

Part 1: From Rebel to Revolution? Formal Democracy and its Grievances

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Reform versus Revolution

There are many ways to interpret the 30 June protests and Morsi's exit. However, the Western media and commentaries have generally taken the **formal democratic approach**. According to this perspective, president Morsi was democratically elected and thus the legitimate president of Egypt. The recent intervention of the Egyptian Armed Forces was accordingly interpreted as a military coup against a legitimate government.

That the mainstream outlets in the West – such as the BBC, CNN, New York Times, etc. – have adopted this approach did not come as a surprise. From the revolution's very beginning in January 2011, Western diplomats were keen to reduce the demands of the Egyptian revolution to a call for formal democracy. This push for the implementation of formal democratic procedures was part of the 'Orderly Transition' paradigm. This paradigm was espoused by the United States as soon as they finally realized they could no longer hang onto their old strongman, Hosni Mubarak, during the last days of the 2011 revolution¹. This paradigm basically insisted on a top-down political *reform* in contrast to a bottom-up *overthrow* of dominant political and economic institutions and practices, in order to deflect the demands of the revolutionary movement. Street politics and the emergence of grassroots democratic structures were to be contained by the ballot box. As long as free and fair elections were held, the spectre of authoritarianism could be exorcised.

The problems with this formal democratic approach became evident when Egyptians were forced to choose between the lesser of two evils, Mohammed Morsi (the Muslim Brotherhood candidate) and Ahmed Shafiq (who represented the old NDP regime) in the second round of the presidential elections. Whilst the more progressive revolutionary forces had attained a greater share of the vote in the first round of elections, this vote was split between three different candidates (Hamdeen Sabahi, Khalid Ali and Abdel Moneim Abd El-Fotouh). Unwilling to put their eggs in an ex-NDP basket, Morsi won with a small margin of the vote (though there are allegations that Shafiq had in fact won the elections). This strengthened the sense among many Egyptians that although the presidential elections were 'procedurally correct', formal democracy did not necessarily represent the will of the people – and certainly not the will of the revolution.

By discursively reducing the demands of the Egyptian revolution to a call for electoral democracy, Western spokesmen and domestic elites ensured that more substantive reforms – such as an overhaul of the entire socio-economic system – were dropped by the wayside. By focusing only on the second element of the revolutionary demand for "bread, freedom and social justice", they turned a blind eye to the profound systemic socio-economic injustices that underpinned the mass uprisings not only in Egypt but across the region. These injustices are persistently stimulated and aggravated by the neoliberal economic order and international financial institutions – such as the IMF and World Bank. Framing the "Arab Spring" merely in terms of a formal democratic "transition" allowed for a continuation of neoliberal reform in Egypt (which previously underpinned Mubarak's crony capitalism in Egypt). Despite evidence to the contrary, economic liberalization was presumed to coincide with political liberalization.

The Brotherhood's Democracy

This narrative of democratic transition suited the Muslim Brotherhood particularly well. They insisted that their "Islamic" project represented a culturally authentic model of governance vis-à-vis "Western" political and economic practices. Nevertheless, close analysis reveals that their economic model resembles that of other (Western) neoliberal vanguards such as David Cameron. Like Cameron's 'big society', the economic model proposed and pursued by the leadership of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is that of neoliberal reform (i.e. privatization, the selling off of public assets, the support of big business tycoons, etc.) with some charity thrown in. The problem with this modern charity discourse – framed within traditional Islamic terms – is that it fits the neoliberal economic model perfectly, since it literally privatizes both the cause and solution of poverty and inequity, by reducing structural societal problems of redistribution and ownership to a question of individual morality.

Moreover, the democratic transition paradigm, which elevates elections as the only measure of revolutionary legitimacy, allowed the Brotherhood to defend its political position in the eyes of the international community, even in the face of mass protests against its rule. However, this perspective does not take into account the deep dissatisfaction across large sections of the Egyptian population with Morsi's rule. This dissatisfaction resulted from what many saw as the Brotherhoodisation of the state, the increase of violence and torture, the deterioration of living standards and unjust social and political policies.

