

Is the Egyptian Revolution Dead?

by Philip Rizk, 17.07.2013

The short answer is “No.” A longer answer follows. What happened in Egypt between 30 June and 3 July was not a coup against an elected government. It was another attempt by the generals to co-opt Egypt’s January 25 Revolution. The situation’s complexity and its globally and ideologically charged nature makes it hard to see the forest for the trees, here is my view on why the revolution is far from over:

In the space of a few days, Mohamed Morsi went from being a ruler who implemented laws and alienated the opposition in order to monopolize power, to one without any power because the people went to the streets. To say the Muslim Brotherhood made mistakes in the last year is an understatement. They did not just replicate the Hosni Mubarak regime that we ousted from power. They took things even further. They allowed the police to maintain their use of violence against everyday citizens & revolutionaries, locking us up, maiming us, torturing us, and killing us. In response to protests against the Brotherhood’s monopolization of power, both their members and the security forces they oversaw fought back with incredible brutality. All this took place without any legal retribution of police or army members. The Brotherhood’s prosecutor general refused to reopen cases against the police who killed or were complicit in killing protestors during the revolution despite having promised to do so in the name of the revolution. Police brutality did not once wane under Brotherhood rule. Instead, the police maintained their impunity to wreak havoc on a society still in revolutionary momentum.

On the economic front, the Brotherhood gained popularity during the Mubarak era, by providing free education and handouts in poor neighborhoods. These kinds of activities helped solidify their support base in an era of rising prices and decreasing opportunities for decent standards of living. Yet, once in power their commitment to charity did not translate into policies that would benefit the poor in the long run. Rather, the Brothers deepened the Mubarak era neoliberalization. In order to please the conditions of never-ending International Monetary Fund (IMF) negotiations, they had already begun removing subsidies from basic goods like fuel. They also announced tax increases on basic goods, which they then rescinded due to street opposition.

During their period in power the Brotherhood took countless loans from both governments and regional banks. They did this in the absence of a Parliament. They did this without publicizing the conditions that Egyptians will have to bare for years to come. One such condition was that of a pending IMF loan that called for the regimental devaluing of the Egyptian pound, causing an unbearable increase in the prices of Egypt’s food, much of which is imported and purchased in foreign currency. The Brotherhood government also maintained the Mubarak era opposition to independent unionization of workers, by allowing the business elite to fire union members without consequence. They did not attempt to identify or recover stolen assets of Mubarak and his cronies. Instead, they began reconciliation processes with former regime members citing the need to boost Egypt’s economy.

The revolution's main call was "bread, freedom and social justice." On judicial retribution, police violence and financial redistribution, the Muslim Brotherhood did not just fail. They drove Egypt to a brink, where conditions were even worse than they had been under Mubarak reign. And all this they did with complete arrogance, alienating the entire landscape of political movements and parties in the process.

This reality drove people back to the street.

This reality discredits that thing called democracy.

In the context of the authoritarian Brotherhood regime, which their Western trading partners supported with their own political and economic interests in mind, the everyday needs of people are not a priority of the political decisionmaking process. This means that those who come to power in Egypt through the electoral process must first receive the approval of local elites like the military generals and their foreign backers. Then, a flawed electoral process allows their emergence to power. It is as simple as that. In Egypt we have never had "fair" elections and never will as long as this power constellation remains.

This neo-colonial reality makes the very idea of democracy redundant.

People went to the street to express their rejection of all this. But there is an uglier side to this mass mobilization. The growing rage on the streets against the Muslim Brotherhood caused their local partners—the generals—to back out of their power sharing relationship and push for the Brotherhood's ouster. Enter the Egyptian military. In the days leading up to 30 June liberal television stations spread massive amounts of anti-Brotherhood propaganda. While much of the information was true, its timing and direct messaging revealed that it was part of a larger campaign against Brotherhood rule. Accompanying this was a fuel shortage that the secret police and military accentuated. In doing so, they allowed the Tamarod campaign to gain support it would not have otherwise had, had these same state forces intervened to stop them as they always do once they threaten state power. In a statement prior to 30 June, the Tamarod leadership convinced protesters to unify their rebellion against one target: the Muslim Brotherhood. All other battles were to be left for a later stage. This logic of "my enemy's enemies are my friends" meant that despite their role in suppressing the revolution, the military and even more alarmingly the police were celebrated on the public stage in the past week as absolute heroes of this revolutionary moment.

At this point, we need to assess the role of the military.

