

President Morsi's last chance

Chibli Mallat, Monday 11 Mar 2013

If the military takes over again, it will be a serious setback for Egypt and the region; but it is not too late for Morsi to avoid a military coup

With the New York Times reporting on the rise of the risk of a military takeover, Egypt seems destined to enter a further cycle of self-fueling conspiracies and self-fulfilling prophesies.

If the military takes over again, it will be a disaster for Egypt, and for all the revolutions in the Middle East, setting the country back to the military coup of 1952.

Democrats across the world will be appalled, but many will remain silent, so determined the Muslim Brotherhood has shown itself to be to grab power at any cost, and so unintelligently at that.

It was already a great achievement of the people of Egypt to stand up to SCAF, insist that they honour their word to retire to their barracks, and accept, once and for all, that the military establishment has no role to play in politics in a democratic country.

When Morsi was declared president, against the preferred candidate of SCAF, a former prime minister under Mubarak, a sigh of relief across the world translated into the people rallying around the president.

Relief lasted a few short weeks, for it was repeatedly, unintelligently, undone by Morsi in a series of authoritarian decisions, most conspicuously a constitutional declaration in which he put himself above the law, followed by a railroading of the constitution-making process at a time when a third of the members of the Constituent Assembly had resigned.

Ever since that ill-fated declaration, the street has been rioting.

This ongoing dissatisfaction is just brushed away by Morsi, who encouraged the mob to threaten the Supreme Constitutional Court judges, and pushed further, again in all haste, parliamentary elections. A lower court halted the process, drawing Egypt into a continuing institutional void as the calls for the army to take over grew louder.

Any such coup would be a disaster, not only because Egypt risks a fate similar to that of the horrendous Algerian civil war between the army and the Islamists that lasted a full decade, but also because of the loss of all the extraordinary achievements of the Nile Revolution: the successful defeat of the dictator by chiefly nonviolent means, and the outbreak of freedom and dignity.

This dual legacy is still with us. Of course there were setbacks, not least the takeover of SCAF. Society resisted SCAF, and prevailed. Revolutionary Egypt has a lot to offer, if only Morsi adopts simple measures, which he promised without ever taking a step to fulfill them.

One should recall that the Muslim Brotherhood had repeated time and again in 2011 that it would not field a presidential candidate. That important promise for the stability of Egypt was jettisoned, and one could argue that it is not too late to honour it, and request that the Brotherhood president step down.

Still, I do not think that Morsi should be removed from the presidency, because there are ways still available for him to honorably recapture that joint Egyptian spirit of nonviolence and freedom which the whole world watched with awe, and which we saw rekindled around him in the few early days after his election.

The first step is to appoint a prime minister from the opposition, and to establish a seriously comprehensive Cabinet that includes leading figures from the revolutionary coalition.

This would actually be sufficient to bring some calm to a boiling Egypt and push back the spectre of military putsch and/or civil war.

Beyond that, Morsi should step back, and let the coalition Cabinet lead and take measures needed to further calm the street. Many are economic and Egyptians will agree that tourism needs to be back in full force, and that unrest cannot degenerate into violence.

A calmer, united Egypt will allow citizens to resume their normal activities and for foreign visitors – who dropped by 37 percent in 2012 – to return to Egypt.

Others are steeped in basic human rights: violence against women should be punished severely, the police must be urgently reformed away from both dereliction of duty and brutal arrests and prison exactions, former regime leaders should be banned from elected office and tried if there is blood on their hands, and the Nile Revolution in its original pristine nonviolent and free spirit should be honored as the beacon for change in the region.

Then there are ways for the Cabinet to rekindle the political and constitutional process with the revolutionary coalition, as opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood alone. The constitution should be subjected to a reasonable and slow process of amendment, and provincial and national elections can be conducted on the basis of as large a coalition as possible, rather than in the way followed to date.

The Brotherhood is taking advantage of Mubarak's long tolerance for their organisation, while any other oppositional group, however small, was hounded and its leaders jailed. When Professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim publically stood up to nepotism in Syria in 2000, he was arrested that very night in Cairo, and his painfully constructed NGO, the Ibn Khaldun Center, was destroyed.

The same goes for Ayman Nour, who Mubarak jailed for three years because he dared present himself as a competitor in the presidential elections.

Leaders of this calibre are needed in a serious coalition cabinet, which can also include some Salafists. Only by doing so can Morsi avoid the growing spectre of a military coup.

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