The July 2013 Military Coup in Egypt:
One normative clarification and some empirical issues

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The present news analysis argues that experts on the Middle East have been pre-occupied with the issue of democratic pervasiveness of Islam(ists), whereas the democratic conviction of liberals and seculars was more or less taken for granted. However, secular liberals are not necessarily democratic, particularly not when exposed to a troublesome transition process after a decades-long political socialization in a secular authoritarian system. The major problem of the instable Egyptian transition process is that the two potentially democratic actors of the post-Mubarak system—the Muslim Brotherhood and the secular liberals—have been entrenched in a *kulturkampf* rather than cooperating with each other, which further increased the already strong role of actors of the old regime, particularly the military elite.

On July 3rd, 2013, democratically elected Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi was deposed from Presidency by the military. To conclude that the action taken by the Egyptian army was illegitimate if democratic standards are applied is so obvious that, at first glance, it appears not worthwhile to tackle the question in depth. Rather, one could argue that on the basis of safe normative ground we should immediately proceed with applying an empirical perspective on analyzing the causes and reasons of the military coup. However, in the present case, there are good reasons to also deal with the normative dimension of the issue. Why so? Firstly, the immediate public reaction in Egypt was dominated by cheering crowds on the Tahrir square whose claim that the military coup was legitimate left a major impact both on many Middle Eastern and Western observers.[1] Moreover, some internationally renowned Egyptian politicians, particularly peace Nobel Prize winner Muhamed al-Baradei insisted that the coup actually is compatible with democratic standards.[2] Last but not least, the reaction of Western actors was much more moderate than in other cases when democratically elected heads of states were put under arrest: US President Barack Obama expressed concerns over the military coup and opted for a speedy return to democratic procedures; however, he refrained from demanding the re-installation of Mr. Mursi as democratically elected Egyptian President.

The official charges that were leveled against Mursi immediately after his deposition are extremely weak indeed—one of the main points is "insulting the judiciary."[3] Thus, the army did not even make the effort of accusing Mursi with severe misuse of office or treason. Other informal justifications are even more obscure, such as the military coup was the only way to avoid a civil war or the failure of Mr. Mursi's government to improve Egypt's economic situation. The former argument is not convincing because in the case of an imminent civil war the army would have been obliged to protect democratically elected institutions and representatives rather than overthrow the government. If a failed economic policy would make coup d'états justifiable, we should see quite some of them in contemporary Europe.[4] It is a well-protected right in democratic systems to organize demonstrations and to use other constitutional means to convince the government to alter its politics, to step down or to accept new elections— but if this does not work out, you have to wait for the next ballots to come.

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[1] BBC: Egypt Crowds Cheer Tahrir Square Military Flypast, July 4th, 2013, available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23190817.
[2] Guardian: Mohamed ElBaradei's Appointment as Egypt's Interim PM Thrown into Doubt July 7th, 2013, available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jul/06/mohamed-elbaradei-interim-pm-opposition
[3] BBC: Egypt Army Arrests Key Muslim Brotherhood Figures, July 4th, 2013, available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23189180.
[4] Guardian: Mohamed Morsi. The Egyptionan Opposition Charge Sheet, July 3rd, 2013, available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jul/03/mohamed-morsi-egypt-president-opposition

How then does one explain the reactions to the Egyptian military coup that show so much normative vagueness - and even confusion in quite a few cases - if democratic standards are applied?

Ever since the electoral victories of Islamist parties in the Arab Spring, there is a strong tendency to confine the debate on the pervasiveness of democratic values on the Islamists. Thus, heated scholarly debates emerged whether the Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia are—or more or less inevitably will become—democratic (Roy 2012: 7, 2013) or whether they might use their newly acquired power to pursue their hidden agenda of establishing an Islamic state (Fradkin 2013). This debate made reference to a decade-old scholarly dispute whether Islamism is an ideology that cannot be cured from its totalitarian underpinnings (Tibi 2008) or whether Islamists as a result of the inherently secular logic of the state are likely to adjust to it, thereby implying that they will democratize if the political system is democratic (Tripp 1996: 63).

The ideologically heated debate on democracy and Islam(ism) tends to be blind to the fact that not only Islamism but also systems of belief with Western roots often have trouble adapting to democratic structures. The question is why this is so. Firstly, socialization plays a certain role: After decades of experiencing anti-Islamist authoritarian regimes, not all liberals and/or secularists find it easy to accept a system in which religion plays a significant role in public life and in which anti-secularist and anti-liberal movements can freely develop as long as they respect the law. Moreover, often it is seen as a truism that the modern urban middle classes play a crucial role in establishing democracies. Yet, it is too frequently overlooked that representatives of the "enlightened" middle classes under certain circumstances may slow down the process of democratization rather than promoting it if they fear the society is composed of too many "non-enlightened" people. Secondly, in a transition process trust in democratic procedures and institutions is not yet well developed because actors have not experienced the system functioning to the benefit of all. *Nota bene*, this applies to all political actors regardless of their ideology.

