

The Debate on the July 2013 Military Coup in Egypt: It is about Much more than the Definition of a Coup (Part I)

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The news coverage and the policy analysis of the military's deposition of Mohammed Mursi, the first democratically elected president of Egypt on July 3rd, 2013 produced national and international narratives that confused rather than illuminated what was unfolding on the ground. On the surface, the narratives seemed to be technically pre-occupied with whether or not a military coup had occurred and its political implications for the outcome of Egypt's democratic transition. Each privileged distinct sets of actors and interests in their analysis failing to join the competing interests that had made this transition difficult and complex.

The analysis of this debate on the July 3rd coup will emphasize the scholarly and policy concerns of these two constructions and how they reflected and impacted national and global power relations that produced them. Both were partial and neither was able to do justice to this phase of the political transition. The weaving of the two narratives could explain the complex dynamics that contributed to the coup and their equally complicated after effects.

To adequately cover this important debate that marks a major turning point in the Egyptian democratic transition, the discussion will be divided into 2 parts. Part I will examine the narratives used by the opposition to discuss how president Mursi's first year in office generated multiple grievances that set the stage for the protests of June 30 that provided a national context and an opening for his opponents to ally themselves with the military changing the direction of the transition. Part II will couple the discussion of the Islamist narrative of president Mursi's first year in office, the protests of June 30 and the coup on July 3 with the international one offered by the US and the EU which surprisingly overlapped in some significant ways shedding light on the increased difficulty of keeping the national and the international apart in the discussions of the increasingly globalized democratic transitions.

The narrative used by the Egyptian opposition to support the July coup discussed the alliances and divisions between the Muslim Brotherhood and other key political actors (including the military, the representatives of the old regime and the liberal opposition) and how they led to the outbreak of much larger political protests on June 30 and their political after effects. While they clearly reflected only one side of a major split that had occurred within the national community, the liberals, secularists and leftists argued that they represented the “popular” opposition against the authoritarianism of the newly elected president and his Muslim Brotherhood. Their narrative also gained the support of three other groups: the revolutionaries of the January 25, 2011 uprising who described the June 30 protests as ushering a correction in the course of the revolution and the rear guard of the Mubarak regime who categorized June 30 as ushering a second revolution that was more representative of all the major political groups. Finally, the embrace of the demands of the opposition by the military led them to claim that theirs was not only a national narrative, but also a democratic one because it reflected the views and interests of the majority of the Egyptian population.

In many ways, this last phase of the Egyptian political transition continued what most observers of the January 25th protest movement/uprising had known to be true i.e. that the toppling of unpopular presidents (the Hosni Mubarak regime on February 11, 2011 and Mohammed Mursi on July 3) brought to the forefront strange bedfellows. The youthful and civil society groups who led the first uprising and articulated its demands for bread, liberty, social justice and human dignity, initially cooperated with the younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood and relied on the support of the Egyptian military to topple President Mubarak and begin a tortuous political transition. The greying members of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) emerged as the dominant actors of the first year of the transition entering into frequent street confrontations with the revolutionaries and pacts with the Muslim Brotherhood. The most important of these pacts was that which produced a road map that advantaged the Muslim Brotherhood the most: It began with parliamentary elections that the Brotherhood with its huge grassroots was bound to win, followed by presidential elections and then the draft of the constitution. New parties needed time to establish a popular base and beginning with a series of elections did not help their electoral prospects. Continued violence and SCAF’s failure to mobilize public support outside the self-contained military industrial complex contributed to public pressure to fast forward the political road map that ended with the election of Mohammed Mursi as president in June 2012.

