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Summary: The overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government involved an unprecedented level of popular mobilization that has created a new opening for the Egyptian and the worldwide revolutionary movement. At the same time, the new military-backed government carries with it serious dangers, as do the contradictions within the left itself, including on gender – Editors

Egyptian Revolutionaries Push Out Islamists, But Face Another Round of Military Rule

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June 30, 2013 saw the largest revolutionary popular mobilization in Egyptian history. On that day, up to 17 million people took to the streets across the country to demand the resignation of the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammed Morsi. (This mass outpouring surpassed even those during the 2011 revolution that toppled the Mubarak regime.) Two days later, on July 2, the Egyptian military deposed Morsi, with General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi claiming to have carried out the people's will, and, as the military did in 2011, promising democracy and free elections.

The fact that these events unseated a president elected just over a year ago worried many democracy supporters, whether liberal or socialist. But most seemed to conclude that revolutions are inherently "illegal," and that the popular will of a mobilized people trumped a narrow victory at the ballot box and an Islamist constitution that had been rammed down the throats of the citizens.

As the human rights activist Sally Sami told the *New York Times* (7/5/13): "Why is it just ballot boxes? Are ballot boxes the only forms of democratic expression when the rulers fail the people?"

The Arab Revolution Continues, Albeit with Deep Contradictions

Amid all the contending forces of July 2013 in Egypt -- revolutionaries, liberals, Islamists, Mubarak supporters, and the military -- one thing is clear. Cynical talk by Western liberals and leftists of the Arab revolutions as dead, of an "Arab winter," of the triumph everywhere of fundamentalism, etc., etc., has been called into question by events. Given Egypt's centrality to the Arab world, the decisive repudiation of the Muslim Brotherhood there could have regional implications. Once again, the Arab masses have shown the world, here in the most populous and important Arab country, that the 2011 revolutions are ongoing. As the Lebanese Marxist Gilbert Achcar concluded in his just-published book, *The People Want*, "The Arab uprising is just beginning."

At the same time, this new chapter in the Egyptian revolution came with deep contradictions. The military is again holding the reins of power and while it has promised liberalization of the

retrogressive Muslim Brotherhood constitution, its immediate actions included violent repression of Muslim Brotherhood supporters. In a sense, the military never left power, having ruled directly in 2011-12 and then having been granted enormous powers in the 2012 Muslim Brotherhood constitution. Moreover, the genuinely revolutionary forces did not have enough organization or support to dominate events. Thus, the overthrow of the Morsi government was the product of a broad alliance of forces, including almost all of Egypt's secular and revolutionary democrats, but also including other forces, some of them quite reactionary, like former Mubarak supporters, ultra-fundamentalists of the Al Nour Party, not to speak of the military itself. Recall that in 2011, the revolutionary youth formed a similarly broad alliance with the conservative Muslim Brotherhood and others to topple the Mubarak regime, aided in the end by the military as well.

But what remained new about Egypt in July 2013, but really since 2011, is that a movement spearheaded by youthful, liberal, nationalist, secular, non-fundamentalist Muslim, and revolutionary forces -- some of these involving Marxists -- has been able to take the Arab world beyond the impasse that had closed off progressive politics ever since the 1980s. As we wrote two years ago, at the onset of the revolutionary process, "In recent decades, the Middle East and North Africa seemed trapped between two reactionary alternatives, pro-imperialist authoritarianism imbued with a nominal secularism (as in Egypt) and equally authoritarian religious fundamentalist movements and regimes that operated in the name of anti-imperialism (as in Iran)" ("Arab Revolutions at the Crossroads," *International Marxist-Humanist*, April 2, 2011 <http://www.internationalmarxisthumanist.org/articles/arab-revolutions-crossroads-kevin-anderson>).

The "Rebellion" Movement of 2013

Launched only on April 28, the youthful "Rebellion [Tamarod]" movement claimed it had garnered over 20 million signatures to a petition putting forth these points in order to demand Morsi's immediate resignation:

- Security has not been restored since the 2011 revolution
- The poor "have no place" in society
- The government has had to "beg" the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a \$4.8bn loan to help shore up the public finances
- There has been "no justice" for people killed by security forces during the uprising and at anti-government protests since then
- "No dignity is left" for Egyptians or their country
- The economy has "collapsed," with growth poor and inflation high
- Egypt is "following in the footsteps" of the U.S. (BBC report of July 2, 2013)

These demands, which were *both economic and political*, gave a focus to the July 30 mass demonstrations.

The Rebellion movement was launched by four young people, all between 22 and 30 years old. It began collecting signatures at the May Day rally in Tahrir Square, but within days it had spread across Egypt, facilitated by both social media and support groups on the ground that mushroomed everywhere. Soon, major opposition politicians like Mohamed ElBaradei and Hamdin Sabbahi

came aboard and by late June, Rebellion claimed have collected 22 million signatures. The rapidity with which the signatures were gained indicated that uncompromising opposition to Morsi had a huge mass base.