The army, which now parades our streets as heroes, is ruled by the same generals that ordered our protests to be crushed at a protest march at the Maspero building. They are the same generals who oversaw the murder of 72 football fans because they participated in the revolution. They are the same generals who carried out military trials against more than twelve thousand Egyptian civilians to re-instill fear. They are the same generals who hog a large portion of our economy for their own interests. They are the same generals

who ordered the attacks on our protests that killed Mina Danial, Emad Effat, Alaa Abd El Hady, and hundreds more, while injuring, torturing and locking up tens of thousands. They are the same generals who incited sectarianism, and conducted virginity tests to divide society and crush any form of public protest.

In this polarized political atmosphere Egyptians forget the past too quickly. We suffer from collective amnesia in order to suppress our fears and put our faith in the fata morgana of promises for change. The discourse of democracy and the illusion of a better, freer, richer life are the illusions that tempt many Egyptians to put blind faith in those who claim they will bring this about.

Let us look at the role of the generals in key moments during the January 25 revolution.

28 January 2011: Though protests had been building, Friday 28 January, the Day of Rage, caught everybody by surprise. Yet, the neocolonial constellation of the military generals and their international backers, who had been Mubarak's lifelong partners, played it smart. They removed Mubarak from power two weeks later, claiming to fulfill the revolution's demands. The majority of the Egyptian people celebrated them as heroes; they saw the Mubarak era faults as concentrated in one man rather than the system he symbolized. Following a period of direct rule, the military junta handed over a majority of power to a "civilian, democratically-elected" government after agreeing to terms of divided sovereignty. They decidedly removed themselves from direct responsibility for any failings of government, while maintaining their share of the political and economic pie. Their vast economic empire could not be threatened.

3 July 2013: The military repeats a tactic similar to the one they carried out after Mubarak's ouster. This time they were more prepared. They claimed to implement the will of the people. They took full credit for a glorious "30 June Revolution." These were steps to contain the wrath of revolution: the actual coup is not the deposing of Morsi or other elected officials. It is the attempt to overthrow a mass revolutionary mobilization. Our revolution brought down Morsi, but the army coup wants to take the credit for his ouster thereby absorbing the power of the people that made it happen. This time was different, this time the generals saw the ship sinking and wanted out. The Brotherhood's governance had not only failed miserably, they had also started to believe they could impose their authority in the Ministry of Interior and even in the military ranks. These steps threatened to chip at the generals' piece of the power pie. On 3 July the military leaders succeeded at ridding themselves of a partnership that had gone wrong while receiving unprecedented praises of the population at large. For their international backers the game has not been so easy. First world nations, especially the Americans who consider themselves the gatekeepers of legitimate democracy, have done their utmost to stand by the Muslim Brotherhood's legitimacy to maintain power. What is at stake is what they deem to be a timeless discourse: democracy. This discourse eases these nation's roles in a global hegemony through which they can alternatively condemn, suppress, and fund third world leaders. Democracy is the golden key to play global judge between good and evil.

In sum let us take a step back.

There is no such thing as democracy within a neocolonial context. Such is the case in Egypt.

Further, the logic of a coup against a government falls apart completely without the possibility of a democratic order.

The power of millions of Egyptians taking to the streets on 30 June shatters the illusion of the necessity of elected representation and has the potential to lay bare this neocolonial reality.

The fear is that the forces that maintain hegemony over our society are using every means possible to prevent the further fruition of our revolution. This includes a dirty game of exploiting these recent events by purposefully deepening divisions within Egyptian society to make their rule unavoidable, more violent and even less accountable to the population at large. Since 30 June this has meant an unending stream of bloodshed amongst Brotherhood supporters and civilians either protesting them or caught in the crossfire or within sectarian battles. We are caught in a situation where a population is being held hostage and their death is being incited and capitalized on by almost all political elites vying for power: the military generals, the Brotherhood and the liberals.

Today we are still in the midst of the January 25 Revolution. We face a serious threat of its co-optation but until now the power still lies with the people. In order to fight on we must both remember the past as well as see our immediate situation in light of the global power constellation.

We are not alone.

Despite the different contexts across Brazil, Turkey, and Chile, as in Greece, Spain, Portugal, and the United States, people are taking to the street to stand in the way of the rule of local elites by the logic of the longevity of their power and the increase of a minority's wealth. Seeing all these revolutionary moments within one frame means that with or without democracy, with or without elections, popular rule is moving to the street and out of institutions and government offices. As Max Weber wrote, representation is a "structure of domination," and thus we maintain the revolution's cry, "the people want the fall of the system."

We are at a global turning point.

We must fight on.

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