

Muslim Brotherhood President in Egypt. Regime Change or Democracy?

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The newly elected President of the Republic of Egypt, Dr. Mohamed Morsi, has pledged to establish a democratic, constitutional state based upon the rule of law and the will of the people. The greatest challenge that he faces in realising this goal is the leadership of the nation's Armed Forces. Even before Morsi's wafer-thin victory — 52 per cent of the vote as against 48 per cent for his opponent, Ahmed Shafiq— the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) had conducted what analysts have described as a “power grab.” On 14 June 2012, Egypt's High Constitutional Court (HCC), which like the elite in the Armed Forces, comprises Mubarak loyalists, dissolved the democratically elected Parliament and curbed the powers of the President especially in relation to security, defence and foreign policy. 75 per cent of the parliamentary seats are in the hands of Islamic parties, led by the Ikhwanul Muslimin (the Muslim Brotherhood). The military elite also has the right to object to any article in the yet to be drafted national constitution and exercises authority over the national budget.

Why the military is keen to retain control over the nation's finances, it is not difficult to fathom. The military “controls a multi-billion dollar business empire that trades in products not normally associated with men in uniform: olive oil, fertilizer, televisions, laptops, cigarettes, mineral water, poultry, bread and underwear... Estimates suggest that military-connected enterprises account for 10% to 40% of the Egyptian economy. It is an opaque realm of foreign investments, inside deals and privilege that has grown quietly for decades, employing thousands of workers and operating parallel to the army's defence industries.”

To dismantle such a complex structure of economic power fused with political power and military might is not an easy task. Morsi will do well to remember that there is hardly a single instance of a military deeply entrenched in power transferring its authority in a smooth and easy manner to civilian rulers. In Algeria in January 1992, we witnessed the ugly spectacle of a military junta usurping power after the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) had won the first round of elections resulting in a long and bloody civil war which claimed tens of thousands of lives. The military in Myanmar continues to hold the trump card, elections notwithstanding. Pakistan's civilian rulers are very much aware of the powerful presence of the military partly because of the series of coups it had staged in the course of the last 50 years. This is also true to a great extent of Thailand. In Indonesia and Turkey, the military appears to have withdrawn to the barracks but it remains a strong undercurrent in the politics of the two states.

For Morsi to establish a functioning democratic system, he must not only persevere and be principled but also possess superb negotiating skills and clever strategies. His greatest ally in this tussle with military power will be the citizenry of Egypt. Since almost half of the

voting population did not endorse his presidency, Morsi will have to redouble his efforts to reach out to all segments of society. Apart from women and Christians which the media has highlighted, he should also seek the support of other Islamic groups, secular and liberal Egyptians, and socialists. In a nutshell, his approach to politics and policies should be inclusive and all-embracing. By resigning from the Ikhwan, and projecting himself as the President of all Egyptians, Morsi has taken the first step in that direction.

A truly inclusive President will accord priority to the long neglected, huge underclass in Egyptian society. These are the millions — 40% of the population live in poverty—struggling to eke out a living. 25% of Egypt's youth, according to some estimates, are unemployed. The paucity of decent housing is a chronic problem that has plagued Cairo for decades. It has forced some 1.5 million poor Egyptians to scour for shelter in the cemeteries of the rich outside the capital. The lack of clean water and frequent power outages are some of the other colossal burdens that this congested city of 19 million bears.

How will Morsi and his policy-makers and planners address these challenges? If they are going to pursue more liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation — as the Ikhwan's economic programme Al- Nahda seems to suggest — then they are adopting the wrong approach. Such an approach will not help to transform the lives of the disenfranchised and the downtrodden. Neither does the solution lie with the IMF— from whom the Ikhwan hopes to secure a loan soon— with its austerity programme and subsidy cutbacks.

A reformed, de-bureaucratized, corruption free public sector will have to take the lead. It will have to raise incomes of the lower echelons of society; emphasise public housing for the homeless; invest in small and medium sized enterprises; focus upon human resource development. People's cooperatives will have to be established which will help to break existing monopolies in the production and distribution of goods and services. Public entities will have to be re-organised to manage water and energy supply and distribution. Infrastructure development which benefits the poor directly will be given priority. In this and other areas, a socially responsible private sector channelling domestic and foreign capital in accordance with the nation's goals, will have a key role to play.

Analysts have asked if vested interests within and without Egypt will allow such an egalitarian, justice driven economic policy to take root. It is revealing that both Morsi and Shafiq put forward economic ideas which in essence sought to assure the wealthy in Egypt and international capital that their interests would be safeguarded. It was only the candidate who emerged a close third in the first round of the Presidential Election, Hamdeen Sabahy, who offered a genuine alternative that privileged the economically marginalised. It was obvious why the mainstream Western media downplayed his economic agenda.

It is not just on the economy that Morsi appears to have adopted a certain stance. On an important foreign policy issue, namely, US military bases in the region and the upgrading of facilities for the US' 5th Fleet in Bahrain, Morsi and the Ikhwan have been rather quiet. And what is even more critical, the centres of power in the West will watch him closely on his position on Syria and on Egypt's relations with Iran. But more than anything else, it is on the question of Israel that Washington, its European allies, and Israel itself, will judge Morsi. Morsi has promised all of them that he will respect all international treaties that Egypt has entered into— which would of course include the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. However, they are not sure if Morsi will at some point in the future, succumb to pressure from the masses to review and rescind the Treaty, especially since Egyptian public opinion has never

been in favour of the Treaty. Because Morsi presides over a democracy, he cannot — unlike Mubarak the dictator— afford to ignore popular sentiments. Besides, he himself had campaigned in the election as a staunch defender of the Palestinian cause.

How will Morsi's commitment to Palestine manifest itself now that he is President? Will the new Egyptian President lead the campaign for a just peace for the Palestinians— a peace that will ensure the return of Palestinian refugees to their land, as provided for in international law, a peace that recognises East Jerusalem as the capital of a new, viable Palestinian state with its own army, navy and air force? Since a just peace of this sort is anathema to Israeli leaders and most Zionists and Christian Zionists in the US, what will Morsi do? Will he abandon these fundamental demands of the Palestinian struggle? What will be the consequences if he does? Or will he stand up to the Israeli elite and their patrons and protectors in the West? Again, what will be the ramifications?

It is because Israel and Western powers are worried about how a democratically elected President in the Arab world's most important state may move the pieces on the Israel-Palestine/Arab chessboard that they would like the military, with its close ties to Israel and the West, to maintain a grip upon Egyptian politics. That is why these so-called champions of democracy have been somewhat reticent about the military's undemocratic dissolution of Parliament and its shackling of the Presidency. This should not surprise us. After all, haven't they always placed their own hegemonic interests above democratic principles?

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