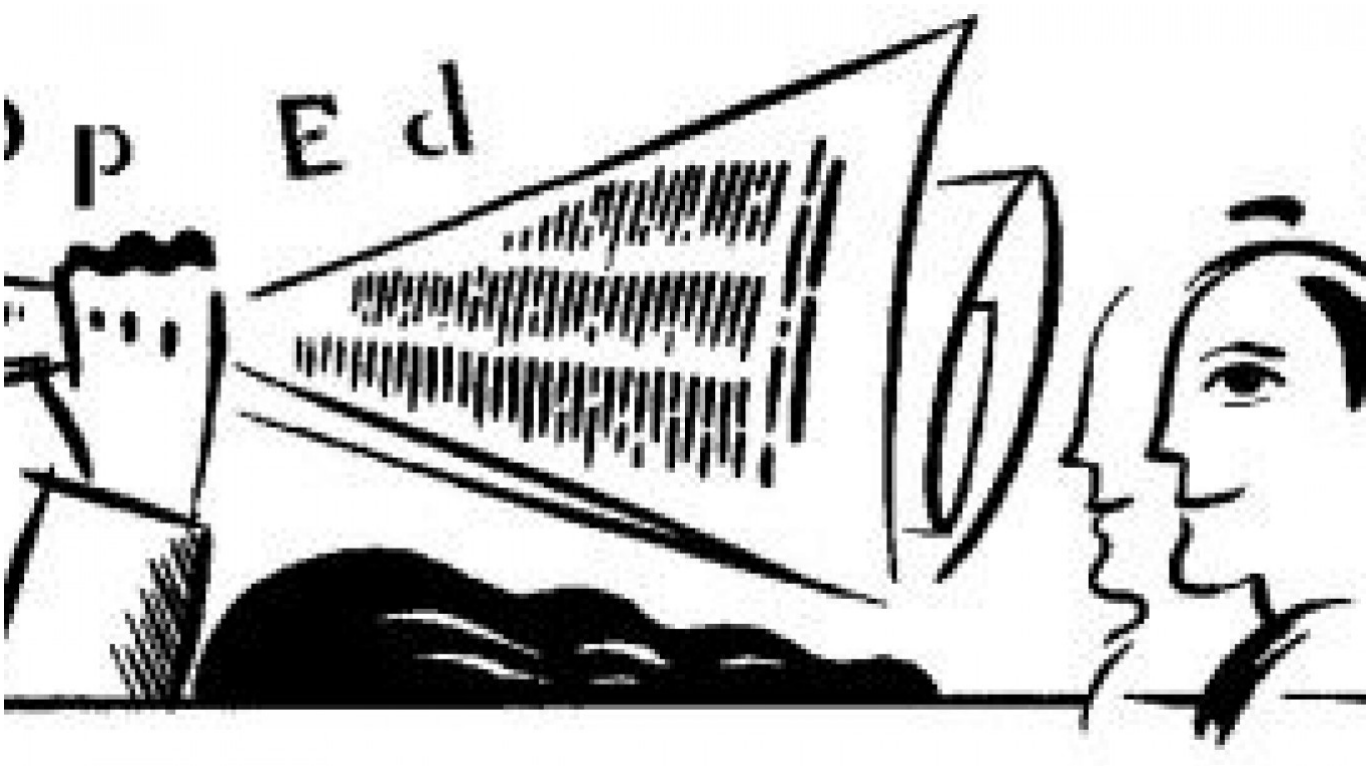
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Egypt's Coup Proves Democracy Needs Pluralism

By Tony Blair

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The events that led Egypt's military to remove President Mohamed Morsi confronted the army with a simple choice: intervention or chaos. Seventeen million people in the street is not the same thing as an election, but it is an awesome manifestation of people power.

Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood was unable to shift from being an opposition movement to being a governing party. Of course, governments govern badly, well or averagely. But this is different. Egypt's economy is tanking. Ordinary law and order has virtually disappeared. Services are not functioning properly.

Individual ministers did their best. A few weeks back, I met the tourism minister, who I thought was excellent and had a sensible plan to revive the sector. A few days later, he resigned after Morsi took the mind-boggling step of appointing as governor of Luxor province, a key tourist destination, someone who was affiliated with the group responsible for the terrorist attack in 1997 — Egypt's worst ever — in which more than 60 tourists in Luxor were killed.

