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Political Stability Eludes Polarized Egypt

Revolution Redux

By Erich Follath

7/29/2013

Amid renewed turbulence, Egyptian politics are at a critical turning point. With opposing movements at loggerheads over the country's next government, much is at stake for future generations, the Middle East and even the rest of the world.

Last Friday saw nationalist fervor and Islamist frenzy sweep through Cairo on a wave of whispered intrigue and paranoia. In a dramatic showdown combining elements of William Shakespeare and Dan Brown, tens of thousands of people gathered in Cairo's Nasr City district, a poor neighborhood with a large concentration of Muslim Brotherhood supporters. They carried signs criticizing "the betrayal" of former President Mohammed Morsi, their hero, who they claim was "wrongfully removed from office" and is now a "martyr" languishing in custody. For them, there is still only one solution to all of Egypt's problems: religion. "Islam will show us the way!" and "Down with the traitors from the military!" they chant.

They reserved particular rage for the arrest warrant against the deposed president. According to the warrant, Morsi could face treason charges for allegedly collaborating with the Palestinian group Hamas to "execute hostile acts." For his supporters in Nasr City, the claims are spurious.

Meanwhile on Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo, a crowd of more than 100,000 anti-Morsi demonstrators gathered who accuse the former president of failing miserably and view his removal from office as the consummation of the Egyptian revolution. Their aim is a democratic new beginning and an economic recovery, supported by the powers of yesterday, the military leaders who helped keep Egypt's autocratic rulers in power for more than four decades.

"The army and the people go hand in hand! The Islamists are our undoing!" chanted the demonstrators, while every half hour, Egyptian television stations interrupted their Friday programming to broadcast the message of solidarity against the Muslim Brotherhood being preached by the generals and the transitional government.

By Monday, at least 72 people were killed during the clashes in Cairo, Egypt's health ministry said, also reporting that nine others had died in violence in Egypt's second largest city, Alexandria, putting the toll in two days of unrest at 81.

While Morsi's supporters said security forces had opened fire on unarmed protesters, the interior ministry insisted that only tear gas was used and blamed the clashes on Islamists.

Urgent Questions

Egypt, the most important country in the Arab world, is at a critical turning point, as it faces the question of whether the military, radical religious forces or liberals will gain the upper hand and assume control of the country. But for future generations in Egypt, the Middle East and even the rest of the world, there is much more at stake. Will millions of demonstrators, using the power of the street, decide on the country's form of government, or will it be up to the parliament and the representative institutions put into office by elections? What role will the Islamists play? Are the contradictions between the Koran and democracy insurmountable, and is violence a necessary component in solving these conflicts?

These are urgent questions that Muslims must confront. But the West, too, must take a position on whether and how it wishes to influence these processes. A look at the Arab past offers little reason for optimism.

Twenty-two years ago, Algeria experienced a highly fraught election campaign that pitted liberals against supporters of the military, and leftists against nationalists. But within the group that eventually won the country's 1991 election, the vote was extremely controversial. Although the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) captured 47 percent of votes in the first round of the election, the victors never formed a government. Instead, there was a military coup, a violation of the constitution to which the West lent its tacit support. The men from the radical wing of the FIS were triumphant. Democracy means compromise, and because they believed that only the faithful are in possession of the truth, compromise was impossible. They concluded that their place in society was in the underground, and that it was from there that they would disseminate the teachings that would lead to Algeria's salvation. Some FIS leaders were arrested, while others organized an illegal resistance movement. Many chose terror, to which the generals responded in kind. More than 100,000 people died in the ensuing conflict.

It is now more than 18 months since Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood joined forces with liberals and leftists on Tahrir Square, bringing down the military-backed, authoritarian regime of then President Hosni Mubarak. A democratic conflict to win the favor of Egyptians ensued. Peace, justice and jobs were at the forefront, while religion seemingly played only a secondary role.

