial days last week. The only exception to my rule apart from Adly Mansour would be if that person in an office is wearing military braid, then perhaps one should talk to him.

My other rule was never assume that Tahrir won't get what it wants. Tahrir was full of people last Sunday, 30 June. We know from 2011 that having toppled one president, they had every right to think they could prove all the Middle East and experts wrong yet again and topple another. That is what happened. I would say to you that even if you think what occurred was a military coup with very negative consequences, I think that the people of Tahrir will be back if they do not get what they want. If it turns out that the army does not go back to barracks and it doesn't turn out as well as those protesters thought, they will be back. So this is very much unfinished business.

I'm going to start by turning to Dina. You were there on 30 June. Could you explain a little bit about who organized these protests? We know about this group called Tamarod, which means 'rebellion'. It claimed to have 22 million signatures calling for the removal of President Morsi. I take that with a big pinch of salt but clearly there was a massive protest. How was it organized and who did it speak for?

Dina Wahba:

Actually, before I start, I want to say that your account is very refreshing. I've been hearing all sorts of experts speaking, especially from the media from the West, and your account is by far the most balanced that I have heard.

Jonathan Rugman:

I'm not sure that's a good thing or a bad thing.

Dina Wahba:

It's so refreshing to hear something a little bit different and an account that actually looks at the people and cares about what the people say and cares about the people on the street, not just the Muslim Brotherhood and the military, not just seeing the Middle East from the view of political Islam or the military. So that's very refreshing.

Who organized these protests? Actually, just like what happened on the 25 January 2011, it was an open call. Of course I wouldn't say that Tamarod or ElBaradei called for the people to go, the political parties called for the people to go on the streets, but it was an open call basically for people. What happened on that day was fascinating. Even though I participated in the 25 January revolution, it was still fascinating for me to see things happening again on the 30th. I remember we were walking in a march, actually a two hours and a half march – it was not in Tahrir, it was in El-Thadiya, in front of the presidential palace. As we walked, people just started coming out, regular people, normal people, not politicized, not our political parties' affiliates – of course there were affiliates of political parties but like normal people who would just come down from their homes and join us. Old people, young people, everyone I know – I mean, everyone I know took to the streets. I have to contest the point about the 51 per cent pro-Morsi in the elections. Actually many people who gave Morsi their voices, gave them so that they wouldn't give them to Shafik. They gave them not to the Muslim Brotherhood –

Jonathan Rugman:

It still makes it a democratic vote.

Dina Wahba:

Definitely, I'm not saying it's not a democratic vote. I'm just saying that among the 51 per cent, many people were on the streets calling for early presidential elections. My own mother voted for Morsi and she was crying with tears when the military intervened to ask him to leave.

Jonathan Rugman:

So families were split over this.

Dina Wahba:

Not really, no. Over the first one, the elections?

Jonathan Rugman:

You said your mother was in tears over Morsi being –

Dina Wahba:

She was happy – tears of joy.

Jonathan Rugman:

Things have reached a pretty pass when protesters in Tahrir Square are carrying pictures of General Sisi and chanting his name. What a change on a year ago when they were trying to get the army out of politics.

Dina Wahba:

I don't think we can box all the people in Tahrir Square, all the people in all the other squares in the governorates into one general segment of people who want exactly the same thing. Yes, there was one thing, which is the ousting of Morsi, which is early presidential elections. This is something that we all agreed on. But there were other factions who wanted different things and they saw the next transition period differently. Some of them wanted Sisi, some of them just wanted Sisi to intervene in order to save the situation. Some of them resorted to him as a strategic last resort, that there is nothing else to do about this, because they wouldn't cooperate, they wouldn't work with us, they wouldn't agree to have early –

Jonathan Rugman:

To be fair, President Morsi was fighting a battle he couldn't win, because the army gave him an ultimatum to reach a compromise with the opposition, but the opposition refused to talk to him. So he could never win that battle.

Dina Wahba:

I don't know about the claim of the opposition didn't – they always have this claim that the opposition doesn't want to talk. I know for a fact that this is not

true. Everyone has been trying very hard to strike a deal with them and they just wouldn't. They just went on and they wouldn't listen to anyone. They really thought that they had the streets. They really thought that they are the majority and they just wouldn't compromise.

Jonathan Rugman:

Can I just ask you what somebody from a mature democracy like this one might ask, which is: why couldn't you give the man another three years? Why couldn't you let him go to the end of his term?

Dina Wahba:

I have to say that at the beginning I felt like we should give him the chance. We should give him three years. We should go by the democratic process, because I am so implicated in this idea of formal Western democracy that I just couldn't imagine any other way. But when I went down on the streets on 30 June, I was taken away by the sheer number of people on the streets all wanting one thing. At that point, I felt, who am I to think that I know better than all those people how their lives should be ruled?

