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THREE PERSPECTIVES ON EGYPT

We are pleased to present three diverse perspectives on the historic events in Egypt. What happened – a coup, a corrective revolution, or something else? What's ahead for Egypt? And what should the US do? This essay by Ann M. Lesch is the first in the series. For the other essays by Samuel Tadros and Raymond Stock, please visit:

<http://www.fpri.org/featured/three-perspectives-egypt>.

In addition, we offer links to related essays published by FPRI Trustees Ahmed Charai (“Egypt and North Africa’s Religious Tumult,” *The National Interest*, July 9, 2013) and Dov Zakheim (“The People’s Coup,” *Shadow Government*, July 6, 2013):

<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/egypt-north-africas-religious-tumult-8702>

http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/07/06/the_peoples_coup

A SECOND, CORRECTIVE REVOLUTION?

By Ann M. Lesch



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Twenty-nine months ago Egyptians rose up against the corrupt, autocratic and aging dictator Hosni Mubarak. They poured into the streets from crowded working class districts and from upscale neighborhoods, demanding *karama* (dignity) and *hurriyah* (freedom), and held fast to the city squares throughout eighteen tumultuous days. They had had enough of military/security rule, imposed through a coup in 1952. They had had enough of the crony capitalism encouraged by the president, his wife and his sons, and were appalled by the ever-deepening poverty, the lack of jobs for young people, farmers and workers, and the deterioration in public housing, education, health, and social welfare.¹ Rigged elections and police repression held the system in place, and the ruling clique assumed the system would continue once Gamal Mubarak would succeed his father in pseudo-elections in 2011.

Protests galvanized by the *Kefaya* (Enough!) movement, professional syndicates, and workers had not shaken the security-state, although they demonstrated the deepening disaffection. Some two million workers participated in organized protests at more than 3,000 factories or in front of the parliament in the six years leading up to the revolution. By the summer of 2010, workers not only chanted for fair wages and benefits but also shouted “down with Mubarak.” Just as workers broke their ‘barrier of fear’, the people of all ages who held vigils against police brutality in the wake of the murder of youthful Khaled Said on June 6, 2010, declared that they would no longer be

¹ See Ann Lesch, “Egypt’s Spring: Causes of the Revolution,” *Middle East Policy*, 18:3 (Fall 2011), 35-48.

humiliated: “Tomorrow the revolution will come.”² Initiating the revolution on January 25 – the Police Day holiday – resonated among the public.

Protesters thought that Mubarak’s ouster on February 11 was enough to start the process of fundamental political change. Here, they miscalculated. There was relief that the armed forces had removed the president, despite concern that the armed forces had their own reasons to remove the president. Would the armed forces remain in control? Go back to the barracks? Retain their separate economic empire? After all, General Mohamed Tantawi, head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), had been Mubarak’s aide for twenty years and had benefited from the armed forces’ independent economy.

At first, there were positive signs. SCAF appointed a new prime minister, who was essentially untainted by the Mubarak years and who stressed that his legitimacy came from the people. SCAF also organized processes to hold elections for the two houses of parliament and then the president and to rewrite the constitution, and claimed that it would relinquish power and cancel the State of Emergency in six months. The arrest and trial of the Mubaraks and other regime stalwarts seemed to indicate that they would be held responsible for their corruption and repression.

Soon, SCAF showed another face. The armed forces began to suppress protests in Tahrir square on February 25 (only two weeks after removing Mubarak), in all subjecting 12,000 civilians to judgment before military courts in the seventeen months (not the promised six months) that it wielded direct power. Soldiers killed peaceful Christian demonstrators on October 9, 2011, and unleashed violent attacks on protesters in November and December – protests sparked by SCAF’s insistence on maintain its privileged status, with a secret budget and ultimate control over not only the military sector but the political processes. In June 2012, when presidential elections were nearly complete, SCAF utilized a convenient court order to close the people’s assembly and then seize supreme power, moves designed to make the newly elected president subject to its authority.

Another concern related to the security sector. Although the police had fled during the eighteen days of the revolution, they remained unreformed. Their thirst for vengeance became clear on February 1, 2012, when they unleashed *baltaguis* (paid thugs) to attack soccer fans in the Port Said stadium – shocking the country by killing 74 young men and triggering weeks of outraged protests.