One of the earliest and most important accomplishments of the new president was the replacement of the 77 year old Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi with a loyal and younger fifty eight years old general Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in the wake of the highly publicized killing of Egyptian soldiers by Jihadi forces in Sinai during Ramadan of

2012. The civilian and Islamist critics of SCAF used the incident to underscore the need for the armed forces to return its attention to national security as a primary concern. The president used the drafting of the new constitution, in turn, to cement his alliance with the military giving them control over their budget and any policies that affected “military production” the sector that economically cemented their power and influence in Egypt.¹

According to a colleague of the general, the souring of the relations began with a slight that occurred in the 2012 celebrations of the 1973 October when he was seated next to Tarek al-Zomor who was implicated in the assassination of President Anwar Sadat, but now was a member of the new Islamist political elite.¹ The general was offended that the heroes of the military had to share the limelight with the members of the new Islamist political elite whom he classified as killers.²

Thinking that he had secured the loyalty of his generals, President Mursi spent the rest of his first year in office preoccupied with the transfer of power from the old Mubarak regime to a new one dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. The president’s opponents derisively described this as the “brotherhoodization” of the state i.e. placing Brotherhood members and/or its loyal supporters in executive or important advisory positions at different ministries. The lack of trust between the Mursi government and its political opponents as well as the Egyptian political elite’s lack of experience with electoral politics since 1952 led them to perceive “brotherhoodization”, not as part of how any newly elected government hoped to govern by appointing political figures close them in different cabinet positions. Instead, they viewed it to be tantamount to the takeover of the levers of power or a prelude to the end of the circulation of power associated with democratic governance. This deepened the tensions and the suspicions between the two sides of the community.

In the economic arena, there were plans for reconciliation (*tasaluh*) with key figures of Mubarak’s business elite. Some had been arrested, prosecuted and given stiff sentences including Ahmed Izz, the steel magnet and secretary of Mubarak’s National Democratic Party and Ahmed al-Maghrabi, the former housing minister.³ Others (like Hussein Salem, Hosni Mubarak’s confidant who owned huge development companies in Sinai, Rasheed Mohamed Rasheed, the former minister of Industry and commerce and Yousef Boutros, the former finance minister) fled repatriating most of their wealth and receiving long sentences in absentia.

¹ Kareem Fahim, “Egypt General Has Country Wondering About Aims”, *The New York Times* (August 3, 2013), p. A8.

² Yasser Rizk, Interview with al-Sissi Part I, *Al-Masry al-Youm* (October 7, 2013).

³ Mansour Kamel, Wafa’ al-Bakry, and Mohsen Sameeka, “Al-Hukuma Tabda’ Khatat al-Dafi’ Muqabal al-Tasaluh ma Rumuz al-Nizam al-Sabiq”, *Al-Masry al-Youm* (November 14, 2013), p. 1.

The negotiations, which began in November 2012, were designed to settle the legal liabilities of many of the above figures in exchange for billions of Egyptian pounds that were to be used as an immediate source of badly needed investments. While the directive from the president supported reconciliation in cases where administrative or legal errors could be shown, but not in cases of clear corruption or profiteering,⁴ the new Islamist business elite, led by Khayrat al-Shatter and Hasan Malek the Muslim Brotherhood's business tycoons, used it to strike deals with the key figures of the old one. Al-Shatter and Malik overplayed their hand, however, by also acting on behalf of Qatari clients who had an interest in some of the businesses under discussion receiving millions in commissions.⁵

This provoked economists and legal experts identified with the liberal opposition who questioned the power and authority given to Malik, the point man between the presidency and all investors, and the absence of legal or institutional oversight. The critics were not opposed to reconciliation per se, but suggested that there was a need to create appropriate legal procedures and institutions to handle these complex deals and issues.⁶

The failure of economic reconciliation led president Mursi to put the power and the prestige of his office directly in the service of the Islamist business men. In the many trips that he took during his first turbulent year in office to Germany, China and Brazil, the presidential plane was crowded with Islamist business men who used these trips to connect with state officials of these economic power houses and the representatives of their businesses. While this way of doing business put the new Islamist elite effectively in charge, it antagonized the old civilian and military ones who felt shut out and without any a stake in the new order. Al-Sisi mentioned the project to develop the Suez Canal as constituting a major bone of contention between the military and the president who represented the interests of the new business elite. The military clearly claimed proprietary rights to any projects connected to the international waterway because of the security concerns.⁷

