

Armies in Power

by *Immanuel Wallerstein*



It is almost always bad news when armies are in power. In Egypt, the army has been the deciding force since 1952. The recent destitution by the Egyptian army of President Mohamed Morsi was not a coup d'état. One cannot commit a coup d'état against oneself. What happened was simply that the army changed the way it was governing Egypt. For a short period, the army had allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to make some limited state decisions. When they began to feel that the actions of the Morsi government might lead to a significant increase in Muslim

Brotherhood power at the expense of the Egyptian army, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi decided that enough was enough, and acted ruthlessly to increase the day-to-day power of the army.

Armies in power are in general highly nationalist and very authoritarian. They tend to be very conservative forces in terms of the world-economy. Furthermore, the senior officers not only permit the army to have a direct entrepreneurial role, but they also tend to use their military power as a mode of personal enrichment. This has certainly been the case for most of the time since the Egyptian army assumed direct power in 1952 - or shall we say, at least since 1952.

Is it possible for armies to play a progressive role in national and world politics? Yes, certainly. Sometimes the nationalism of the army leads them to espouse an anti-imperialist line in geopolitics and a populist role in supporting the needs of the underclasses. This was the case with the initial role of Gamal Abdel Nasser. But progressive populism is unnatural for armies, which find it difficult to engage in the bargaining process it necessarily entails internally. And progressive populism leads to a readiness to impose the army's views on neighboring countries, thereby undermining precisely what had been progressive in their geopolitical stances. This was true of Nasser as it had been true of Napoleon.

What is interesting about the Egyptian army's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood is the reaction it has evoked within and outside the country. Remember first of all that before the initial uprising against Hosni Mubarak began in Tahrir Square in 2011 the Muslim Brotherhood had managed to obtain a limited role in political life (a small minority of seats in the legislature and some limits to its repression) by a tacit deal with the Mubarak regime, which means with the army.

So when the populace began to flow into Tahrir Square demanding change, neither the army nor the Muslim Brotherhood was very supportive. However, when the popular

uprising seemed to be taking off, both the army and the Muslim Brotherhood decided hastily to join it, in order to tame it by appropriating it. And when the run-off in the first presidential election reduced the choice to one between Morsi and a former leading figure of the Mubarak regime, both the secular left and centrist voters and the army chose Morsi, enabling him to win by a small margin.

When Morsi decided to proceed to put into effect a new constitution with a decidedly Muslim tilt, the secular voters returned to Tahrir Square to denounce him. The army joined them once again to control the situation. And the secular voters now cheered on the very army they had denounced two years earlier.

The political situation is straightforward. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian right (the forces that had long supported Mubarak) command enough voters so that any reasonably honest election will allow one or the other to be victorious. The secular forces - the multiple socialist parties and the middle-class centrists whose leading figure at the moment is Mohamed el-Baradei, are too few in number. In the end, they have to join forces with one or the other, while they really want neither the right nor the Muslim Brotherhood. And the Egyptian Salafists joined the anti-Morsi coalition, hoping thereby to strengthen their own hand among Muslim activists.

In the rest of the world, the enthusiasts for the actions of the army are a strange lot: Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Algeria and Morocco, and probably Bashar al-Assad. The unhappy ones are Hamas, Ennahda in Tunisia, Turkey, and Qatar. As for the United States (as well as western Europe), it loses whoever wins, and has become irrelevant.

For Israel, Morsi represented a threat whereas the Egyptian army will preserve the relative detente. For Saudi Arabia, the Brotherhood represented their great rivals in the Arab world. For al-Assad, the Brotherhood had been great supporters of the Free Syrian Army. Algeria and Morocco both work hard to constrain Islamist forces, and the fall of Morsi is therefore to be applauded. For Russia, the fall of Morsi probably guarantees no major shift in the geopolitics of the region, which is what Russia wants.

For Turkey (as for Ennahda in Tunisia), the fall of Morsi undermines the case for a "moderate" Islamic government. For Qatar, the fall of Morsi weakens their hand in their struggle with Saudi Arabia.

The U.S. government wants above all stability in the region. It was ready to work with Morsi, if necessary. It has long had the closest possible ties with the Egyptian army. It has tried to wiggle between the two, offending both sides as well as both neo-cons and human rights supporters in the United States.

The one presumed piece of U.S. leverage with Egypt - its financial aid, of which 80% goes to the army - cannot be used. For one thing, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates have already sent in more money than the United States has been giving. And secondly, the U.S. government needs the Egyptian army more than the other way around. The Egyptian army likes to buy its equipment from the United States. But if cut off from that, it can find equipment elsewhere. The U.S. government needs the Egyptian army for overflight rights, intelligence assistance, assurances about detente with Israel, and many other things, for

which there is no replacement. So, Obama is reduced to making symbolic gestures, with no teeth.

The Egyptian right has won, the Egyptian left has lost (even if it doesn't yet acknowledge this), and the Muslim Brotherhood will go underground, from which it may yet re-emerge, strengthened.