

Let's Do Lunch: When is a coup not a coup?

By Yuram Abdullah Weiler

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“Imagine U.S. army units invading the Oval Office, arresting President Barack Obama and his senior aides, detaining hundreds of top Democratic Party officials, closing down MSNBC and other Democratic-leaning media, appointing Chief Justice John Roberts as caretaker president, and shooting pro-Obama protesters. Americans would call it a coup.”¹ – Cato Institute senior fellow Doug Bandow.

As the democratically-elected President of Egypt Mohammad Morsi reached the end of his first year in office on June 30, 2013, it should have been clear to him that there was widespread dissatisfaction with his administration not only among the Egyptian people, some 14 million of whom by conservative estimates poured out into the streets in the largest protests in the history of Egypt, but also in Washington. Starting from a post 2012 election high of 88 percent, Morsi's popularity ratings dipped below 35 percent by June 2013 in the days before his ouster on July 3.² An examination of Morsi's record since his election in 2012 sheds light on the reasons why.

Recall that Morsi's rival in the 2012 runoff election was Ahmed Shafiq, the last prime minister in Mubarak's regime and a former air force commander, so many votes, technically speaking, were more against Shafiq rather than being for Morsi. Also in the midst of the vote counting, Egypt's judiciary dissolved parliament and the military issued an interim constitution, further clouding exactly what powers would be granted to the president-elect. In addition, both Morsi and Shafiq declared victory³ after what was described as a “polarizing election.”⁴ Nevertheless, the Muslim Brotherhood, while cautious with the military and other political foes before their ascent to power, appeared to take their 52 percent plurality in the runoff as a landslide rather than the tenuous margin that it really was, and even dared to openly announce their opposition to the generals who had declared themselves in charge of the constitutional process.⁵

While promising “men, women, mothers, sisters, laborers, students ... all political factions, the Muslims, the Christians” to be “a servant for all of them,” Morsi and the Brotherhood seemed more concerned with wresting control of the levers of power from the Egyptian army's generals.⁶ So instead of instituting publicly demanded reforms, such as elections instead of appointments for provincial officials, Morsi was quick to place members from his own *Ikhwan* into positions of authority. Ignoring secular and minority political opponents as inconsequential, Morsi crossed the political Rubicon in November 2012 when, after the non-Muslim Brotherhood members of the constitutional commission resigned in protest, he declared himself and his constitutional authors exempt from judicial oversight.⁷

Morsi's marginal political capital was all but exhausted after he and the *Ikhwan* pushed through their constitution to a referendum, so there was nothing left for him to spend to counter Egypt's dismal economic numbers when they persistently refused to improve during his term in office. In his campaign, Morsi had made promises of fostering economic growth, but failing to attract outside investment and institute more market-oriented policies, he could not deliver to his impoverished Egyptian constituency.⁸ Morsi even had to obtain an \$8 billion loan from Qatar to keep his ailing administration financially afloat and avoiding bankruptcy. Also, his failure to

impose neoliberal economic reforms cost Egypt \$4.8 billion in International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans. A poll taken shortly before the first anniversary of the Morsi administration showed that while 98 percent of the Muslim Brotherhood supporters said they felt better off than they were a year ago, 80 percent of the rest disagreed and 73 percent felt he had made poor decisions during his tenure as president.⁹

U.S. President Obama even called President Morsi on July 1, as if trying to give a “heads up” of his impending doom. According to a White House press release:

“The President told President Morsi that the United States is committed to the democratic process in Egypt and does not support any single party or group. He stressed that democracy is about more than elections; it is also about ensuring that the voices of all Egyptians are heard and represented by their government, including the many Egyptians demonstrating throughout the country. ... President Obama reiterated that only Egyptians can make the decisions that will determine their future.”¹⁰

Even after the coup was *fait accompli*, Obama, in a July 3 statement said that the U.S. was “... deeply concerned by the decision of the Egyptian Armed Forces to remove President Morsi and suspend the Egyptian constitution. I now call on the Egyptian military to move quickly and responsibly to return full authority back to a democratically elected civilian government as soon as possible ... I have also directed the relevant departments and agencies to review the implications under U.S. law for our assistance to the Government of Egypt.”¹¹