Finally, president Mursi and his government tried to use labor issues and laws to cement the economic interests of the old and new business elites, but this proved to be a major challenge for another set of reasons. There is a general consensus that the wave of strikes by the organized section of the labor movement (constituting of 30% of all workers) that extended from 2005 to 2011 set the stage for the mass protests of January

⁴ Mansour Kamel and Wafa' Bakry, "Al-Hukuma Tatasalah Ma' Izz wa Bishai Muqabil Milyar Gunih", *Al-Masry al-Youm* (March 30, 2013), p. 8.

⁵ Assim Hanafi, "Mubawadat Beer al-Salim", *Al-Masry al-Youm* (February 13, 2013), p. 16.

⁶ Nagi Abdel Aziz, "Qanuniyun wa Iqtisadiyun Yuhagimun Taharqat Malik Lil Tasaluh ma' Rigal Mubarak", *Al-Masry al-Youm* (March 30, 2013), p. 8.

⁷ Yasser Rizq, Interview with al-Sissi, Part I *Al-Masry al-Youm* (October 7, 2013).

25th 2011. It was not surprising, therefore, that Ahmed al-Bora'i, the minister Manpower and Immigration in the first post-revolutionary government, put the legalization of independent labor unions on the legislative agenda. SCAF blocked this law because it would have had serious implications for the sector of military production which it controlled and that relied very heavily on the cheap and coercive labor of conscripts. When president Mursi passed a constitutional amendment that put the power of his office above all other state institutions in November 2012, he used it to amend Law 35/1976 allowing the minister of Manpower to appoint new leadership for the state run Egyptian Trade Union Federation⁸ reviving that old structure which the labor movement had overwhelmingly rejected since the revolution.

A close examination of *al-Nahda*, the economic blueprint for change that the Muslim Brotherhood offered as part of Mursi's presidential campaign, showed that it continued to adhere to a crude neo-liberalism that was committed to the privatization of the economy, but without giving the workers any meaningful forms of representation or rights to negotiate fair wages and better work conditions with their employers and/or the state. Yet, the need for independent labor unions emerged as the single most important unifying demand of the Egyptian working class. It was a right that the Muslim Brotherhood clearly opposed opting for continued state control of labor which cost it the support of this important group.

As for the liberal opposition, the president and the Muslim Brotherhood thought they could easily manipulate them after repeated defeats at the ballot box. Since March of 2011, it defeated them six times: first there was the referendum to change some of the rules of the old constitution in support of a new political road map that called for bicameral parliamentary elections, two rounds of presidential elections and then a referendum on a new constitution. Liberal political fragmentation and lack of organizational skills explained these repeated defeats and the eventual loss of faith in electoral politics. Still, the liberal opposition successfully demonstrated the power of the talking classes to use the old and new media to effectively and relentlessly criticize the performance of the new Islamist elite in the media poking fun at their hypocrisy (the discrepancy between their lofty claims and actions). The Islamist satellite networks viciously responded attacking them in the most personalized way hurling charges that they were atheists and homosexuals. The result was a very uncivil political discourse that prevented both serious discussion and any building of bridges between the two sides of the political divide.

All the above sheds light on the mixed record of president Mursi first year in office and the failure to appeal and/or to include important groups from outside his Muslim Brotherhood in government. It explained the popularity of the successful call for civil disobedience by the youth group, REBEL, which gained momentum in April 2013 mo-

⁸ Mohamed Abdel Baky, "Labouring with Old Demands", *Al-Ahram Weekly* (April 30, 2013).

bilizing the Egyptian public through the collection of signed petitions that called for early presidential elections coupled with a new round of mass protests to exert enough pressure for change on the anniversary of president Mursi ascension to power.

