Qüestions CIDOB
D.L.: B-8441-2012

35
SEPTEMBER
2013

EGYPT CRISIS
The Algerian Perspective

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On 3 July 2013, the Egyptian military removed president Mohamed Morsi from power and installed an interim government. Morsi had been elected on 24 June 2012. He was the first democratically elected head of state in Egyptian history.

General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, who broke the news in the presence of the Grand Sheikh of Al Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb, the Coptic Pope Tawadros II as well as opposition leader Mohamed ElBaradei, announced, in addition to Morsi's removal, the suspension of the constitution, and a new presidential election to be held soon. Morsi was put under house arrest and Muslim Brotherhood leaders were arrested.

This came after large-scale ongoing public protests in Egypt for and against Morsi, and a warning from the army to respond to the demands of the protesters or it would impose its own roadmap. On 30 June, marking the anniversary of Morsi's inauguration as president, millions of protesters across Egypt took to the streets and demanded the resignation of the president, whom they accused of being increasingly authoritarian and of pushing through an Islamist agenda with no regard to the opposition. The demonstrations turned violent when five anti-Morsi protesters were killed in separate clashes. On the morning of 1 July, anti-Morsi protesters ransacked the national headquarters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo. On 3 July, gunmen opened fire on a pro-Morsi rally, killing sixteen people and wounding two hundred.

The situation escalated to a full-blown national political and constitutional crisis, with Morsi refusing the military's demands and the army threatening to take over if the civilian politicians did not resolve the situation. Morsi gave a defiant speech in which he reiterated his "legitimacy" as a democratically elected president and criticized the military for taking sides in the crisis. On 3 July, the Egyptian military appointed Chief Justice Adly Mansour as interim president, and charged him with forming a transitional technocratic government.

There were mixed international reactions to the events. Much of the Arab world was supportive or neutral, with the notable exceptions of Tunisia and Turkey. There was also a measured response from both the United States and the European Union. The world media meanwhile indulged in what seemed at times like a semantic debate about when a coup was not a coup – it was variously described as a coup d'état or as a pro-revolution intervention.

Many observers recalled what had happened in Algeria in 1992, when what looked like a democratic transition was knocked off course by the military: they aborted the second round of general elections which the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was poised to win. This was the first democratically-elected Islamic experiment which was (pre-emptively) halted in the name of protecting democracy and it triggered a civil insurgency between the Armed Islamic Group (the armed wing of the FIS) and the national armed forces, during which an estimated 150,000 people died, thousands disappeared and maybe 500,000 fled the country, billions of dollars-worth of Algeria's infrastructures was destroyed. Francis Ghilès says that Algerian politics have never quite recovered from that failed experiment - the country is still disoriented. He adds that events in Egypt follow a well-known script: that of the "revolutionary passion play" which begins "in dewy innocence of collective rebirth" and ends "with the arbitration of arms".

Is this a constant?

Well, revolutions do not follow a straight line. And they tend to go through phases (acts in a play, if you wish) which are convoluted. Despite the revolution, time passes and no one is better off - which is what is happening in Egypt. The obvious popular reaction to this is that the people in charge, who were supposed to conjure the ills of the past, have signally failed to do so. And so, in come the military as saviors of the revolution. Algeria is a cautionary tale: it all went so badly wrong.

But is not Egypt a special case?

Egypt is not really the leader of the Arab world any more. The days of heady Pan Arabism are long since gone. Since signing a peace treaty with Israel a generation ago, Egypt has become a lynchpin for the security of Israel. In many ways it is a client state of the US. It is here that the 50 year old competition between Egypt and Algeria for primacy in the Arab world must be mentioned. It was Algeria, after all, which trained the commandos of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and introduced the then Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to the United Nations in 1975. Egyptians resent any comparison with Algeria – as many middle easterners, they consider their Maghreb neighbors as slightly uncouth country bumpkins. They resent comparing Egypt to either Turkey or Algeria.

After the coup, comparisons seem inevitable...

Events in Algeria must first be recalled. The FIS never formed a government, though it did run many municipalities after it won local elections in May 1991. In Egypt it was the mismanagement of the Muslim Brotherhood during their

year in power which prompted their downfall. The experience of achieving independence in the two countries was quite different and guerilla warfare is not as obvious a recourse in Egypt (except in the Sinai) as it is in Algeria. That said, cities can bread their own form of guerilla warfare – *vide* the Battle of Algiers in 1957 and the risk of Egypt's large cities becoming maybe ungovernable. Now, in Egypt as in Algeria, the majority of Islamist supporters are non-violent - but in both countries some are not. Those Algerians who had been fighting in Afghanistan (more than one thousand) were very violent, well trained and determined. Would similar groups resort to escalating violence in Egypt today? The question in Egypt today is akin to the question in Algeria twenty-one years ago: how brutally will the security forces react? Will violence escalate rapidly? The Islamists as victims - were events in Egypt to take that course - offers fertile ground for the recruiting of more Islamists. That is one of the lessons to be learnt from Algeria: as the number of victims increases, as the "dirty war" intensifies, it is best to remember that it takes years – a generation maybe, maybe more - to heal the wounds.

