

DATELINE MEI

No. 50

Thursday, 22 August 2013

Need to Step Back from the Brink

P R Kumaraswamy

MEI@ND

Massacres. There is no other way to explain the spiralling violence that has been unleashed in Cairo and other parts of Egypt. With no political settlement in sight, the number would only cross four digits. Unfortunately, saner heads are scarce and neither side is willing or able to step back from the brink. Who is to blame for the current wave of unrest and violence? Overwhelmed by the righteousness of their respective positions, neither the Army nor the Islamists are ready for introspection. This partisanship holds true for the outside world too.

The military, which deposed President Mohammad Morsi, should take the large portion of the blame. General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and his colleagues not only deposed a democratically-elected leader but they did so without a clear and credible alternative. As the Army has found out, ousting Hosni Mubarak was a lot simpler than easing out an Islamist leader with significant political support. The decision was hasty and the Army should have allowed Morsi time to mend his ways or demit office voluntarily. What would have happened had the anti-Morsi momentum continued? Most probably it would have led to a bloodbath, not different from the one that is happening right now. Then Morsi would have been blamed, not the Army.

Military takeovers are never simple. This has been a common means of regime-change in Middle East since the end of World War II. These ‘revolutions’ were often carried out by junior officers who were angered with the rulers. Gamal Abdul Nasser, for example, did not come to power through elections. The same holds true for the Ba’athist regimes in Iraq and Syria. King Idris of Libya did not voluntarily abdicate in 1969. One can add the examples of Bangladesh and

Pakistan.

In some cases, the changeover was brutal and barbaric. Following the military coup in Iraq, Prime Minister Nuri al-Said's body was dragged through the streets of Baghdad and his mutilated corpse displayed in public. The execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto — the only Pakistani leader with a mass base — was one of the first 'achievements' of General Zia-ul-Haq after the latter took over power. Not many would forget the gory end former President of Afghanistan Mohammed Najibullah met at the hands of the Taliban.

There is a difference between these examples and the ongoing saga in Egypt. The military which deposed Morsi, chose to stay behind a civilian face as the interim leader with a largely technocrat Cabinet. This façade makes it difficult to call the events of 3 July a coup; at least not in the political sense of the word. While keeping him under house arrest, the military has indicated that Morsi would be charged with treason. This does not bode well for Egypt.

The Islamists in Egypt and their supporters in the region and beyond have made one fundamental mistake: They failed to recognize the apprehensions of those who voted against Morsi. Not only was Morsi's victory margin small, the popular mandate given to him was for a post-Mubarak transparent and inclusive political order. But Morsi made the same mistakes that Mubarak did. If Mubarak excluded the Islamists, Morsi sought to impose his conservative worldview upon those who did not vote for him. In the days before his overthrow, over 22 million Egyptians (one-fourth of the population) signed petitions calling for his removal. Even this did not force him to act and like Mubarak; he only offered cosmetic changes.

Many have criticized the military's role in the entire crisis. Even those who support Morsi's overthrow could not accept its subsequent handling of the situation. Similar retrospection, however, is not visible among Morsi's supporters. This is true for pro-Islamist and pro-Morsi elements not only in Egypt, but also in other countries.

Victory at the ballots is not a *carte blanche* for the political annihilation of rivals. Such a narrow approach also raises fears over the democratic credentials of the Egyptian Islamists. Many Arab regimes are equally concerned about the behaviour of the Egyptian Islamists both during and after Morsi's tenure. Their ability to seek a *modus vivendi* with the Islamists in their respective countries would depend heavily upon Morsi's supporters backing away and seeking a political settlement with the other half of Egypt. In the absence of such a possibility, these countries would only resort to new restrictions and repressive measures.

Only a political dialogue can resolve the crisis in Egypt. This would mean a degree of accommodation without either side losing face. A clear time-table for fresh elections could be a starting point but to be credible the Islamists, or at least a significant segment of them, should be on board. Presently, there are no signs. With protests gaining momentum and getting more organized, things could only get worse in the coming days. With no towering leader in sight, passions would continue to dominate the Egyptian discourse — meaning more violence.

In the end, the outcome rests on both Islamists and their opponents asking a simple question: Is Egypt their first priority or their last?

Note: This article was earlier published in **The Pioneer** on 21 August 2013. **Web Link:** <http://www.dailypioneer.com/columnists/oped/need-to-step-back-from-the-brink.html>

Professor P R Kumaraswamy is Honorary Director of MEI@ND.

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