Jonathan Rugman:

Can I at that point turn to Maha, and ask you about the Muslim Brotherhood. I visited their big protest in Rabaa, in Nasr City, several times. There were tens of thousands of people but actually nothing like as many people as in Tahrir and Alexandria and other places. The argument that you would put to them would be that a kind of revolutionary street democracy, sort of measured by aerial photographs taken by the army – which the army very deliberately published – had trumped the ballot box. That Egypt is in such a position in its development that, as I said at the beginning, the street is where Egypt is, and that the Brotherhood should accept that they had failed. That is what you would hear from opposing voices.

Maha Azzam:

My starting point would be that Egypt had decided on a course of democratization and that there is a process involved in that, and that process is one that entitles everyone to have their rights defended and protected. And that going outside that process and overturning the democratic process

through a military coup, even though it had huge numbers of protesters outside backing it, means that it charts a path for Egypt and other countries that are starting off with a democratic process as a means to advance and to develop and to create stability for their countries – it charts a very dangerous path, because it means that the opposite can happen too. I put it to you, and it's something that I think about, is if we'd had the reverse – if we'd had an elected liberal-secular government in power and not Morsi, and we had huge numbers on the streets that were Islamists, Salafis and Brotherhood, and we had a military coup in their name, I expect that the reaction among many in the West would have been quite different. We would have been more likely to call it a coup. We would have been much more disturbed that we were going to have Islamists in power. In a sense, we would have said they'd rejected the democratic process.

So I think the issue here is really to what extent we believe that Egypt should abide by a democratic process, its institutions and parliamentary elections and referendums and so on. So it's not that the numbers may have shifted, and they certainly may have shifted under Morsi – the signs are they did and his popularity waned. The issue is that there was a constant reluctance to turn to the ballot box. There were constant blocks from the judiciary and others to delay the parliamentary elections. One thing that the Muslim Brotherhood constantly said is: let's go to parliamentary elections. One time after the other, the issue of the electoral law needing reform, it went back to the judiciary. So what you had in Egypt – and you still have, and this is the worrying point – is you have institutions, both security, in terms of the Ministry of Interior, the police, the judiciary, the military – very much part of an old order, not that only of Mubarak but one that lasted 60 years. A system that is ultimately dictatorial versus, yes, people power on the streets, but ultimately those institutions are reluctant or are refusing to reform. That is the main challenge that Morsi faced during that year.

Jonathan Rugman:

Can I just go back to your point about this being dangerous? I would just query how dangerous it is. First of all, the Muslim Brotherhood protest was relatively small in Cairo and it still is. The second point is that in terms of pure British tourist and commercial interests, the fear must be that a radicalization will occur. People driven out of democratic politics will find targets, Western targets, and that cycle will begin. The counter-argument is that if the country is continually on the skids and everybody is getting poorer under President Morsi, that radicalization was going to happen anyway.

Maha Azzam:

I think there are two points here. I think there's an element whereby we say we either believe that – whether it's Egypt or other countries – people who have decided on a democratic path can uphold those institutions. It's not just about our interests and radicalization. To say that the numbers of the Muslim Brotherhood are contained and small in Raba is also open to question, because they are contained. It's almost like containing people in Tahrir in the early days during the Mubarak –

Jonathan Rugman:

They were containing themselves, to be fair.

Maha Azzam:

No, but at the same time they are containing themselves because there are arbitrary arrests, there were killings. The leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood is being rounded up. As we speak, probably the full weight of the security forces is coming down on Muslim Brotherhood supporters. So I think that is a key point. What you have is – you will call it a minority today but you're talking about a very substantial part of society that is going to be repressed again, as it has been on and off for 80 years. It's whether, again, the United Kingdom and the United States, when they stood up and said 'we support the Arab Spring and we support democratization', are then willing to be swayed in one direction. Because yes, there is people power on the street but it's being implemented through a military coup.

That military, yes, as we hear over and over again, wants to hand over government to the people and doesn't want to be at the forefront of politics. But we know that –

Jonathan Rugman:

So you're saying a country that couldn't sign off on a \$4.6 billion IMF loan, where there were petrol queues, electricity shortages, where Morsi didn't command respect among his own ministers – that government should have been allowed to continue.

Maha Azzam:

No, I'm saying that government faced the challenges of a system that was still intact, and that's why it faced those challenges. What you have now is a return of that old system and that's why it's going to be able to do business again, because you're going to have vested interests – corrupt ministers and corrupt business interests – coming back. Those are the ones that resisted Morsi, and institutions and a bureaucracy that did not want any reformist president. They didn't want an Islamist president reforming them because of the ideological factor as well, but it wouldn't have wanted even a liberal or leftist president coming in to reform them and change the pattern of politics and hold people accountable. I think that's the challenge that Egypt still faces. You may have a change to an elected president today, with the backing of the military – yes, in the background, but very much in control of the political agenda. You have the institutions of the state and old business interests coming in and, in a sense, reaping the rewards of the new investments coming in from the Gulf and maybe the IMF loan coming forth.

