




Egypt: on the road to disaster

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The worst forecasts are unfolding in Egypt. One year of the Muslim Brotherhood's incompetent and sectarian governance polarised Egyptian society. For the past month and a half, the return to a regime dominated by the military has set Egyptians violently at odds with one another. Uniformed and bearded men now clash on the country's streets on the basis of hatred, exclusion, cynicism and death. While many average Egyptians justify and applaud the actions of the army and the police, others consider themselves to be victims of a great injustice and cry out for revenge and martyrdom. This is how armed civil conflicts begin.



The sit-ins of the supporters of the deposed President Morsi constituted a serious threat to public order. The problem could have been resolved through political negotiation, which EU mediation advocated until the end. The army, however, along with some 'liberals' thought they could crush the Muslim Brotherhood and eradicate them as a political force by the use of force. In their cynicism, Islamist leaders needed to increase their list of martyrs; in their arrogance, Egypt's generals are providing them with just that. The collective unreason and dehumanisation of the enemy seem to be the only points in common between the factions that are dragging Egypt towards social fracture, political instability and economic ruin.

Abandoning institutionalised politics and substituting it for machine guns, flaming torches and explosive belts is disastrous not only for Egypt; it also gives rise to nefarious ramifications in the entire Middle East and on both shores of the Mediterranean. Massive extrajudicial executions –widely distributed on social networks– in the name of the fight against 'terrorism' is fostering a new generation of radicals that will see that resorting to terrorist methods is justified. The prophecy will be self-fulfilled, although the return of a police state will not guarantee that instability will not lead to chaos, or even, lawlessness.

The Egyptian economy is in a critical state and is solely maintained thanks to Gulf-State petrodollars (mainly from Saudi Arabia). Today's socioeconomic crisis is even more serious than when Mubarak was dislodged in February of 2011. The current head of the Egyptian army, general Sisi, will attempt to present himself as the 'saviour of the country', but in a context of increasing repression and instability he will find it very difficult to be the 'saviour of the economy'. Even if the military are able to neutralise the Islamists, which is highly unlikely, the social upheaval on the streets will only continue. In the absence of democratic mechanisms to channel that frustration and search for solutions, the only paths available are the old formulas of repression, information manipulation and 'conspiracy-paranoid' nationalism.



What is now occurring in Egypt will unavoidably have repercussions beyond its borders. It would be a grave mistake to think that the bloody trial of strength between the military and the Islamists is an internal affair, but it would be equally wrong to expect that the new Egyptian regime will know how to manage the country's domestic situation. A new wave of radicalisation in Egypt would be far less predictable now than in the 80s and 90s. The new communication technologies have deprived the Egyptian state of the information monopoly it used to have then; neither are Egypt's borders –especially with Libya– under control as they once were. And, more importantly, the current regional context is far more uncertain and complex than it was. Furthermore, jihadism has acquired the dimensions of a global movement, which was not the case in previous decades.

With an Obama Administration that does not know or is unable to contribute to stability in the Middle East, it is time for the countries of the EU to understand that their security and wellbeing are at stake in the southern Mediterranean. Egypt's military eradicators and religious fanatics are playing with a fire that might well set the entire region ablaze. It is time for the EU to act determinately today with the Egyptian authorities in order not to have to pay a higher price tomorrow.

Time will tell if the currently silent majority of Egyptians are willing to abandon their demands for 'dignity, liberty and social justice' with which they overthrew Mubarak, and if they will accept a return to an authoritarian regime that exerts absolute power in the fight against 'terrorism' and, in the process, against any form of political opposition.

(Originally published in **El Mundo** on 18 August 2013).