Those who had initiated and sustained the revolution were sidelined. The Revolution Continues party gained only 1.6 percent of the seats in the People’s Assembly (elected in late 2011) as against fourteen percent won by liberal/left parties and a whopping seventy percent won by the Muslim Brotherhood (45 percent) and the newly emergent Salafi bloc (25 percent). Then, when several liberal/left parties boycotted the elections to the upper house, in which only seven percent of the electorate voted, the two Islamist blocs captured 83 percent of the seats. The liberal/left similarly miscalculated in Spring 2012, when their eleven presidential candidates fragmented the vote – leaving the two most polarizing candidates in the run-off: the Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi and the Mubarak regime’s Ahmad Shafiq. Only a third of Morsi’s 13.2 million votes came from Brotherhood adherents who had backed him in the first round; most of his votes came from people who feared the return of Mubarak’s “deep state” and/or believed Morsi’s promise to be president of all Egyptians.

In line with that pledge, Morsi initially appointed a technocratic cabinet. However, the liberal/left and revolutionaries became increasingly disaffected, concerned that the dominant discourse and the drafts of the constitution led Egypt down the road to a Shari’a-based state under a centralized presidential system. Then, on November 22, 2012, Morsi issued a startling decree: He took all power into his hands, fired the prosecutor-general, made the president immune from judicial oversight, and immunized the upper house of parliament and the constituent assembly from dissolution by court order. By asserting dictatorial powers, Morsi abruptly canceled his legitimacy as the first civilian elected president in Egypt’s history.

He then rammed a divisive constitution through the constituent assembly, endorsed by a referendum in which only thirty percent of the electorate voted; decreed a restrictive labor law; and empowered the extremist upper house to legislate on hot-button issues such as NGOs, the right to protest, and the judiciary. Each time he changed ministers, he added members of the Brotherhood, giving them control over influential local government and

² *Al Masry Al Youm*, July 18, 2010.

economic portfolios. He also appointed an increasing number of Brothers as governors. As late as June – while protests mounted against Brotherhood rule – he made more Brothers governors and insulted the residents of Luxor by appointing a member of the Gama'a Islamiyya as their governor.³ Large numbers of people immediately attacked Brotherhood offices and blocked the new governors from reaching their offices. In his June 26 speech, instead of being conciliatory, he lashed out at his “enemies” in the media, judiciary, interior ministry, and the public at large.⁴

One can make a long list of other important divisive actions: not bringing to trial those who had killed protesters during and after the revolution or even beginning to reform the police and security organs; not decisively ending military trials and detention; increasing sectarian strife by remaining silent at – and even encouraging – incitement against Christians⁵ and Shi'a⁶ and using religious terminology to label critics unbelievers and infidels. In late May, the new Minister of Culture even launched a culture-war against the music, dance and art communities, heightening fears that the Brotherhood sought to remake Egypt in its own narrow image.

And there was the chaotic approach to the economy. The Brotherhood's claim to have a detailed Renaissance (*nahda*) plan proved false. And the president's promise to solve security, fuel, traffic, and garbage problems in his first hundred days proved a cruel joke. Instead, the government floundered, abruptly decreeing – and rescinding – rules about taxes, prices, store-opening-hours, and stock market operations; racking up huge long-term debts to foreign governments (\$7.5 billion in grants and low-interest loans from Qatar, alone) while failing to develop a coherent policy toward the International Monetary Fund; responding in belligerent confusion to Ethiopia's construction of a dam on the Nile; and allowing the disorganized devaluation of the Egyptian pound, which increased prices of basic commodities and exacerbated fuel shortages. These policies triggered long, angry lines at gas stations, hampered farmers' harvesting and transport of crops, caused rolling blackouts, and made the government's bill for subsidies completely unsustainable. Granted, any government would have confronted serious economic problems, but this government's responses were particularly inept.

