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Business as Usual: Egyptian Military Kingmakers

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"Revolutionary coup", "democratic coup", "convenient coup", "salutary coup", "power change", "popular impeachment", "second revolutionary wave", "corrective revolution", "revocation", and so forth are these ingenious labels invented and used by analysts and scholars to justify the military coup on the July 3rd that ousted the democratically elected President Mohammed Morsi. Only those who are naïve and intellectually dishonest would refuse to call things by their names. It is a coup as it is taught in the textbooks regardless of the name used to legitimize the unfolding regime change in Egypt. Unsurprisingly, Saudi Arabia which sheltered Idi Amin Dada of Uganda and gave refuge to the fallen dictator of Tunisia moved quickly in warmly congratulating the Egyptian Army for its "achievement". In a message sent to the newly appointed interim President Adly Mansour, King Abdullah Al Saud "strongly shakes hands with all the men of the Armed Forces" for "saving Egypt at this critical moment". This reaction is in perfect line with the official position of the kingdom towards the Arab popular uprisings seen by the rulers of this country as no more than "Arab trouble", according to Prince Turki al-Faisal.

No matter which label is used to convince internal and external observers of the legitimacy of the emerging new political configuration, Egyptian diplomacy obviously failed to dupe the African Union (AU) about the usefulness of

this dangerous step. The AU's decision to suspend Egypt's membership, after what it called an "unconstitutional" removal of the Egyptian President, is much in line with the same sanctions that Mali experienced, more than one year ago, in the aftermath of Captain Sanogo's coup. Egypt's suspension from the AU came at a bad time and reaches beyond political consequences. Now more than ever, Cairo needs support from the African arena in order to negotiate its water rights with Ethiopia over the Nile. Moreover, once the Army started arbitrarily arresting citizens without due process, holding the fallen President in an unknown location, and shutting down all pro-Muslim brotherhood media, it is likely that the *mukhabarat* state playbook – the unwritten code of conduct of Arab securitocracies – surfaced. The goal was not so much to allow autocrats to hang on to power, but mainly to overthrow a legitimate government by manipulating the peoples' discontent and to alienate the political constituencies of one of the major political actors in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

Remarkably in the interlude between June 30th and July 3rd, Egypt witnessed a pre-planned classic *coup d'état* seeking to overthrow Morsi's government even before the Egyptian Minister of Defense, General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, delivered his ultimatum on July 2nd. Among the pre-emptive actions taken to secure the coup were the



simultaneous resignations of more than five Ministers and several advisers. This move sought to isolate the President from the main state institutions and to create a constitutional vacuum paving the way for the Army's intervention, all of which was *déjà vu*. A parallel could be drawn with the beginning of President Sadat's era, in which pro Nasser ardent partisans, a.k.a. the "centers of power", were purged from the government and the security apparatuses for initiating a collective resignation designed to provoke the constitutional collapse of Sadat's regime. The major exception at that time was that the media, a decisive weapon in leveraging, directing and shaping the Egyptian public opinion through powerful state propaganda, was controlled by Nasser's successor; and, the coup was aborted.

The main innovation generated by this undisputable coup on July 3rd is that it was staged and executed by military decree. It was approved by the opposition, the religious state clerics, the bureaucracy within the "deep state", the remnants cronies of the Mubarak regime and the tabloid-style media outlets who subjectively and unprofessionally reported on the pre and post coup and sought to demonize and finally discredit the country's leader. This circumstantial coalition seized the golden opportunity of the popular disenchantment expressed by the *Tamarod* (Rebellion) movement against the fallen President to orchestrate this coup. Interestingly, less than 24 hours before the Army started deploying its armored carrier vehicles around the presidential palace, the Egyptian Interior Ministry issued a statement to the police authorizing them to join anti-Morsi protests. The issue waved them from any disciplinary measures for their involvement in the demonstrations organized in Tahrir Square. This deliberate politicization of the police and its call for disobedience will likely have negative ramifications on the future neutrality and professionalism of one of the most problematic security corps in Egypt and on security sector reform as a whole.

There is no doubt that Morsi missed a lot of opportunities since his election. He failed to reach out to the opposition or to build a national consensus around key issues where there was some agreement. However, it was inevitable that a fundamental divide within the Egyptian society between the so-called liberals and Islamists, each of whom hold different views about the direction that Egypt should take, would continue to widen. In other words, what is at stake is the very nature and identity of Egyptian society. This divide was palpable before the presidential election took place in June 2012, and it was accentuated during and after the elections. Morsi won 51.7% of the vote while his rival Shafiq obtained 48.3%. Despite these polarized elections which institutionalized the divide of the Egyptian society, the main criticism raised by Morsi's opponents was that the new President was not representative of the whole Egyptian political landscape as he was not overwhelmingly elected. Kennedy was elected with only a lead of 112,827