It should be emphasized that the 2013 uprising was not “secular” in the sense of rejecting religion as such. Most progressives who joined in the revolt were practicing Muslims or Christians, in keeping with the overwhelming piety of the Egyptian population. Here, however, one must distinguish religious piety from politicized religious fundamentalism, as in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, or other political groups with even stronger fundamentalist agendas. For example, among those who opposed the Muslim Brotherhood constitution and called for Morsi to step down was Abdel Moneim Aboul Foutouh, a liberal Islamist expelled from the Brotherhood who received 17% of the vote in the 2012 presidential elections.

The Military Installs a Government

Once the military took over, however, the specific demands of the Rebellion movement were largely ignored. This could not have come as a surprise to Rebellion or other revolutionary activists. After all, many of their members had risked rape, torture and even death in street confrontations protesting the post-Mubarak Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, when it ruled the country in 2011-12. Once the Morsi government came to power in the 2012 elections, which it won only with the support of liberals and the left, it not only refused to criticize the military-police apparatus, but it also praised the police repeatedly as they attacked demonstrations by democratic and leftist youth.

To replace Morsi, the military appointed as president the jurist Adly Mansour, who tried to appoint the liberal Mohammed ElBaradei as prime minister, only to backtrack under pressure from the Al Nour Salafist Party. (He eventually appointed another somewhat progressive economist, with ElBaradei as vice president.) Mansour enunciated a set of “constitutional principles” that included restoring (vs. the 2012 Muslim Brotherhood constitution) language against discrimination based upon gender [al-jins], race [naw], language, religion, or doctrine. Mansour also seemed to eliminate a clause from the 2012 constitution that had curtailed trade union organizing by mandating a single large union for each occupational sector. However, he kept a reactionary feature that went back to Anwar Sadat’s 1971 constitution, promulgated at a time when Sadat, who was drawing closer to U.S. imperialism, was appealing to the Islamists against the Nasserites: Islamic Sharia law was “*the* principle” rather than, as under Nasser, “*a* principle” source of legislation. Most importantly, there was no sign that the military, the power behind Mansour, would honor these principles in terms of the right of citizens to be free of arbitrary arrest, military trials, etc. This led the Rebellion movement and other revolutionary and liberal groups to strongly criticize these principles for allowing too much power to the military. (Juan Cole, “Egypt: Muslim Brotherhood Calls for ‘Uprising’ as Plan for Elections Is Announced,” *Informed Comment*, July 9, 2013 <http://www.juancole.com/2013/07/brotherhood-elections-announced.html>)

Mansour also outlined a process for reaching a new constitution: He would appoint 10 judges and law professors to create a revised draft constitution, after which 50 representatives of parties, the military, and religious groups, and other civic groups (among them as least 10 young people and women) would then revise it. A referendum would follow, and that would be followed in turn by parliamentary and then presidential elections. All of this by the end of 2013! Again, the rushed

and top-down nature of this process were immediately and roundly attacked by virtually all of the political forces that had organized the June 30 demonstration.

In practice, the military acted in the highhanded fashion it always has. It arrested Morsi, holding him incommunicado. It shut down media associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, including *Al Jazeera*. And then, on July 8, it fired live ammunition at a largely peaceful Brotherhood rally, killing over 50 and wounding 300. At this point, Al Nour withdrew its support for the military. So did the liberal Islamist Aboul Foutouh, who has aligned at times with the left. The large National Salvation Front, which includes both ElBaradei and the leftist Nasserite Hamdin Sabbahi, also criticized the massacre, as did the Rebellion movement.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Power

The reactionary character of the Muslim Brotherhood was demonstrated not only during its one-year rule, but also as it fell from power. Since its overthrow, the Brotherhood has claimed, over and over again, that the crowds on June 30 were not “true Egyptians,” but Christians and Mubarak supporters, plus Jews. (Fact: There are less than 100 Jews in Egypt today, with thousands having left or been expelled in the 1940s, in the wake of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, which created millions of Palestinian Arab refugees as well.) The Muslim Brotherhood website even claimed that the military-designated president, Adly Mansour, is a “secret Jew.” This type of language soon found its target, as fundamentalist mobs attacked members of the Christian minority in some rural areas in the days following Morsi’s overthrow.

Toward the end of his rule, Morsi had made or allowed a number of jihadist gestures from his administration. He appointed as his press spokesman the Salafist cleric Safwat Hegazi, who called for “jihad” against Christians, Shia Muslims, and secularists. Part of this came to fruition on June 23 when 4 Shias were murdered by a Sunni mob while holding religious celebrations in a village outside Cairo. In addition, Hegazi referred to Jews as “sons of apes and pigs,” language Morsi himself had also used before coming to power.

