Commentary

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Democratic Transition or Coup?
Egypt's Second Revolution

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T he ongoing "Second Revolution" in Egypt around deposed President Mohamed Morsi, the first democratically elected leader since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, raises a number of challenges. Is it a failure of democracy or a military-backed move which is, in fact, in defence of the democratic institution? Earlier popular protests against Hosni Mubarak garnered support amongst the youth and the wider international community due to the assumption that these would usher in democracy. However, it has become increasingly evident that while there was a consensus that Mubarak must go, a post-revolution Egypt was seen by various groups through different lenses. After all, democracy does not mean the same to everybody.

The deposition of Morsi has raised many questions. Those in opposition to Morsi, who was backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, called this the second revolution and saw it as merely another step in the direction of democracy. For the supporters of the Brotherhood, this was an attempt to undermine the democratically elected government and, hence, they have taken to the streets in defence of Morsi. While there are calls for fresh elections, are elections all that democracy is comprised of? After the fall of Mubarak, have the people of Egypt developed zero tolerance for governing measures that seem authoritarian and demand quick and tangible results that immediately affect them? Morsi's errors, while in power, cannot be easily dismissed as merely the intolerance or impatience of a change seeking nation. The Muslim Brotherhood, through the election of Morsi, gained prominence, an opportunity it had not seen since the days of Gamal Abdul Nasser.

But in the process of consolidating this opportunity and the power it had gained, the Brotherhood did not look for support from the rest of the political groups which had played an active role in the revolution against Mubarak. Post-elections, the secular opposition and other political groups, despite their broad-based support, felt isolated and sidelined, thus leading to increasing ill- will towards the government in power. Morsi also alienated some sections of society, like women and the youth, from the decision making process despite the key roles they played in the revolution. Morsi's failure to address the concerns of the pre-revolution power groups and businesses increased their discontent with the President. Add to this the state of the economy and it becomes

evident that Mohamed Morsi brought himself to the precipice of public discontent. All that the army did was to push him over the edge.

There are those who insist that it is not the protests of the people that are a threat to a democratic Egypt but Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood who are its enemies. They defend this by pointing out the many excesses that the Muslim Brotherhood has committed against the protestors as well as the unpopular constitutional reforms pushed by Morsi. The critical state of the economy of Egypt is seen as the final straw, thus legitimizing the actions of the protestors to choose to overthrow Morsi instead of waiting for the next elections or even insisting that he call for early elections. But, in the unfolding of the entire series of events, democracy seems to have taken on a singular meaning – elections. The irony in claiming to support and defend democracy while taking off air all television stations which are sympathetic to Morsi does not immediately strike the protestors as paradoxical. While one defence, again in terms of elections, is that an interim President from the Judiciary has been sworn in and elections will soon be held under a new set of regulations, it loses face in the context of the involvement of the military.

Initially, the army chose to merely request the protestors on both sides not to let the movements break out into violence. After the wide spread anti-Morsi protests on June 30, the army took a more active role. Two days later, they took Morsi into custody along with other high ranking members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Adly Mansour, the head of the Supreme Constitutional Court was sworn in as interim President. While the actions of the army are based on the support that they are getting from the people of the nation, these actions cannot easily be labelled as democratic. Democracy insists that the army be subordinate to civilian will. In Egypt, the army took a decision that was supported by civilian will but was not subordinate to it. Once again, the compromise of democracy in the name of defending the same shows up as a glaring paradox. The question of the democratic "legitimacy" of President Morsi's deposition is not as easily answered as the opposition may wish us to believe.

The unfolding drama could have a significant impact on the rest of the Middle East, especially the countries that witnessed the Arab Spring. Despite the involvement of the military, the United States and the United Nations have not come out with any statements calling it a 'coup.' This comes on the heels of already increasing criticism for the American lack of active involvement in Egypt's transition from Mubarak to democracy. The US and the UN, both of which in the past have been at the forefront of condemning military coups and imposing sanctions on the concerned countries are suspiciously shy about using the "C" word for Egypt. While, the US was not overly fond of the Morsi administration, the people of Egypt felt that it was supportive of him and, thus, popular opinion has remained anti-West. The reluctance to call this a coup which would immediately progress to sanctions might be an attempt on the part of the Barack Obama administration to garner popular support in Egypt but it will undermine American efforts for democracy in the rest of the region.

The future of Egypt is tenuous at this juncture but it is clear that the Muslim Brotherhood faces expulsion from the political scenario in Egypt. Democracy, in a larger sense, needs to be understood and a framework must be built for Egypt to establish this but as of now, its future lies in the hands of the military at least until promised elections are held. One can only hope that Egypt does not become another example of a failed compatibility between Islam and democracy.

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