Many argued that from its very inception, Morsi's government was not a government for the Egyptian people but merely for those belonging to the Brotherhood. Morsi sought to Islamise Egypt's main political institutions such as the Judiciary and Ministries – through the imposition of those loyal to the Brotherhood. Evidence for this includes the November 2012 Presidential decree wherein Morsi sought to unit all branches of government under his control (and which resulted in the Palace clashes in December 2012), the rushed and highly controversial constitution written by an all-Islamist assembly, as well as most recently the ousting of the Culture Minister and the 'cleansing' of Egypt's cultural activities. Moreover, under the pretext of fighting 'feloulist' forces of the old regime, Morsi 'safeguarded' the revolution by ousting all those critical of his government and dragging critical media personalities (including Bassem Youssef) in front of the courts on charges of 'insulting the president'. In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi supporters drove buses full of their supporters to sites where anti-government protesters were gathering (such as Itihediya palace in December and Moqattam in March), thereby guaranteeing bloody conflicts. Recently they also incited direct violence against the Shia minority in Egypt, resulting in four deadⁱⁱ. They increasingly polarised the country by insisting that all those not loyal to the president were not proper Muslims. Moreover, even when the army insisted on its ultimatum, they made no significant steps towards reconciliation, and instead spoke about the need to sacrifice one's blood for the legitimacy of the president.

Tamarrod and the Army

The deep dissatisfaction with Morsi culminated in more than 22 million signatures during the Tamarrod (Rebel) campaign, which demanded the removal of the president, the establishment of an interim government, the rewriting of the constitution and early presidential elections. The military estimated that on 30 June 2013, over 30 million Egyptians took to the streets to make these demands heard. Though the exact number of protesters is disputed, their quantity

certainly outnumbered the votes Morsi had received in the second round of the presidential election (13,230,131). For those who were protesting against Morsi, this signified that Morsi no longer represented the Egyptian people and had lost all legitimacy.

The army stuck to its ultimatum and intervened, after it had come to some understanding with the anti-Morsi movement, as we now know.ⁱⁱⁱ So far, it appears to have stood by the demands of the Tamarrod campaign: it immediately installed an interim president (Adli Mansour – the Head of the Constitutional Court). It is also insisting on a inclusive approach through which early presidential and parliamentary elections are held. Thus, from the anti-Morsi's protesters perspective, the intervention of the army entailed an end to: 1) encroaching Islamisation, 2) a new authoritarianism in Islamist guise; and 3) gross economic mismanagement.

Military spokesmen, such as Colonel Ahmed Ali have furthermore argued that – because of the reluctance of the Brotherhood to give in to the demands of the protesters and the readiness of Ikhwan members to pledge their blood to defend the president – the military intervention constituted a humanitarian solution. It prevented a further escalation of street violence and perhaps even a civil war.

Given the grievances outlined above and the mass character of the anti-Morsi movement, it is not surprising that many Egyptians feel angered by the fact that the Western media not only largely remained silent on the past abuses of power by Morsi but now even depicts Morsi as a legitimate president who has been illegitimately overthrown by a military coup. They insist that the military intervention was not a coup, but rather constituted the crowning achievement of a “second revolution” that represented the will of the people.

PART 2: From Rebel to Revolution? On the Alliance between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Military

In the previous part of this article, we outlined a critique of the formal democratic paradigm that not only underpinned the international responses to Egypt's revolution from its very inception, but also largely formed the backbone to president Morsi's claimed legitimacy. Given the deep political, social and economic grievances in Egypt as well as problems within this paradigm itself, it is not surprising that many Egyptians have argued that president Morsi has lost all legitimacy. It is hence also understandable that many Egyptians are angered by the Western media coverage, which largely holds onto this formal democratic and simplistically depicts the current events as the ousting of a democratic and legitimate president by a military coup.