votes, or 0.17% of the popular vote and his narrow victory over Nixon did not tarnish Kennedy's legitimacy. Later, the political crisis escalated further as the opposition accused the President's party and other Islamic groups of dominating the process of drafting the constitution. Although the draft was passed with a 63% approval rating, it failed to lessen divisions, build confidence, or provide support for the entire political process. Nevertheless, Morsi's stated the word "legitimacy" approximately 59 times in his latest speech, yet he failed to realize that, although elections are vital, they do not by themselves nurture democracy. Seemingly, Morsi's belonging within a very hierarchical, rigid and often secretive society of the MB has made him less sensitive to the fact that democracy is more about inclusiveness. This means that citizenship is the only factor for inclusion in the nation, and equality of all before the law is the rule rather than the exception. This polarization cannot shade the conspicuous reality that anyone who would be elected to the presidency is going to run a corrupted and broken bureaucratic system that will take a long time to reform and meet international standards of effective governance. The battle of governance is the foundation of legitimacy that should be renegotiated between governors and citizens on a daily basis in terms of the ability of the former to deliver to the latter socioeconomic needs and social justice conducive to peace and stability. The millions of Egyptian citizens who signed the *Tamarod* petition and gathered in Tahrir Square and elsewhere across the country sent a clear message to Morsi and the MB that religion will not be an adequate criterion to tell them how to act personally or politically. Islam is common reference point for the majority of Egyptians but cannot be an instrumental tool for political goals. Rather than religious piety, poor socioeconomic performance sealed the fate of one of the shortest presidencies in the contemporary history of Egypt. Islamist movements in power across the Arab Middle East have to draw major lessons from the Egyptians' failed experience and understand that their future is closely tied not only to their obligation of respecting fundamental rights, but also to performing efficiently for the well being of their citizens as a whole. Democracy is a never-ending endeavor and needs to be constantly renegotiated.

The last thing to come out of the Pandora's Box of this coup is the defective state of the civil-military relations in Egypt. The important question is more about the future of democratization and civilian control of the Army than the demise of political Islam. A military who is seeking to manufacture democracy by siding with the oppositional left wing against the Islamists and playing a square against another square only serves to aggravate the division within Egyptian society. Obviously, such a division will give birth to a threatening democracy, one which will jeopardize the whole political process that emerged in the aftermath of 11 February 2011. Egyptian citizens should acknowledge



that their country's transition towards democracy cannot be achieved unless the relations between a democratically elected civilian authority and military establishment are redefined to prevent the Armed Forces from threatening the security that they are supposed to assure. Indeed, General al-Sisi, mastermind of the coup and active member of Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which failed in managing the post-Mubarak era, is now behind the scene and running the show. He suspended the 2012 constitution but it is unlikely that there will be any change to the new constitution with regards to Article 195. Article 195 states: "The Minister of Defense is the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, appointed from among its officers". The appointment of a uniformed officer as a Minister of Defense is the main obstacle to the principle of "civil supremacy" over the Armed Forces that presume the establishment of mechanisms of effective civilian control over the Egyptian Armed Forces to improve and protect the conditions of an embryonic democratic process. Also, it shows that the military are behaving as a separate entity or state within the state immune from executive, constitutional and democratic control. Rather than being subordinate and accountable to the civilian authority, the coup on the July 3rd clearly attested that political power expressing the sovereign will of the electorate is subdued to the military. It is difficult to leash the praetorian impulse of the Egyptian Army unless its untouchable and an un-audited economic empire owned and operated by the military come under scrutiny. The military controlled around 35 companies and factories that produce cars, TVs and refrigerators. It is also a service provider by managing gas stations and restaurants where conscripts form the ma-

ajority of the force work. With almost a half million soldiers and no war fought since 1973, the military has tended into military business but their share of control over the country's economy is a national secret. Sources estimated that between 15% to 40% of the global Egyptian economy is controlled by the military. It is a gray economic zone that is not subjected to legislative oversight. The Army owns a lot of land across the country and speculates on real estate, which is a lucrative business. The Army enjoys subsidies, tax breaks and other economic privileges and is eager to preserve its economic empire. This deep penetration into the Egyptian economic fabric comes with a price called corruption. According to the *Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index 2013* published by *Transparency International Defence and Security Programme*, Egypt is placed in group F, associated with critical corruption risk. Therefore, those who applauded euphorically and acquiesced to the coup on the July 3rd should actively question the opacity of the military and the lack of democratic control over the Army that will certainly hinder any democratization of the country. It was the wise senator Juventus who raised the question of civil control in the ancient Roman Empire: "*Quid custodit ipsos custodes?*" meaning "Who shall guard the guardians?" In the beginning of the twentieth century and within the context of the World War I, French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau launched his famous warning "War is too important to be left to the generals". This adage is more than relevant within the Arab environment in general and Egyptian in particular as it should be paraphrased that "[politics] is too important to be left to the generals".

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