

July 3 In Egypt

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Of the events of July 3, 2013 in Egypt, their nature and what they portend for Egypt.

The unseating of former President Morsi is as difficult to condemn as it is to condone. It is a paradox with no easy resolution. An elected president was unseated by extra-legal means; yet on the other hand the current Egyptian constitution, which he rushed through, also by extra-legal means, provides no workable way of removing a dangerously incompetent and increasingly isolated man. Democracy would normally demand that we wait for the next election to vote him out; yet on the other hand the Muslim Brotherhood was moving rapidly to alter the election law to make it impossible to challenge them at the polls and to gut the judiciary to remove any semblance of a rule of law. The street is a dangerous substitute for electoral politics; yet on the other hand the Brotherhood foolishly excluded all others, even other Islamists. One can go on in this vein, but it would not help make the events easier to justify. No understanding is possible without some searing honesty about where Egypt is today. Nor will the future be brighter, nor the plans better thought out, without learning the lessons of the last 30 months.

Twice in two and a half years, the Egyptian street ejected presidents from office with scant regard for due process. Both presidents had overstayed their welcome, Mubarak after 30 years and Morsi after just one, the latter exhibiting exceptional and precocious ineptitude. The Muslim Brotherhood, to which former President Morsi belonged, is right to cry foul that it was robbed of the fruits of its electoral victory. It is also right to point out that this electoral victory was the result of a chaotic transition process which left the country with no constitutional checks and balances to ward against ineptitude or tyranny, other than the roar of the street and the discipline of the Army. If July 3 2013 was a sin, it was begat from another sin, that of February 11, 2011. This sorrowful cycle must end or it will ruin the nation. Sin will beget sin until redemption is achieved through understanding.

The events of July 3 were a setback for democracy. We need to recognize everyone's role in this setback, especially that of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood has delivered two serious setbacks to democracy in recent Egyptian history. Born after World War I, it adopted the outlook and tactics of intra-war European fascists. After World War II, it conspired repeatedly with the Monarchy and the Army against the imperfect, but relatively open Parliamentary system. Half of the "Free Officers" who led the 1952 coup were members of the Brotherhood. Nasser used to attend lectures by Sayyid Qutb, soon to be appointed the Brotherhood theoretician. When coup leaders banned all political parties in Egypt in 1953, they exempted the Brotherhood. But Nasser grew quickly disenchanted with the Brotherhood maximalist approach. In the dozen years between the attempt on his life in 1954 and the trial and execution of Sayyid Qutb for treason in 1966, Nasser brutally and effectively eradicated the Brotherhood.

The current Brotherhood is a product of the 1970s under Sadat. The second time the Brothers conspired against Egyptian attempts at democracy was during the 2011 revolution. They were in constant negotiation with the Mubarak regime as it was falling, then worked hand-in-glove with the military to pass a disastrous constitutional declaration created by an Islamist lawyer, Tarek El Bishry, that set the stage for the chaotic Egyptian transition that led to their rise and control over all branches of the Egyptian state, save the courts and the Army. Throughout the course of former President Morsi's tenure they exhibited the full pathology of determined totalitarians, but fortunately ineffectually.

The current setback to democracy will only be rectified by the determined action of many parties including, and especially, the liberal political class. This group needs to assume responsibility for digging Egypt out of this hole and providing capable leadership that can talk to the street in an effective manner. It also needs to hold the Army to its promise of promoting democracy in a measured and inclusive fashion, as well as righting the ship of state left listing by the revolution and the disastrous mismanagement of Morsi and the Brothers.

Most importantly we must temper our expectations of the time scale for development of full democratic institutions. The last 30 months have shown that democratic forms do not necessarily bring freedom. The agenda today should focus on freedom rather than only democracy. What Egyptians really want is the freedom to prosper, the freedom to live in peace, the freedom not to be lynched for their religious beliefs, the freedom to develop their own authentic version of a modern nation. The nation will also have to balance this freedom with a sense of personal responsibility, something that has grown weak during decades of authoritarian rule.

Egypt needs economic assistance to prevent yet more unrest due to the dire economic situation. Much of that might be assumed by the Gulf countries, but it would be wise for the US to abandon the fecklessness of the last few years and add its weight to the rescue package. We should not expect, nor hope for, a Marshall plan. What Egypt needs today is a functioning free market system to unleash the coiled entrepreneurial energy. Improved security is necessary for return of tourism and foreign direct investment (FDI), and responsible people cannot shrink from what is necessary to maintain law and order.

The next constitution should recognize the need to build an effective and representative political class through decentralization of the state. Local council and governor election is critical and should be a prime objective for the upcoming stage. The military will likely resist, but the liberals must insist.

Finally and most importantly, there is a need to guard against a recurrence of 1954 and 2013. Two painful lessons are enough. The Army and interim government now have a window to incorporate the Muslim Brotherhood into the political system in a manner that does not allow it to subvert democracy yet again. The Brotherhood should be made to declare itself a NGO or legal charity or have to disband. Once legal, it should submit to the letter of the law, as

with all other such organizations, and make its finances public. If the Brotherhood refuses, it is a telling clue as to its intentions. Egypt cannot be held hostage by a secretive group. The idea that the Brotherhood can blackmail the country via threats of violence should be tackled head on. Egypt needs to exorcise the demons of its soul.

Affection for Egypt and understanding of its recent history prevent blithe optimism regarding the outcome of the next stage. The events of July 3 were a clear win for progressive and tolerant thinking bought at the price of a setback to democratic rules. The threat to social peace is real, posed by Islamists who view open revolt as the only alternative to absolute rule achieved through one-time use of the ballot box. Egypt must face that threat down and, in conquering it, she will set yet another historical precedent for how the yearning of a people can set the course of their history.

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