One particular incident in June seemed to have turned the military decisively against him. At a rally in support of the Syrian uprising that Morsi attended, jihadist speakers characterized both the Shia Muslims supporting the Assad regime and Morsi’s opponents at home as “infidels.” Moreover, the speakers also called upon Egyptian youth to go to Syria to join the uprising, while Morsi said later that such youth would not be prosecuted in Egypt upon their return. It appears that this worried the military, which feared the return to Egypt of battle-trained jihadists, as had occurred after the Afghan war during the 1990s.

These kinds of fears were compounded when Morsi appointed Adel Asaad al-Khayyat, a member of Gamaa al-Islamiyya [Islamic Group], as the governor of Luxor province, also in June. In 1997, Gamaa terrorists had slain 62 people, mainly European tourists, at the Luxor temple. This attack virtually ended tourism in Egypt for the next few years, also spelling the end of Gamaa in terms of any popular support among the Egyptian people. While Gamaa renounced violence a decade ago, this appointment still shocked and angered Luxor residents, who forced al-Khayyat to resign in a matter of weeks.

Economic Continuity: From Mubarak to Morsi

While the Muslim Brotherhood was in power, an important continuity emerged between it and the Mubarak regime: support for neoliberal economic policies, including harsh austerity. The Brotherhood implemented a right wing, anti-labor agenda, this in a country where a third of the population subsists on \$2 per day. Middle East scholar Juan Cole summed the situation up as follows: “Morsi, from the Muslim Brotherhood, represents the equivalent of the American tea party in Egyptian politics—captive to the religious right, invested in austerity and smaller government, and contemptuous of workers and the political left. In his first year in office, the nation’s first freely elected head of state has squandered Egyptians’ willingness to give him the benefit of the doubt. He has acted like the president of the somewhat cultish Muslim Brotherhood, rather than like the president of the whole country” (“How Egypt’s Michelle Bachman Became President and Plunged the Country Into Chaos,” *Truthdig*, July 1, 2013 http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/how_egypts_michele_bachmann_became_president_and_plunged_the_country_into_c/)

An editorial from the leftist *MERIP Report* offered an equally damning assessment: “In Parliament, the Brothers eviscerated legislation that would have introduced more progressive taxation. They spurned a draft labor law that would have guaranteed the right to form independent unions through free workplace elections. Instead, they proposed to ‘regulate’ strikes and sided with employers in the wildcat work stoppages that persisted after Mubarak’s ejection. In early summer, the International Labor Organization blacklisted Egypt for failing to live up to the labor conventions to which it is a signatory. The Brothers stymied a popular drive to ‘drop the debt’ of the Egyptian state on the grounds that much of it is ‘odious,’ that is, derived from loans that were embezzled or used to bolster the coercive apparatus. The Morsi government ignored a court order to revoke several selloffs of public-sector firms at shamefully low prices and conducted with little or no competitive bidding. It retooled Mubarak’s ‘Cairo 2050’ plan that, among other things, aimed to expel poor residents from prime real estate in the capital in order to make room for five-star hotels. Such schemes met with vociferous community opposition” (“Egypt in Year Three,” *MERIP*, July 10, 2013 <http://merip.org/mero/mero071013>).

Besides the mounting demonstrations and strikes, other signs suggested that the Muslim Brotherhood’s core base of support was also eroding. In April, they lost heavily in elections for the leadership of Egypt’s professional associations (doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc.). Since the 1990s, the members of these associations had been giving overwhelming support to slates backed by the Brotherhood.

Since 2011, the overall unemployment rate rose from 9% to 13%, while by 2013 the youth unemployment rate stood at 25%.

Neither the military, which reportedly tried to pressure Morsi to compromise in the winter of 2012-13 in light of the demonstrations that raged against his reactionary constitution draft, nor the Muslim Brotherhood, has a solution to these dire economic problems, which are a global characteristic of the 21st century. This is a big part of why the population soured, first on “temporary” military rule in 2011-12 and then on the Muslim Brotherhood’s rule in 2011-13. The Keynesian or neo-Nasserite policies of state intervention in the economy, advocated by much of the left and liberals, do not offer a real solution either, for it was those policies that had reached an impasse by the 1970s, paving the way for neoliberalism under Sadat and the rise of fundamentalism as the main form of opposition to the system. (For a Marxist analysis of the global economic crisis, see Peter Hudis, “From the Economic Crisis to the Transcendence of

Capital,” *International Marxist-Humanist*, August 27, 2012

<http://www.internationalmarxisthumanist.org/articles/economic-crisis-transcendence-capital-peter-hudis>)