Things will seem better again for an elite and somewhat better for the majority because there's greater security and a return to more tourism. But ultimately, have you had a revolution? In a sense, you haven't really reformed the institutions of the state and you haven't delivered – not to the Islamists alone but to the revolutionaries who came out on 25 January.

Jonathan Rugman:

Can I finish by asking you about the reintegration of the Muslim Brotherhood? When I went to see President Mansour, he told me that the Brotherhood were a part of the fabric of Egyptian society, they must have a place – quite rich coming from him, the day after the president had been put under house arrest. But clearly this week there's going to be no integration. More than 50 of their followers have been shot dead. But can you see a situation in which the Muslim Brotherhood can be persuaded to take part in elections by February?

Maha Azzam:

I think the Muslim Brotherhood are committed to democratic politics. They are committed to a civil society. But I can't see at this particular point, with, as you say, protesters and supporters killed, with the rounding up of their leaders and so on, and the fact that they felt they played by the rules of the game that were disrupted not because of them but because of a military coup – because

of, yes, the sheer numbers on the streets but ultimately because of a military coup – that basically they're acquiescing to the military engaging in politics again and setting the agenda. I think that in some ways the showdown eventually in Egypt will be not just between the Brotherhood and the military but between Egyptians and the place of the military in politics.

Jonathan Rugman:

On that point, let me just move to Jane. Can you, for those of us in the audience who are concerned about the economic stability and investment in Egypt – I note that the petrol queues have shortened dramatically, which has led many to think that they were deliberately lengthened in order to create a situation of crisis for the army to intervene. But can you see any good winds blowing from what has happened, economically, for Egypt?

Jane Kinninmont:

The main economic boost that's likely to result is going to come from the Gulf. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have announced \$8 billion in aid. Gulf aid is sometimes slow to materialize but both those countries have a major interest in supporting what's happened. The UAE foreign minister was, I believe, the first foreign official to congratulate Egypt on what had happened. It's fascinating really that you have two countries which themselves ban all forms of street protests congratulating Egypt on this, but it reflects their very deep concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood's influence in their own countries. The UAE had just arrested a number of Egyptians that it accused of plotting against it and had also sentenced some tens of Emirati dissidents accused of belonging to a local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. They have an interest in stabilizing Egypt's economy.

But of course aid doesn't solve the underlying problems. One of the key slogans in the first revolution was 'bread, dignity and social justice'. This grievances around economic inequality, corruption, economic injustice, a creaking education system, poor healthcare – those grievances have existed for many years. They are not easily going to go away.

I fear that the new government, which includes some renowned economists – Hazem El-Beblawi, Ziad Bahaa El-Din and so forth – may inherit quite inflated expectations. Morsi was heavily criticized for mismanaging the economy but in fact a lot of the economic problems, such as the drop in income from investment, the fall in tourism and the consequent plummeting of Egypt's

foreign reserves – these are symptoms of a lack of confidence which fundamentally stems from political uncertainty. That international perception of political uncertainty is still there. It may have been made worse by what's happened in recent weeks. Many people aren't going to be booking themselves winter holidays to go from Europe to Egypt. The underlying policy problems – the fuel subsidy problems, the exploding public sector wage bill – are going to be extremely difficult for a short-term transitional government to seriously address.

Jonathan Rugman:

Can you explain a little bit more about why you think the Saudis and the Kuwaitis have taken the path they've taken, and the Qataris, having backed President Morsi quite heavily, to the tune of many billions – do the Qataris back whoever is in town and then change horses accordingly?

Jane Kinninmont:

Qatar itself is undergoing quite a dramatic transition because of the abdication of the emir and the installation of one of his sons, who is now the youngest ruler anywhere in the Middle East – 33 years old. Already we were seeing signs that he, whether through personal choice or perhaps through regional and Western pressure, was moving away from Qatar's perceived position of really siding strongly with Islamists. So you've seen a decision to cede a lot of the management of the Syrian opposition to Saudi Arabia. You've seen news a couple of days ago that the Taliban would be closing, if perhaps temporarily, their new office in Doha. You've seen him quickly join the UAE in congratulating Egypt, whereas Turkey – which used to be very similar to Qatar – has been adamant that this is a coup. Given that Qatar already seems to want to recalibrate, this is probably an opportunity for it to say: we're going to stick with the rest of the Gulf, we're going to have a common GCC policy towards Egypt and continue to back this new government.