Now the army is faced with the delicate and arduous task of steering the country back onto a path toward elections and a rapid return to democratic rule. We must hope that they can do this without further bloodshed. Meanwhile, however, someone will have to run things and govern. This will mean making some tough, even unpopular, decisions. It will not be easy.

What is happening in Egypt is the latest example of the interplay, visible the world over, between democracy, protest and government efficacy.

Democracy is a way to decide who the decision-makers will be, not a substitute for making decisions. I remember an early conversation with some young Egyptians shortly after President Hosni Mubarak's downfall in 2011. They believed that with democracy, problems would be solved. When I asked what the right economic policy for Egypt should be, they simply said that all would be fine because now they had democracy.

I am a strong supporter of democracy. But democratic government alone does not guarantee effective government. Today, efficacy is the challenge. When governments do not deliver, people protest. They don't want to wait for an election. In fact, as Turkey and Brazil show, people may protest even when their countries have made huge progress by any objective measure.

But as countries move from low- to middle-income status, people's expectations rise. They want higher-quality services, better housing and good infrastructure. especially transport. And they resent — to the point of mobilizing in the streets — any hint that a clique at the top is barring their way.

This is a sort of free democratic spirit that operates outside the convention that elections decide the government. It is fueled enormously by social media, itself a revolutionary phenomenon, and it moves very fast in precipitating crisis.

It is not always consistent or rational. A protest is not a policy, and a placard is not a program for government. But if governments lack clear arguments with which to rebut protesters, they are in trouble.

In Egypt, the government's problems were compounded by resentment of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology and intolerance. People came to believe that the Muslim Brotherhood was steadily imposing its own doctrines on everyday life.

Across the Middle East, for the first time, there is open debate about the role of religion in politics. Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's superior organization, those who support an intrinsically secular approach to government — and this is true in most of the region — are probably in the majority.

Society can be deeply imbued with religious observance, but people are starting to recognize that democracy works only as a pluralistic concept, requiring equal respect for different faiths and allowing a voice, but not a veto, for religion. For a country like Egypt, with its immense and varied civilization, which includes around 8 million Christians and a young population that needs to be connected to the world, there is no future as an Islamic state that aspires to be part of a regional caliphate.

So what should the West do? Egypt is the latest reminder that the region is in turmoil and won't leave us alone, however much we may wish it would. Disengagement is not an option, because the status quo is not an option. Any decision not to act is itself a decision of vast consequence.

At its crudest, the West cannot afford Egypt's collapse. So it should engage with the new de facto power and help the new government make the changes necessary, especially with respect to the economy, so that it can deliver adequate performance for Egypt's citizens. In that way, it can also help shape a path back to the ballot box that is designed by and for Egyptians.

Engagement is demanded elsewhere in the region as well. As for Syria, the worst that can happen is unacceptable: effective partition of the country with a poor, extremist-led Sunni state in the east, shut out from the sea and the country's wealth. In that case, Lebanon would be totally destabilized, Iraq further destabilized and Jordan placed under even greater pressure. And what would be left for Syrian President Bashar Assad to govern would depend on Hezbollah, a terrorist organization, and Iran.

As for Iran, newly elected President Hassan Rouhani may want to reach an agreement with the world on the country's nuclear ambition — or he may not. Either way, ultimate power in Iran still rests with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The world cannot afford a nuclear-armed Iran. Then there is Libya, Yemen, Pakistan or the plague of extremism now coursing through the northern part of Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Central Asia.

The West's interests demand that we remain engaged. We have to make decisions for the long-term because in the short term, there are no simple solutions. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's current dedication and drive on the Israeli-Palestinian issue is exemplary: If it matters, act on it, however difficult.

A long transition in the Middle East is underway. It is difficult, time-consuming and expensive. Many in the West believe that it should be someone else's job to help sort it out. But it is our job. This struggle matters to everyone.

The good news is that there are millions of modern and open-minded people in the Middle East. They need to know that we are on their side, that we are their allies — and that we are prepared to pay the price to be there with them.

Tony Blair was British prime minister from 1997 to 2007. © Project Syndicate

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