The Muslim Brotherhood seemed to be on the path to becoming a "normal" party, liberated from its early tendencies to engage in fundamental opposition. Not surprisingly, its behavior triggered outrage from Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian doctor and member of the Muslim Brotherhood at the beginning of his career, who later succeeded Osama bin Laden as the head of the al-Qaida terrorist organization. Zawahiri criticized the Muslim Brotherhood for what he called its "treasonous" acceptance of the "rules of the West." In June 2012, Zawahiri seemed to have ended up on the losing side of history. The Muslim Brotherhood had won the runoff election, and Morsi became Egypt's first democratically elected president. The West applauded. The military remained in its barracks, and the divided liberal forces initially accepted the fundamentalist Morsi as president.

Streetocracy Rules

At his inauguration, Morsi promised to be the "president of all Egyptians," and yet what followed was a disaster. He had an Islamic constitution drafted, his supporters temporarily blocked the country's independent Supreme Constitutional Court, and journalists critical of the Morsi government were persecuted. His opponents likened his behavior to that of a modern-day pharaoh. Most of all, however, he destroyed the country's already deeply ailing economy through sheer incompetence.

Popular opposition began to take shape. On the anniversary of Morsi's presidency, hundreds of thousands flooded into public squares in Egypt's major cities, and 22 million people signed a petition by the Tamarod grassroots movement calling for Morsi to resign, which he ignored. On July 3, the military removed the failed elected president from office and placed him under house arrest in an undisclosed location.

"We had no other choice," Nobel Peace Prize winner and current Vice President Mohamed ElBaradei said in a SPIEGEL interview three weeks ago. It was a popular coup, and most people in Egypt and the West were enthusiastic, or at least relieved. But it was a coup nonetheless, despite all semantic contortions by those with liberal leanings, who sought to reframe the events as a "second revolution." Everyone must have realized that the Islamists would now mobilize their own supporters, who still represent about a quarter of Egyptian society.

Currently, the only decisive question in Egyptian politics revolves around who is capable of bringing the largest number of people into the streets. The crowds supporting one side seek to shout down the crowds supporting the other, creating a conflict that is little more than a village brawl devoid of content, a form of government the Twitter community is called "Streetocracy."

And, once again, it is apparent that free elections or the right of assembly are not the primary elements of a democracy, but rather the checks and balances among functioning institutions. Erudite, worldly thinkers like ElBaradei hope that they will be able to send the soldiers back to

their barracks, and the constitution promised by the generals has awakened cautious hope. But skepticism is very much in order.

At the end of last week, army chief Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, the new strongman in Cairo, called for mass rallies in Cairo against "terrorism," an indirect reference to the Muslim Brotherhood. Perhaps part of his plan was also to create a justification for new emergency laws. The overwhelmingly favorable press Sissi is currently receiving at home and abroad has glossed over the fact that, for example, he was responsible for the unspeakable "virginity tests" performed on young female protesters taken into custody in 2011. It is also not at all clear who is currently responsible for more egregious acts of terror.

The Islamists repeatedly engaged in provocative acts after being ousted from power, attacking police stations and advocating acts of murder. But according to research by both Human Rights Watch and the British newspaper *The Guardian*, the military was responsible for the worst bloodbath. In the early morning hours of July 8, soldiers shot into a crowd in front of the Republican Guard officers' club in Cairo, killing 54 demonstrators, most of them Muslim Brotherhood supporters.

The Need for Compromise

To defuse the situation, both the army and the Islamists would have to be willing to accept compromises. But the Islamists believe that Islam is the solution, while the military sees itself as the solution. Egypt's armed forces are traditionally interested in only one thing: maintaining stability in the country, by whatever means necessary, to ensure that they can continue to pursue their business interests. The military is by far the largest economic power in the country. It controls hotels and gas stations, and it produces most consumer goods. In Germany, it would be inconceivable for German soldiers to be packaging noodles or assembling TV screens in factories on military property, but it's a reality in Egypt. Anyone who interferes with the military's self-service operation is quickly swept out of the way. And as if it needed to prove its role as a state within a state, members of the military are not allowed to vote in Egypt. They are seen as being above the fray.