Jonathan Rugman:

Presumably the Turkish position, which as you say has been very adamant, is on the basis that the Turks exemplify political Islam and some accommodation with an avowedly secular republic. But there is no overlap with Egypt, is there really? The Brotherhood and the AKP are very different,

and trying to pretend that there is a sort of Atatürk-ist compromise to be met in Egypt is quite hard to argue.

Jane Kinninmont:

They're certainly very different countries but I think the Turkish reading is partly based on their own experiences. Erdoğan has direct experiences of military coups himself and is very sensitive to that. He was also clearly very conspiratorial, blaming all sorts of foreign agents for the protests that took place against him. If anything, I think this will harden his resolve to take a tough line against his own protesters, because he will be more afraid of those sorts of supported conspiracies.

Jonathan Rugman:

Can I ask perhaps everyone on the panel, just to finish – this debate about whether it's a revolution or a coup, it is important. Policy decisions stem from it; as we know, the Americans are still delivering fighter jets because they have not called this a military coup. Do you call it a military coup?

Jane Kinninmont:

Yes. I've looked up many academic definitions of coups since this happened. This fits every definition that I can find, because the military deposed the elected president and also suspended the constitution. Those who say it's not a coup say, firstly, that it's popular, and secondly, that the military handed power over to a civilian government. But that's actually been seen before in many cases. That doesn't change the definition of a coup, however much people would like it to. The US decision to avoid the word coup is clearly political. They don't want to cut off aid to the Egyptian military. They need that leverage – it's important for maintaining the peace treaty with Israel – and also, importantly, that \$1.2 billion in military aid mainly goes to buying American-made arms. American jobs depend on it. The defence industry in the US will be lobbying Congress to say: keep this going, we need it for our economy.

Jonathan Rugman:

So it's important that it's not a military coup.

Jane Kinninmont:

But that's a political decision.

Jonathan Rugman:

Dina, you've defended what's happened, you were part of Tahrir Square. But do you ever feel a little bit used by your armed forces, who may have been planning this for some time?

Dina Wahba:

I just have to comment about the question that you asked about would you say that this is a coup. I just find our obsession with definition very interesting. Since the very beginning of the revolution, I stopped looking for textbook definitions for anything that the Egyptian people are doing.

I don't know what you mean by 'used by the armed forces'. So far everyone –

Jonathan Rugman:

You may come to regret what you wished for.

Dina Wahba:

Everyone has a crystal ball that is looking into the future and seeing horrible things. So far there are indicators that we are going into a transition period with a roadmap. Like you said, someone asked me, do you trust the military? I said: I trust the people. Just exactly like you said. If the military decided to stay in, if they don't deliver and if this turns into another dictatorship, I have no doubt whatsoever that the Egyptians can take down as many dictatorships as will come.

Jonathan Rugman:

Maha, just to finish: there's a lot of hostility to the use of the word 'coup'. It's become quite dangerous for journalists in Tahrir Square for a new reason, which is some of us have called it a coup and protesters don't like it. What do you call it?

Maha Azzam:

I call it a coup. I think the military intervention in Egyptian politics is not new. They intervened in 1952. They were the backbone of three dictatorships. They've intervened again, always in the name of the people. They intervened in the name of the people in 1952 and they've intervened again today in the name of the people – part of the people – to undermine a democratic process. I'm –

Jonathan Rugman:

You're essentially saying that Dina here has been had.

Maha Azzam:

No, Dina has not been had. Dina has real aspirations, and aspirations that I share and actually overlap with the aspirations of even Muslim Brotherhood supporters. Because the people who stood in Tahrir – and I was with them too on 25 January, and I stood against the army on 30 September as well, I think it was 2011 – were people who didn't want the military at the forefront of politics. This is an alliance of sorts between a number of people: people who really want the revolution to happen, who want reform; people who are part of the old regime and a lot of the interests there; and the old state that just does not – not the wealthy in the old state but the bureaucrats, the police force and so on – that don't want to give up their power and don't want to see a change of regime. They have all coalesced and they are willing to let the army come in and institute order. That's what's happening now.

The army is going to still pursue its political agenda. It doesn't like the Brotherhood; it never did. It was worried about the Brotherhood's stance over regional politics and so on. So it has interfered at this particular stage to preserve its interests – its economic interests above all else, although they tried to reach some kind of *modus vivendi* with Morsi, and their position within the constitution was good. That's going to be maintained; I can't see that changing.

That's why I say that further down the line, there is going to be a recurring friction between military and civil, whether through people who are more secular inclined or more Islamist – it doesn't matter. The point is that that friction is going to continue, as it did in Turkey, over the next decade or so.