This precipitated a national context that resembled the January 25th, 2011 on June 30, 2013 including the pivotal role played by young Egyptian men and women in mass protests that called for the toppling of another form of authoritarian rule (by the Muslim Brotherhood). They hoped to use the weapon of mass protests again to force the government to capitulate to their demands for early elections. As such, they viewed the protests of June 30 as a continuation of the revolutionary dynamics of the January 25th revolution. General al-Sisi recently stated that there was no contact between the REBEL group and the military until after July 3.⁹ In other words, the military's decision to support popular demands did not appear to be dramatically different from the role that it played in 2011 in events it did not engineer. In going beyond the support of the popular demand for early elections to depose the popularly elected president, they clearly redefined the political terms of the democratic transition.

Conclusion

How does one evaluate the political claims of this debate and the goals it had set for itself? And is it possible to correct the authoritarian distortions that the liberal opposition claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood had introduced in the Egyptian democratic transition, through authoritarian means?² Let me suggest that the answer to the second question cannot be simply a theoretical one, but that it should be determined by how one answers the first question. To do otherwise would be to refuse to employ our understanding of the messy dynamics of the transition to inform and refine our discussion of its potentially ambiguous outcomes.

Up until now, the coup has not ushered a greater degree of stability or new forms of governance. The military led interim government has used excessive violence in the breakup of the sit-ins by the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and the tracking down of their leaders. The initial calls for political reconciliation with the Brotherhood were quickly replaced by the demand that the members responsible for the incitement of political violence be held accountable. The arrested leaders faced fabricated charges; the organization has been legally forbidden from operating, but their supporters are contesting that decision. Neither of these practices represented a break with Egypt's authoritarian past, but the use of the law to contest it was new.

At the same time, there were many signs of failed authoritarian consolidation.¹⁰ While the state has inflicted excessive violence on its opponents, it was clear that the

⁹ Yasser Rizk, Part II of the Interview with al-Sissi, *Al-Masry al-Youm* (October 8, 2013).

¹⁰ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Egyptian Attacks are Escalating amid Stalemate", *The New York Times* (October 7, 2013).

state institutions, which had taken a beating in the last 3 years, no longer inspired fear or respect. The Brotherhood had apparently successfully hidden its assets and therefore the legal injunction to stop working had not had the intended effect on its ability to function. Its mobilizing capacity has been compromised, but its support remained undiminished and its capacity to destabilize the new order continued.

As a result, al-Sisi has announced that he will not run for president and that the military will not field its own candidate in the presidential elections. In a recent interview, he suggested that the lesson learned from the first year of transition under SCAF was the importance of reliance on civilian governments.¹¹ While this indicated a willingness to operate behind a civilian façade, the Brotherhood's discursive centering of the coup (and military rule) and the defense of democracy in its mobilization effort challenges this attempt head on.

Meanwhile, students unions have continued their activism to prevent the return of the security services to their campuses and the workers have refused to heed the call of the new minister of Manpower to set aside strikes in favor of social peace. The new minister of Social Affairs has been working on a less restrictive law that governs the activities of non-government organizations which provide the interim government with some of its base of support.

The failure of authoritarian consolidation and the movement by several key political players in the opposite direction suggests an unexpected national stalemate. If you add to this the lack of international support for the coup, which will be discussed in part II of this debate, then the successful prospects of the authoritarian detour appear less certain. At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood's opposition to military rule and the defense of democracy (when it is not confused with the defense of Islam against non-believers) gave these liberal goals popular traction. It also undermines the popular belief, which is part of the authoritarian legacy, that a strong man or the benevolent patriarch may offer a short cut solution to the problems of the democratic transition.

¹¹ Yasser Rizk, Interview with al-Sissi Part II, *Al-Masry al-Youm* (October 8, 2013).

¹ Shana Marshall, "The Egyptian Military's Economic Interests and Institutional Response to the Uprising", Paper prepared for the Egyptian Revolution Working Group (September 2013).

² This is a question that Martin Beck posed as part of the review of an earlier version of this paper.

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