



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

E-NOTES

July 2013

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 Samuel Tadros is the second in the series. For the other essays by Ann M. Lesch 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

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EGYPT’S COUNTER REVOLUTION

By Samuel Tadros



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As news agencies and politicians around the world debate how best to describe Egypt recent upheaval, Egyptian non-Islamists, much to the amazement of everyone else, continue to insist it was they who removed President Morsi from power – not the military. Terminology of course is no small matter, for upon it hinges both U.S. aid to Egypt and, more importantly, the Egyptian people’s self-perception and pride. A “people’s coup” has now become the preferred term by non-Islamists infuriated by the failure of the world to see events from their own eyes. While there is no denying that it was indeed a military coup that toppled Egypt’s President, perhaps a more accurate description that captures the entire picture would be that of a counter-revolution.

Images of the Bourbon Restoration come to mind when the word counter-revolution is mentioned. A restoration of a man or a ruling family is not, however, what this one seeks. Mubarak and his son will not be ruling Egypt, but their ruling formula -- the one the Egyptian state has been accustomed to since 1952 -- is precisely what the driving

forces behind this uprising are seeking, even if those walking along have not realized it yet.

Like the revolution it seeks to undo, the counter-revolution is deeply rooted in a mythological construction. The unimagined evils of the Mubarak regime are now replaced with more elaborate evils, only this time of the Brotherhood's making. Instead of an imaginary \$70 billion that an old ruler had stolen, a plan to sell Egyptian territory and pride from the Sinai to the Suez Canal and the Pyramids is ascribed to a whole organization. Facts are of little relevance here. The conspiracy theories have transcended reality and replaced it. The usual masterminds are still the same; the United States, Israel and the Jews, but the names of their perceived local agents have changed. In a sense life is fair. The Brotherhood, which excelled in fabricating stories regarding its old enemies, has reaped what it sowed. The media monster has turned against it with devastating results.

Pictures of the masses in the square with the towering figure of their military savior, General Sisi, are impossible to ignore and so are the chants of "the people, the military and the police are one hand". Revolutionaries may fool themselves for a while that this is merely a passing moment, but soon enough reality will be haunting them. Egyptian non-Islamists have run away from the Islamist monster to the bosom of the state. In a sense their return was inevitable; the 25th of January was a moment of delusion. Egypt's self-proclaimed liberals never stopped loving the state that created them, their utmost dream remaining a modernizing ruler in the mold of Mohamed Ali who would force modernity on a reluctant population.

The Brotherhood insists it was given a bad hand, but they certainly helped make it worse. The great euphoria of the January revolution, which they cultivated, came to haunt them as high hopes met the sobering reality of a failed state. Their incompetence may have been their worst crime. Edmund Burke had rightly declared two centuries earlier that "nothing turns out to be so oppressive and unjust as a feeble government." Insistent on ruling alone, they alienated almost everyone in the country from the various state bodies to the non-Islamists and, most importantly, the traditional families of Egypt. Eric Trager, the brilliant scholar on the Brotherhood, observed that "the source of Morsi's strength was also the source of his downfall." The Brotherhood's organizational structure and unique membership process denied it the possibility of reaching out to the traditional families that controlled the patron client networks in the countryside, and incorporating them. Realizing that the continuation of the Brotherhood's rule meant their political death, they struck back with a vengeance in the heart of the Delta. In the army they found their natural ally, with the urban middle class cheering along.

Many commentators are quick to pronounce Islamism dead. Obituaries were written before the body had been found. Egyptians, it is argued, have risen against Islamism, and there is no turning back. It is true that the military will win this round. The Brotherhood stands no chance in front of the tanks. Their strategy of martyrdom can only succeed if they win the narrative battle and people sympathize, but the military's complete media blackout and the obedient journalists cheering along have made sure that won't happen. The Brotherhood has been dehumanized. They have been pronounced an alien body to the Egyptian nation. The military's success in getting the Salafis on board has also weakened the Brotherhood's argument that this is a war on all Islamists. No matter how good a fight the Brotherhood offers, it will lose this battle, but make no mistake, a battle it is, and the war is hardly over.

In a couple of years' time, when non-Islamists prove to be as incompetent as the Brotherhood in solving Egypt's structural problems, the Brotherhood's failures will not look as bad as they do today. But more importantly, while the Brotherhood's understanding of democracy was flawed, its commitment to the ballot box as a means of political change and renunciation of violence was genuine. What will rise from this battle will not share this commitment. Denied the fruits of their victory, Islamists will remember the words of Sayyid Qutb. Fighting Jahiliyyah will tempt this generation as it has tempted others in the past. Christians will become a favorite target. The visible support the Coptic Pope offered to the military coup will neither be forgotten nor forgiven.

But this round has been lost once again to the military. Civilians will be appointed and in due time elected, but the military will continue to call the shots and rule Egypt as they have done for so many years. The worshiping crowds will get their new Nasser, but like the old one, he will have little to offer, for the road undertaken today is not as innovative as Egyptians seem to believe. Those methods have been tried many times before and they never succeeded. Repression has not ended Islamism, and military rule has not led the country to prosperity or salvation. Defeats, failures, and disappointments are all lurking around the corner. The counter revolution has won, but its victory will be short lived. The Mubarak regime fell for a reason and those reasons continue to exist. The Mubarak order may have been a tragedy, the attempt to repeat it, as Marx would say, will only be a farce.

Farag Fouda, one of Egypt's greatest intellectuals, wrote shortly before his assassination some twenty years ago that Egypt was caught in a vicious cycle: military regimes gave way to religious ones, which in turn were removed by military coups that in time gave rise to religious regimes. Breaking the cycle was a matter of life and death, he insisted, and could only be broken by building a true liberal alternative. His words are as true today as they were back then, for though a lot of water has flown through the Nile in the last few days, it has hardly left any mark on the ancient river's banks. The sentiment of the son of the land was echoed by the brilliant foreign observer. "The pride of modern Egypt has been far greater than its accomplishments" as it continues to be "a jaded country that has known many false starts and faded dawns," as Fouad Ajami remarked. This time is no different.

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