The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, is more of a state outside the state. Its members are not permitted to hold positions in the military or the police force, both traditionally secular institutions. Most have probably never truly accepted democracy and are now refusing to back away from their unbending demand that Morsi be reinstated. They like to see themselves in the role of martyrs and are spurred on by groups affiliated with al-Qaida, like the Al-Shabaab militants in Somalia. "When will the Muslim Brotherhood finally wake up from its deep sleep and realize how pointless the effort to change a society through institutions is?" the terrorists tweeted.

But it is impossible to run a country on the totalitarian principle that Islam is the answer to all questions, and that anyone who thinks otherwise must toe the party line. Seen in this light, religion and democracy are truly incompatible, as are military rule and democracy.

Turkey seemed to present a promising model of how faith and governance could be reconciled. The Islamist-conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, won several free elections, presided over an astonishing economic boom and at least partially allowed a free press. That was until Erdogan decided to essentially put an end to this experiment, had his security forces beat up protesters, persecuted journalists and severely curtailed civil liberties.

In Iran, where the Shiite theocracy has ruined the economy, the mullahs are despised as corrupt and incompetent. In Saudi Arabia, the Sunni Al Saud royal family, guardians of Islam's most sacred holy places in Mecca and Medina, faces a cynical youth that detests the opulent lives of the princes. In the Gaza Strip, residents are becoming increasingly critical of the ruling fundamentalist Hamas agitators.

Political Islam on the Decline

Political Islam, long feared as a counter-ideology in the West, is undoubtedly on the decline. In Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, a second prominent leftist liberal politician and opponent of the ruling Islamist Ennahda party, Mohammed Brahmi, was murdered last Thursday, raising questions of whether it was a deliberate provocation by the especially radical Salafists for not having a seat at the political table. On Friday, tens of thousands took to the streets in a general strike, and at least one protester died. There are some indications that what happened in Egypt is repeating itself in Tunisia, where an elected but incompetent Islamist regime is being ousted from power by crowds of protesters in the streets.

This is no reason to rejoice, because where Islamism has, at least formally, submitted to the rules of democracy, it was combatted with means that were not always democratic.

In Algeria, the Islamists were not allowed to come into power in the first place, and in Egypt they were ousted in a coup after being in office for one year. The fact that this happened is a tragedy. It strengthened all of the ultra-radicals, enabling them to draw attention away from their responsibilities. Perhaps the impatient, all those who felt the need to unleash a "second revolution" with the power of the street, will realize that it would have been better to allow the Muslim Brotherhood -- severely weakened in all opinion polls -- to finish their term in office and then hand them a crushing defeat in the next election.

"So far, we have proven only one thing: that we can overthrow regimes," said one of the few self-critical demonstrators on Tahrir Square. Being constructive is a different matter altogether. And what if the next government, despite good intentions, fails in the Herculean task of providing adequate jobs for the roughly 40 percent of Egypt's youth that are unemployed? Will there be more massive protests, only to be repeated a year later and be followed by another coup?

The West should set conditions for cooperation with the Egyptian military, such as the immediate release of senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and constitutional, transparent trials of those who incited violence. It should also demand an investigation of the brutal attacks committed by soldiers, especially the massacres on July 8. Until then, all economic aid and arms shipments should be suspended.

The United States government took a modest stab in this direction last week when it placed the delivery of four modern fighter jets to the Egyptian military on hold. And the German government, to its credit, is calling for fair treatment of the Islamists. Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle called the coup a "setback for democracy."

Most of the demonstrators in Egypt, regardless of which side they are on, are opposed to Western intervention. They are citizens of a deeply divided, polarized nation, either devoted fans of the Muslim Brotherhood or its hate-filled opponents. The arrest warrant against former President Morsi is valid for 15 days, at which point his fate may already have been decided: an indictment for serious crimes, house arrest or release.

On the other side liberals, in a strange alliance with the military, are not much more realistic when they dream of a flourishing economy, new jobs and a better future. At least seven demonstrators were killed in Alexandria on Friday night, and the Muslim Brotherhood claims that far more died in Cairo's Nasr City neighborhood. The government could have used a large military presence to seal off the main square, keeping the fanatics on both sides from attacking one another.

Whether the government will manage to prevent further escalation remains unclear. Over the weekend, Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim announced that the pro-Morsi protests in Cairo would be dispersed.