Obama also remarked, “No transition to democracy comes without difficulty, but in the end it must stay true to the will of the people. ... [W]e will continue to work with the Egyptian people to ensure that Egypt’s transition to democracy succeeds.”¹² This is the U.S. President’s idea of a “transition to democracy?” Strange, it looked more like a armed coup to me. After all, over 50 people, mostly from the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters were killed by the military not to mention the fact that what has been installed is a government answerable to the military’s generals instead of to the Egyptian people.¹³

While it is clear that Morsi had lost popularity and credibility as president, still, why no outcry from the U.S. over this blatant and somewhat sanguine coup? The assistance to Egypt referred to above comes to about \$1.55 billion for fiscal year 2014, of which \$1.3 billion is military aid.¹⁴ If the Egyptian military “coup” were to be called a “coup,” U.S law would require aid to be frozen, thus creating the potential for a regional security dilemma. Max Fisher of the Washington Post writes that the absence of an objection from Obama “has to do with the administration’s increasing impatience with Morsi’s mistakes and its desire to maintain leverage with the Egyptian military, one of the most powerful institutions in one of the most important countries in the Middle East.”¹⁵

There are other geopolitical reasons why the U.S. would remain mute over a military takeover.

- The U.S.-Egyptian military relationship is perceived by Washington as a stabilizing and moderating force in the region;
- The U.S. needs Egypt to maintain the façade of peaceful relations between a “moderate” Arab state and the Zionist entity;

- The U.S. military enjoys rights to fly over Egypt's airspace, shares intelligence with the Egyptian military, and is assured transit access for U.S. Naval vessels to the Suez canal;
- Egypt plays host to Operation Bright Star, which is the largest U.S. military exercise in the world;
- Washington sees Egypt as a counterforce to Islamic "extremism" and views the military as a watchdog for the Muslim Brotherhood and other extremist groups;
- Egypt has substantial gas reserves;¹⁶
- The U.S. desires to maintain the flow of crude oil through the SUMED pipeline,¹⁷ which runs from the Red Sea port of Ain Sukhna to the Mediterranean port of Sidi Kerir; and
- The U.S. wants to avoid any sort of catastrophe that might cause refugees to flood into economically troubled Europe.¹⁸

In short, Washington will support a government in Egypt that closely resembles the previous Mubarak regime, and it will never go against the wishes of the Egyptian military. In fact, Egypt even sees itself as one of Washington's key "partners" as the Foreign Ministry states: "The US-Egypt relationship has grown to include working closely on counter-terrorism; the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; ... and promoting moderate Islamic values and representative governments in the Arab world. To meet these responsibilities however, Egypt must maintain a strong military force. In the volatile Middle East, political influence is directly related to one's military capabilities."¹⁹

And oh yes, there is the small matter of a personal relationship between the coup ringleader, General Abdel Fattah al-Sissi and U.S Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel. It seems that General al-Sissi, who announced Morsi's ouster in a state-run TV broadcast, had lunch with the defense secretary when the General was in the U.S. for a visit in late spring, during which time Hagel voiced U.S. objections over plans for a coup by the Egyptian army. As to the significance of the luncheon, Adam Entous of the Wall Street Journal quoted a senior Obama administration official as saying that the relationship between Hagel and al-Sissi is "basically the only viable channel of communication during the [Egyptian] crisis." Confirming its desire to maintain warm relations with the Egyptian military, the U.S. plans to go ahead with a delivery of four more F-16s as previously scheduled. Underscoring the shrinking U.S. ability to dictate policy to Egypt is the \$12 billion pledged by three unnamed Arab monarchies to the new government, a far cry from the paltry U.S. pledge of \$1.55 billion.²⁰

According to the pollsters, the army's coup against the President received a resounding 94 percent approval rating by the Egyptian people. Still, there is something that is very troubling to me about the military ousting a democratically-elected leader. If the people, with Kalashnikovs in hand, had in similar great numbers stormed the sacred halls of the Egyptian government and demanded Morsi's removal, I would have no problem calling the action a popular revolution. However, what happened, despite its popularity, was unquestionably a bare-faced military coup executed with Washington's tacit approval.