For the military, the last straw was the “rally packed with hardline Islamists [on June 15] calling for holy war in Syria,”⁷ during which clerics denounced as infidels both Shi'i fighting for the Syrian regime and the Islamists' political opponents within Egypt. By encouraging Egyptians to fight in Syria, Morsi seemed eager to create a new generation of jihadists – reminiscent of the 1980s when Arab youth fought the Russians in Afghanistan.

In essence, Morsi was elected democratically but failed to rule democratically. His power grabs, dehumanizing of critics, and abysmal economic policies alienated a wide swath of Egyptians. A Zogby poll in May captured the popular anger. Nearly three quarters of the respondents lacked confidence in the presidency, believed that the Brotherhood was not capable of administering the state, and were not satisfied with the government's performance across key indicators: rights and freedoms, economic opportunity, safety and order, and services for health and education. Only a quarter believed that the government could lead Egypt out of its economic crisis. A whopping 71 percent feared that the Brotherhood intended to ‘Islamize’ and control the state⁸ and resented being vilified as *kufar* (infidels) when they objected to government policies.⁹

No one should have been surprised that millions of Egyptians signed the *tamarod* (rebel) petition that called for immediate presidential elections or that a third of the adult population took to the streets at the end of June, shouting “we are revolutionaries, not infidels”¹⁰ and expressing their determination to restore the Jan25 revolution to its initial goals. They rejected Morsi's claim that his electoral legitimacy trumped all else, and were insulted by

³ Gama'a Islamiyya assassinated President Anwar Sadat in 1981 and had killed many Egyptians and tourists in the early 1990s, culminating in the attack on Queen Hatshepsut's tomb near Luxor in November 1997 that killed 62 Egyptians and foreign tourists.

⁴ Translation of his speech on June 26, 2013, on Atlantic Council website: www.acus.org

⁵ Although he participated in – and even led – weekly Friday prayers, the president never visited a church and did not attend the enthronement of the new Coptic pope Tawadros II on November 18, 2012.

⁶ This culminated in the lynching of four Shi'a in a village near Cairo on June 23, 2013.

⁷ Reuters, July 3, 2013, reprinted in *Ahram Online*.

⁸ *After Tahrir: Egyptians Assess Their Government, Their Institutions, and Their Future*, Zogby Research Services, June 2013, 11, 14, 20.

⁹ Mariz Tadros, “Missing the pulse of Egypt's citizens?” Institute of Development Studies blog, July 4, 2013.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

his Mubarak-like posture: *ana aw al-fawda* (“It’s me or chaos”).¹¹ That the Brotherhood leaders thought that June 30 would be a “normal day” and that the armed forces would remain by the president’s side¹² displayed how out of touch they were with reality.

As protests swelled, the armed forces mounted a soft-coup on July 3, claiming to obey the will of the people. Tamarod leaders asserted that they would make sure that the military would follow its proclaimed road-map, leading the country back to democracy. But they conceded: “just because the military council sided with us and made promises doesn’t mean that we believe or trust them completely.”¹³ Indeed, in the week following the removal and arrest of Morsi, fundamental questions remain.

The military is necessarily an authoritarian structure, focused on national security. In 2011-2012, SCAF ruled by hard-power. Just because it has quickly appointed an interim president, who quickly issued a constitutional declaration, does not guarantee that it will return to the barracks. Indeed, its ability to crush any armed opposition launched by the now-furious Islamists will be essential in order for the corrective revolution to succeed. But the use of force can backfire politically, as the recent violence at the Republican Guard complex proved.

Both revolutionaries and Islamists accuse the judiciary of politicizing court rulings to exonerate Mubarak-regime officials and security personnel. Now, the head of the high constitutional court is the interim president, with (temporarily) absolute executive and legislative powers under the constitutional decree issued on July 8.¹⁴ Moreover, the 2012 constitution will be revised by a committee composed of six judges and four constitutional law professors. While interim president Adly Mansour is likely to try to be measured in his actions, the judiciary is now politicized at the highest level.

The prime minister is clearly subordinate to the president for the interim period, as he and the cabinet serve at the will of the president. It remains (on July 9) unclear as to whether the cabinet will be purely technocratic or led by a politician. A technocrat could tackle critical economic problems but lack the clout to make politically difficult decisions. A politician could polarize political life even more, particularly if he is strongly identified with the ‘victorious’ political camp.