In the Egyptian case in the period between the first free and democratic elections and the July 2013 military coup, both the Islamists and the liberal secularists showed some limits in fully accepting democratic norms and principles. Thus, the Muslim Brotherhood pushed through a constitution that failed to protect the basic rights of believers of non-Abrahamic religions and avoided reference to gender equality. However, as has been shown, contrary to the Muslim Brotherhood, the secular opposition actively encouraged the basic violation of democratic values by supporting the military coup. Some of their major representatives such as al-Baradei even openly cooperated with the military establishment. Why did they do so?

The secular opposition had become increasingly frustrated in the course of the transition process: Although they were proud to take the credits for having removed Hosni Mubarak from office, they had to face electoral defeats. At the same time, major

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representatives of the old guard managed to preserve their privileges, particularly the military. Thus, the Muslim Brotherhood not only left the diverse businesses of the military sector untouched but also privileged the army in the new constitution, for instance by establishing a powerful National Defense Council whose majority is composed of army representatives (Ginsburg 2012).

With the removal of Mubarak, four power centers became pre-eminent in the Egyptian system: the military establishment, the judicial elite (which has been, however, deeply split between pro/anti-Mubarak and pro/anti-Brotherhood segments), the Muslim Brotherhood, and the oppositional National Salvation Front. In contrast to Tunisia, the first major structural problem of the transition process in Egypt was that the degree of cooperation between the four camps was quite limited—particularly among the new actors in the system, the Muslim Brotherhood and the liberal secular opposition (Stepan/Linz 2013: 21-23). Rather than joining ranks in checking the influence of the institutions of the old regime, their mutual relations were increasingly driven by a *kulturkampf* ideology. Thus, rather than concentrating conflicts on specific issues—such as women's rights or freedom of religion—the secular opposition more and more agitated against those that allegedly betrayed the revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood on its part entrenched on its democratic majority. As a result of pressure from the other two power centers, things only got worse. Thus, when the judicial sector threatened to dissolve the constituent assembly,[5] the Muslim Brotherhood decided to rush the constitution by an immediate referendum. A highlight with a touch of historical irony occurred on July 3rd, 2013, when the Islamist President of Egypt delivered a speech in which he did not say much beyond repeatedly claiming his office's democratic legitimacy—for which he was treated with scorn by many secular liberals.[6]

At the same time, both the Muslim Brotherhood and the opposition competed in courting the military. By doing so, the undemocratic ideal of the Egyptian army as an elitist guardian of the state that is entitled to interfere when those that deal with the lows of day-to-day politics fail to deliver was being served. Moreover, in July 2013 it appears that both actors greatly over-estimated their own power capabilities in their relations with the army: Mursi seems to have believed that removing Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi and other generals was sufficient to control the army and at least part of the opposition appears to have been so naïve to believe that the military coup was an intervention on behalf of the people to whom political power will be immediately returned thereafter. What remains to be seen is whether we have just two or (in the long run) possibly three losers of the first period of Egyptian politics after the removal of Mubarak. After the massive reaction of the Muslim Brotherhood also the army will

[5] Guardian: Egyptian Court Decides whether to Dissolve Islamist-dominated Assembly, October 23rd, 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/23/egypt-mohamed-morsi.
[6] Al-Arabiya English, July 3rd, 2013, available at:
http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/2013/07/03/Mursi-s-speech-How-Twitter-and-one-angry-TV-guest-reacted-.html.

have trouble to simply retreat to the status quo ante when it could act as the "guardian" without getting politicized by "daily politics."

Conclusion

What does the military coup in July 2013 tell us about the transition process in Egypt? Has it been a transition process at all? Yes, it has. However, as the result of a political system dominated by four more or less independent actors—the military, the juridical system, the Muslim Brotherhood and the secular liberal opposition-- with uneasiness in mutual cooperation, the Egyptian transition process from the very beginning appeared much less promising in terms of successful democratization than the Tunisian case (Beck/Hüser 2012: 17-20). At the same time, it would be too simple to conclude that the transition process has been terminated with the military coup in July 2013. First and foremost, it is rather unlikely that the Egyptian military intends to institutionalize an authoritarian system with the military as the sole legitimate political decision-maker. If so, the military would be taken responsible for all major political developments by a highly politicized post-Arab-Spring society, thereby losing its role as a guardian of politics. Moreover, if the Brotherhood is to be permanently excluded from political participation, the legitimacy of the new political system will suffer among major parts of society. At the same time, other Islamist groups such as the Salafists (who are both more radical and politically less experienced) could start to play a more important role in the formal political system. Transition processes are long-lasting, open-ended and non-linear processes. Thus, although hopes for a successful democratization process in Egypt have certainly experienced a major blow, it cannot be ruled out that in the long run just the July 2013 military coup may appear as just a major setback in an eventually successful transition process.

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Key Words

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