Contradictions within the Left, Including on Gender

Other contradictions have also emerged within the secular leftist and liberal forces themselves, as recounted by revolutionary journalist Hossam El-Hamalawy, who considered the emergence of these contradictions a “good thing” in that it was part of a necessary process of self-clarification. If the Muslim Brotherhood is “fascist,” as some on the left maintain, he asked, then should we not support the Army’s attacks on them? But as El-Hamalawy noted, Brotherhood supporters include many middle and working class people who have been drawn to them precisely because of the failure in earlier decades of the left, and it would therefore be unconscionable to support attacks like the July 8 one where the military massacred over 50 Brotherhood members. Unfortunately, some on the left, like the Nasserite Sabbahi, have been speaking uncritically of the military. In addition, the predominantly Nasserite Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions has called upon workers to suspend strikes and to work harder in order to boost the economy. Fortunately, it is unlikely that the rank-and-file workers will follow their leadership on these points. Those workers, who have been striking for months for both higher wages and the firing of their holdover Mubarak-era bosses, played no small part in the toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood government. The overall goal, El-Hamalawy maintained, should be to “stand firm against the Mubarak repression machine” while also opposing the Islamists. (See “Is the Egyptian Revolution Aborted?” Interview with *Jadaliyya*, July 12, 2013

<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/12889/is-the-egyptian-revolution-aborted-interview-with->)

At the same time, one might have expected a bit more self-criticism from those like El-Hamalawy concerning the left’s failure in 2011 to see fully the dangers represented by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Another deep problem facing the secular leftist and liberal forces is that sexual assaults on women continue to take place in Tahrir Square and at the sites of other large revolutionary demonstrations. On July 3, just as Morsi was toppled, Human Rights Watch reported that 100 sexual assaults on women had taken place in Tahrir Square or its environs during the past week. Many of these were gang attacks by large groups of young men. It is unclear if these attacks are spontaneous or part of a sinister plan by some political force. What is clear is that these attacks would seem to exert pressure on women to stay at home rather than participate in the large public demonstrations that have marked the Egyptian revolutionary process since 2011. For example, Muslim Brotherhood politicians have stated repeatedly that women who go to demonstrations are “loose,” that they are there to engage in sex, etc. Despite these physical and verbal attacks, Egypt’s revolutionary women have continued to exhibit great courage as they participate in large numbers in the demonstrations. Numerous groups to protect women from attacks have been organized as well, but have so far not been able to stop them. (See Roger Friedland and Janet Afary, “When Women Fear to Tread: Sexual Violence and the Egyptian Revolution,” *Huffington Post*, Feb. 23, 2013 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/roger-friedland/sexual-violence-and-the-egyptian-revolution_b_2658500.html)

What Next?

The Egyptian revolutionary movement has gained a breathing space, upsetting what had seemed to be a trajectory toward an authoritarian Islamist state coexisting with the old military-police apparatus of the pre-2011 regime. As the French journalist Christophe Ayad noted, the events in Egypt will be viewed widely as a failure not just of the Muslim Brotherhood, but of political Islam more generally, thus impacting the Arab revolutions as a whole: “But the Islamists’ inability to alleviate the catastrophic economic situation, their effort to govern alone, their volcanic temperament, and their sectarian agenda cut them off from society and the liberal and revolutionary forces sooner than had been expected.” Moreover, the demonstrations against the Erdogan government in Turkey, previously held up as a model for the Middle East and North Africa, also served to tarnish the image of Islamism, even in its milder Turkish form (“L’ échec des islamistes au pouvoir marque un tournant dans les révolutions arabes,” *Le Monde*, July 4, 2013). In short, the politics of “Islam is the solution,” put forth by those like the Muslim Brotherhood, has been shown to be no solution at all, at least as far as Egyptians were concerned, and perhaps more widely as well.

Despite this victory over Islamist rule, the danger of a renewal of military despotism remains. Moreover, while the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood have suffered a severe setback, they cannot be counted out for the future, not least because of the lack of a viable alternative. As Maxime Rodinson, the French Marxist scholar of the Middle East put it 1986, in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, “If an Islamic fundamentalist regime failed very visibly and ushered in an obvious tyranny, an abjectly hierarchical society, and also experienced setbacks in nationalist terms, that could lead many people to turn to an alternative that denounces these failings. But that would require a credible alternative that enthuses and mobilizes people. It won’t be easy” (cited in Gilbert Achcar, “Extreme capitalism of the Muslim Brothers,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2013 <http://mondediplo.com/2013/06/05brothers>)

No, it certainly will not be easy. Nonetheless an important opening has been created in Egypt, both for the Arab revolutions and for the global left.