Others disagree that Washington had any say over the recent military coup by public plebiscite. "Morsi's fate was decided in Cairo, not Washington," writes Cato's Bandow.²¹ In any event, Washington is bending over backwards not to call it a coup. So to answer the question of when

is a coup not a coup, apparently, it helps when the coup's leader does lunch beforehand with the U.S. Defense Secretary.

Endnotes

¹ Doug Bandow, "Egypt's Coup Conundrum," *Cato Institute*, July 10, 2013, accessed July 22, 2013, [http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/egypts-coup-conundrum?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+CatoRecentOpeds+\(Cato+Recent+Op-eds\)](http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/egypts-coup-conundrum?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+CatoRecentOpeds+(Cato+Recent+Op-eds)).

² "The second time around," *The Economist*, July 6, 2013, accessed July 22, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21580533-egyptian-army-widespread-popular-support-has-ended-presidency-muhammad-morsi>.

³ Associated Press, "Egypt Election Results: Mohammed Morsi, Muslim Brotherhood Candidate, Announced President," *Huffington Post*, June 24, 2012, accessed July 22, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/24/egypt-election-results-morsi-president_n_1622133.html.

⁴ Sarah El Deeb and Lee Keath, "Egypt Election Results: Muslim Brotherhood Declares Mohammed Morsi Victory," *Huffington Post*, June 17, 2012, accessed July 22, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/17/egypt-election-results-muslim-brotherhood-mohammed-morsi_n_1604499.html.

⁵ Sarah El Deeb and Lee Keath, "Egypt Election Results: Muslim Brotherhood Declares Mohammed Morsi Victory," *ibid.*

⁶ Sarah El Deeb and Lee Keath, "Egypt Election Results: Muslim Brotherhood Declares Mohammed Morsi Victory," *ibid.*

⁷ "The second time around," *ibid.*

⁸ Doug Bandow, "Egypt's Coup Conundrum," *ibid.*

⁹ "The second time around," *ibid.*

¹⁰ "Readout of the President's call with President Morsy of Egypt," *Office of the Press Secretary*, The White House, July 2, 2013, accessed July 22, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/02/readout-presidents-call-president-morsy-egypt>.

¹¹ Barack Obama, "Statement by President Barack Obama on Egypt," *Office of the Press Secretary*, The White House, July 3, 2013, accessed July 22, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/03/statement-president-barack-obama-egypt>.

¹² Barack Obama, "Statement by President Barack Obama on Egypt," *ibid.*

¹³ Dalibor Rohac, "U.S. Aid Does a Disservice to the Egyptian People," *Cato Institute*, July 10, 2013, accessed July 22, 2013, <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/us-aid-does-disservice-egyptian-people>.

¹⁴ Tom Curry, "Egyptian Coup Reflects Strategic Interests of the United States," *Pan African News Wire*, July 3, 2013, accessed July 22, 2013, <http://panafricannews.blogspot.com/2013/07/egyptian-coup-reflects-strategic.html>.

¹⁵ Max Fisher, "Another reason why the U.S. hasn't condemned Egypt's coup: one high-level personal relationship," *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2013, accessed July 22, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/07/11/another-reason-why-the-u-s-hasnt-condemned-egypts-coup-one-high-level-personal-relationship/>.

¹⁶ CFR, "Strengthening the U.S.-Egyptian Relationship," *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2002, accessed July 22, 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/egypt/strengthening-us-egyptian-relationship-cfr-paper/p8666>.

¹⁷ SUMED Pipeline website, accessed July 22, 2013, http://www.sumed.org/docs/strategic_location.aspx.

¹⁸ Tom Curry, "Egyptian Coup Reflects Strategic Interests of the United States," *ibid.*

¹⁹ "Egypt and the United States: A Strategic Relationship," *Egyptian Embassy*, no date, accessed July 22, 2013, <http://www.egyptembassy.net/relations.html>.

²⁰ Adam Entous, "U.S. Defense Chief Mans Hot Line to Cairo," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 11, 2013, accessed July 22, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324425204578597981624524800.html>.

²¹ Doug Bandow, "Egypt's Coup Conundrum," *ibid.*