However, we should be careful to note that this critique of the formal democratic paradigm does not imply a straightforward fiat for military intervention. In order to transcend the conceptual dichotomy between "revolutionary coup" and "democratic legitimacy", one should carefully analyse the motivations and positions of the different factions involved in the process. One should particularly note the silent alliance between the MB and army, and how this has been interrupted by the Tamarrod campaign and the recent street protests.

Since January 2011, the simple discursive contradistinction between "the people" and the "dictator" has been complicated by the fragmentation and crystallization of different revolutionary and counter-revolutionary actors. The popular uprising of 25 January *disorganised* the ruling bloc, but it did not *overthrow* it. The military intervention of the SCAF that forced Mubarak to resign and brought forth a "transitional" regime represented itself as the *realization* of popular power, while, in reality, it merely *replaced* popular mobilization from below by its own top-down rearrangement of elite forces. Gamal Mubarak and his cronies were kicked out the ruling coalition and the patrimonial networks of the NDP and the power of the Interior Ministry were weakened in relation to the Armed Forces.

From the March 2011 referendum onwards, the SCAF found a strong but unruly ally in the Brotherhood and the Salafist movement to impose its formal democratic roadmap on the revolution. The torture and intimidation of political activists, especially women, the failure to democratise authoritarian institutions such as the Ministry of Interior and the army itself, the inability to secure economic prosperity and social justice, stimulated new protests against the military-engineered transition. The Brotherhood, for its part, tried to capitalise on the increased discontent with SCAF rule to strengthen its own position vis-à-vis the generals and the other remnants of the old regime.

While the Brotherhood was unable and unwilling to confront these institutions of power, it could negotiate a compromise in which the old guard of the SCAF retired. Thus, Hussein Tantawi (the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces the Minister of Defense under Mubarak since 1991) and Sami Anan (Chief of Staff since 2005) were pushed to the sidelines of the political game in return for immunity from prosecution. This spectacle was engineered with a great deal of fanfare, which boosted Morsi's image as a pro-revolutionary civilian president who "sent the army back to the barracks", thereby completing one of the goals of the revolution. Morsi also promoted more 'likeable' military officers such as Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi to the position of Defense Minister and Chief of Staff of the Armed forces.

However, as Gilbert Achcar points out in his new book *The People Want*,^{iv} the “revolutionary nature” of these retirements and appointments was grossly overstated both within and beyond the Brotherhood. For Tantawi and Annan had long passed their retirement age and were severely disliked within the military forces anyway. Furthermore, Al Sisi was not as pro-revolutionary as generally claimed: in June 2011, he even publicly justified the virginity tests on 17 female demonstrators^v. In fact, Sisi was forced to retract his statement by SCAF itself, as they were such an embarrassment to them in light of international condemnation.

Nevertheless, there was a temporary division of labour emerging between the Brotherhood and the generals, whereby the Brotherhood safeguarded the economic and political interests of the military apparatus, in exchange for the right to govern. The December 2012 constitution articulated this compromise, as it continued to shield the military’s budget from parliamentary control. Ironically, for the Brotherhood rank-and-file, as well as the revolutionary opposition, this alliance with the military remained a closed book. Instead, the Muslim Brotherhood increasingly depicted itself as engaged in a ‘revolutionary’ battle to cleanse the felouist elements both within state institutions as well as within revolutionary forces, thereby constructing a revolutionary legitimacy of their own. Yet, one could say that this ‘revolutionary’ battle was compromised when they grew increasingly sympathetic to corrupt businessmen affiliated to the previous regime. Even felouist capitalists such as Hussein Salem, who was slapped with a 15 year jail sentence in absentia for illegally acquiring public property and was responsible for the illegal gas deals with Israel, was offered a reconciliatory deal. And more generally, businessmen closely associated to the NDP were asked to return to Egypt in order to improve Egypt’s business climate.