How the Brotherhood is handled will be crucial. The swift arrest of Morsi and nearly all the Brotherhood leaders and the closure of Islamist television stations were not auspicious. The Brotherhood can galvanize support by pointing out that the Brotherhood gained strong support in parliamentary and presidential elections and that Morsi had the right to complete his four-year term as president. Moreover, as a movement that was underground for decades, the soft-coup strengthened “their already powerful narrative of persecution [and] repression.”¹⁵ Many Islamists, already skeptical of political parties and elections, may abandon the democratic route. Indeed, Brotherhood Guide Mohamed Badi’s cry at a huge rally on July 5 that “God make Morsi victorious... We are his soldiers, we defend him with our lives”¹⁶ triggered violent attacks on their opponents throughout the country over several days, including virulent rhetoric against and attacks on Christians. Most seriously, jihadist groups in Sinai declared all-out war on the state and immediately attacked an airport, police posts and the oil pipeline. Without steps to bring the Brotherhood back into the political system, there is a risk of a return to the violence of the 1980s and 1990s, which empowered the deep state against the Jihadists. In that era, the Brotherhood eschewed violence, but today some of its leaders are at the fore-front calling for revenge.

¹¹ Reem Abou-El-Fadl, “Three Days of History,” *Jadaliyya*, July 3, 2013.

¹² Khalil Al-Anani, “What would the fall of Morsi mean to the Islamists?” *Ahram Online*, July 3, 2013, quotes Brotherhood Secretary General Mahmoud Hussein. Also Bel Trew, *Ahram Online*, June 30, 2013, “Brotherhood under siege: Question and Answer with Freedom and Justice Party advisor Gehad El-Haddad”. Haddad claimed that those on the street were a mixture of Mubarak-regime supporters, people fed up with the opposition parties, people who sought personal political gain, and citizens disappointed in the technocratic government’s performance. He debunked “the bunch of kids” who allegedly obtained 22 million signatures on the Tamarod petition, asserted that the Islamic stream represented 70 per cent of the people, and claimed that the Brotherhood’s only rival was the Nour Party.

¹³ Co-founder Ahmed Abdu’s comments to *The Los Angeles Times*, in Edmund Sanders, “After Mohamed Morsi, future of Egypt’s Rebel movement is uncertain,” July 5, 2013.

¹⁴ Bassem Sabry, “First Look at Egypt’s Constitutional Declaration,” *Al-Monitor*, July 8, 2013.

¹⁵ Shadi Hamid, “Demoting Democracy in Egypt”, *The New York Times*, July 4, 2013.

¹⁶ “Many dead, injured in Egypt clashes,” Reuters, July 6, 2013.

Creating an inclusive political order will be very difficult. Over the past two years, it was the Islamists who saw themselves as the majority that had the right to impose their beliefs on the country. Now, their opponents could be tempted to gloat over their victory. Thus, even though Mohamed ElBaradei calls for “reconciliation and an inclusive approach,” he also justifies the arrests of Brotherhood leaders and closure of TV networks as necessary precautions.¹⁷ Carefully crafted policies need to acknowledge the weight of Islamist trends within a restored democratic structure. Liberals also need to contain the rivalries that have weakened their effectiveness and work at the grassroots level to build enduring political structures.

Will the enormous outpouring on the streets in the past weeks lead to the second revolution – the revolution that will correct the failings that occurred after the Jan25 revolution and undo the damage done by the Brotherhood’s rule? Will the liberal politicians prove capable of pulling Egypt out of its multiple crises? Will the new regime heal the wounds of the past two years or exacerbate the polarization? Will the youth who galvanized the *tamarod* campaign gain a significant role, or be sidelined? At the moment, people are anxious and uncertain, but they will not forget or relinquish the Jan25 revolution’s call for dignity and freedom. Their new-found voice will be crucial in propelling Egypt forward in the coming months and years.

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¹⁷ Interview with David D. Kirkpatrick, “Prominent Egyptian Liberal Says He Sought West’s Support for Uprising,” *The New York Times*, July 4, 2013.