

Egypt's Coup and the Failures of Political Islam

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The military coup that has overthrown Egypt's first democratically elected president and led to the arrests of Muslim Brotherhood leaders across the country poses an enormous danger not only for Egypt's democratic transition but for the democratic hopes of the entire Arab world as well.

The fact that the coup was undertaken with massive popular support is a sign of the enormous difficulties faced by the Muslim Brotherhood during its first turn in power. President Mohamed Morsi's government struggled to address Egypt's inherited economic and social crises in the face of the enormous public expectations created by the 2011 revolution, whose protagonists sought not only freedom, but also economic development and social justice.

Of course, the Muslim Brotherhood was also a victim of its own mistakes, particularly the failure of Morsi and his government to reach out to the secular opposition, elements of which had contributed to his election. The Morsi government seemed incapable of understanding that a slim electoral majority is not enough, especially nowadays.

Indeed, the breadth of the opposition to Morsi reflects a major global tendency toward the empowerment of the educated and connected middle classes, whose members tend to be suspicious of political parties and demand more direct political participation. In this sense, Egypt's difficulties differ only in scope, not in kind, from those faced by governments in Turkey, Brazil and even Europe.

Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood dominated government from its first days in power. But it also faced opposition from a variety of other, far less democratically minded forces, including holdovers from the regime of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, which continue to wield influence in official institutions. The judiciary, for example, dissolved the first elected legislative assembly. Likewise, the interior minister refused to protect the Muslim Brotherhood's headquarters from repeated attack.

Moreover, some secular intellectuals demonized the Muslim Brotherhood. Like their Algerian counterparts — who in 1992 approved of the Algerian army's suppression of an Islamist electoral victory, leading to years of brutal fighting that left perhaps 500,000 people dead — many Egyptians didn't mind repressing Islamists.

Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood also faced competition from Saudi Arabian-backed Salafists. Indeed, on the night of the coup, these ultra-conservative Islamists appeared together with military leaders and the secular political leader Mohamed ElBaradei to announce Morsi's overthrow.

The prospects for Egypt's democratic transition have become increasingly difficult to predict, but one thing is clear: The military cannot and must not be trusted. During the period after the fall of Mubarak, when the army exercised full power, 12,000 civilians were charged in military courts, virginity tests were imposed on women (particularly those protesting against the military), demonstrators were killed, and myriad human rights violations were committed with impunity.

Of course, it is possible for soldiers to assure a transition to democracy, as they did four decades ago in my homeland, Portugal, following their overthrow of the Salazar and Caetano dictatorship. But the record of military-led transitions elsewhere has been poor. Democracy may be proclaimed to be the coup's *raison d'être*, but the transition stops there. Moreover, in this case the Egyptian army appears far more interested in protecting its enormous economic interests than it is in securing the benefits of a civilian government responsive to its citizens.

Trust should still be put in young Egyptians and their demands for freedom and democracy — demands that link the movement that overthrew Mubarak to the demonstrations that led to Morsi's removal. But the predominant goal should be to support the creation in Egypt of a pluralistic society that defends the rights of all to political participation and free and fair elections. Today, this requires opposition to any Mubarak-style repression of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Immediately following the coup, the European Union adopted an ambivalent position toward it. This, too, is reminiscent of Algeria in 1992, when most European governments supported the annulment of the Islamists' electoral victory. Likewise, the EU refused to recognize Hamas's electoral victory in Gaza in 2006.

Continuing fear of political Islam in much of the West explains past support for dictatorial regimes. Today, the EU and the U.S. should demand the liberation of all members of the Muslim Brotherhood, including Morsi, and the integration of the Muslim Brotherhood into any political solution.

The international community should also be concerned with the coup's regional implications. Syrian President Bashar Assad's cynical declaration of support for the coup is a sign that some want to turn today's struggle in the Arab world into a bloody contest between Islamists and secularists.

In the long term, any crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood would lead its members and supporters — already bitterly disappointed in democracy — to reject elections entirely. That outcome could have a very negative impact on Islamist movements elsewhere. For many, the extremists who criticized the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties for choosing a democratic route to power will have been vindicated, and a new wave of violence in the region may begin.

Hope remains that Egypt will not become Algeria in 1992 or Chile in 1973. But to avoid that grim fate, it is imperative that Muslim Brotherhood members' fundamental rights now be protected.

U.S. President Barack Obama, who has expressed deep concern about the overthrow of Morsi, is perhaps the only leader able to mediate in such a situation and work for a consensus solution that prevents a civil war. To achieve this, he would need to use all of the leverage at his disposal, including cutting off the massive military assistance that the U.S. provides to Egypt's armed forces, as he has threatened to do. He can also use the reserve of trust that he established by reaching out to the Muslim Brotherhood during Morsi's presidency.

But will Obama take the initiative? His speech in Cairo in 2009, which called for "A New Beginning" in the region, inspired many in the Arab world. Now it is time for more than words.

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