The rise of Tamarrod and the inability of the Ikhwan to contain the movement, alienated the generals from their erstwhile partners. As the Brothers proved incapable of securing political and economic stability, the military apparatus opened negotiations with Tamarrod and the political opposition parties, especially the National Salvation Front. As such, the stand-off between the Armed Forces and the Brotherhood was expressed by a split in the revolutionary movement itself. In the eyes of the anti-Morsi protesters, the Brotherhood had hijacked and betrayed the revolution. The army was conceived of as an instrument of popular power to get rid of the Ikhwan and revive the revolutionary process. In the eyes of the pro-Morsi demonstrators, Tamarrod paved the way for the return of the military and the feloul to power – thus it constituted a counter-revolutionary force. The fight between the Brotherhood leadership and the generals over state power was articulated within the revolutionary movement, splitting it along sectarian lines, with protesters in each camp genuinely believing they represented the revolution.

The Revolution Continued

Even though Tamarrod underestimated the impact of the military intervention on the political relations of force, it would be wrong to consider the whole process as merely a top-down coup. The magnificent movement represented a new high point in the revolutionary process that started since 2011, re-politicising broad layers of the populace, and re-constituting grassroots instruments of popular power. Despite the presence of feloul and opportunist political figures in the ranks of the campaign, its spontaneous mobilisation and organisation represented the revolutionary aspirations that once had driven the 25 January uprising. The military was forced to intervene because of this mass uprising and could only control it by seemingly allying itself

with the movement. Conversely, although many of the Ikhwan members and sympathisers had at one point resisted authoritarianism and crony capitalism side-by-side with secular liberals, nationalists, and leftists, now they were found defending an authoritarian president, who had allied himself on multiple occasions with the same elite faction (the army and corrupt businessmen) that they loathed. Unlike the Tamarrod activists, who had swept the military into action, the Brotherhood rank-and-file was driven into the streets by their reactionary leadership, which struggled for the survival of its narrow interests.

Right now, in order to enact the revolutionary demands of bread, freedom and social justice, the movement has to overcome three obstacles. Firstly, revolutionaries should be wary of the novel “democratic transition” from above. Without any profound transformation of core state institutions such as the army and the security forces, elections, parliament, the presidency, and the constitution, will remain exercises in formal democracy. The on-going top-down transition should therefore be supervised by the building and expansion of bottom-up committees of popular power. Tamarrod could play an important role in this process, turning popular mobilisation into the organization of people’s power. Secondly, the current divide between pro-Brotherhood and anti-Brotherhood protesters weakens the revolutionary movement. By distancing themselves from the generals as a ruling elite and from the opportunist opposition leaders, the Tamarrod revolutionaries could try to reach out to the Brotherhood rank-and-file – without creating any illusions in Morsi or the Ikhwan leadership. Thirdly, even though the military apparatus presented itself as an instrument of the revolution, it seeks to instrumentalise the revolution for its own purposes, much like the SCAF did in 2011. Revolutionaries should recognise that, whereas the common recruits, soldiers and lower officers might be their natural allies, the higher officers are part and parcel of the ruling bloc and will eventually turn against the revolutionary process to defend their political and economic privileges. This requires a careful campaign of solidarity with the army’s rank-and-file, in combination with a staunch criticism of the general staff.

ⁱ See Adam Hanieh (2011) Egypt’s Orderly Economic Transition: Accelerated Structural Adjustment under a Democratic Veneer?, *Development Viewpoint* 64, July 2011

ⁱⁱ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/27/egypt-lynching-shia-follows-months-hate-speech>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jul/06/egypt-army-took-orders-from-us>

^{iv} Achcar, Gilbert. 2013. *The People Want. A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

^v http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/12712/morsi-and-the-army_the-illusiv-power#.Udkuc7CPYt4.facebook