Not to mention the economic costs of reconstruction, which are huge...

Yes, indeed. But Algeria has 37 million people, as opposed to Egypt's 84 million, and plentiful oil and gas resources. Egypt is dependent on foreign aid and so a far greater number of countries (headed by Saudi Arabia and the US) have a stake in Egypt than they have in Algeria, and they will seek to influence the outcome of events. Also, unlike Algeria, Egypt has no strong links (long-standing immigration, family ties, mixed marriages) with Europe.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the FIS: how similar are they politically?

In Egypt, after winning the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood was in government for a year; in Algeria, the FIS, after winning the local elections in 1991, governed many towns for more than a year. What the FIS did and what Morsi's government did, was to engage in cultural wars: the role and status of women was a key battle ground. The other common feature is that neither party had ever thought through the management of a modern economy.

Some observers say this is a key weakness of most Islamist parties, one where Turkey's AKP is far more modern, and hence able to govern...

The Islamists have not addressed the economic and social problems their countries face. There are certainly no easy solutions to these problems, particularly in the current global economic context. The Washington Consensus is dead – killed in Egypt as in Tunisia by the cronyism in favor of the ruler's family which characterized the privatization programs encouraged by the World Bank -, but there is no going back to state socialism. Most observers seem at a loss as to what to do. Little thought - be it in Egypt or Tunisia, let alone the West -, is devoted to what economic reforms might be put in place. Those who are pessimistic, and they have reason to be economically, think that the Egyptian economy is akin to a slow motion train crash. The millions of young unemployed will simply never find jobs. And a deteriorating economic situation is unlikely to argue in favor of a democratic outcome in Egypt.

This was not the case in Algeria, though…

A point which should be born in mind when attempting to compare the two countries is that FIS leaders had publicly insulted the Algerian army during Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. They rushed to pay tribute to the Saudi leaders, their paymasters, only to find, on their return, that people in Algeria were in favor of Saddam Hussein, the Robin Hood of the Arab street. The FIS leader Ali Belhadj appeared in Algiers in combat fatigues as the coalition forces entered Iraq in January 1991 and, in front of huge crowds, castigated the Algerian army for torturing "fellow citizens" but being incapable of saving "our brother Saddam" (whom the FIS had visited after their misconceived trip to Saudi Arabia). As Algerian leaders, including President Chadli Bendjedid had worked hard behind the scenes to try and convince Saddam to withdraw his troops from Kuwait in the autumn of 1990, this insult turned out to be the death toll of the FIS.

And the start of the civil war.

Yes. Facing civil insurgency and guerrilla activity by the Armed Islamic Group, the army resorted to very brutal tactics: they arrested tens of thousands of people and exiled them to camps in the Sahara, all kinds of dirty tricks characteristic of civil war were indulged in - which worked only too well in a mountainous country long used to guerilla warfare. And Algeria was practically cut off from the world for ten years. The same happened during the Spanish Civil War, did it not? On the internal front, some people ended up hating Islamists more than the army, and others were left hating the army more than Islamists. In the end, the violence of the Islamists failed to bring down the military rulers of the country and the millions of civilians, notably women, who were dead set against the idea of a state ruled by shari'a law. A very similar outcome would seem to be likely in Egypt.

In the early 1990s, the crude Mubarak-era logic was that "there is no other way to deal with Islamist groups" but through brutal repression. Violence seems the only way Algeria (then) and Egypt (now) know how to deal with Islamists, and violence to opponents the only response the FIS (then) and the Muslim Brotherhood (now) know… Today however islamists have, to a degree, been coopted into the Algerian body politic.

When violence unleashes, a multiplier comes into play: the more violence there is, the more difficult is it to stop. In Algeria, violence happened only thirty years after independence - as if historical violence (the War of Liberation was tough) attempted a comeback. In any case, there is one thing everybody in Algeria is sure of: they want no more war. This, of course, is conditioning and will condition many things in the political evolution of the country. Today, however, Islamists have - to a degree - been coopted into the Algerian body politic.

In Egypt, national reconciliation currently seems remote. The principles for which Mubarak was overthrown were human rights and due process for all, but the Muslim Brotherhood has revealed itself as a force intent on the negation of all political opposition…

The US and the UK thought the Muslim Brotherhood would learn to play by the rules of democracy. They also believed that of Ennahda in Tunisia until the US embassy in Tunis was nearly torched by a crowd in September 2012 while the government sat back and did nothing. Both countries understand better now that Islamists are not quite Christian Democrats, however much they need to be in-

tegrated into the political process. They also understand better that the informal economy the Islamists encourage and thrive on is increasingly linked to smuggling and global criminal networks.

The revolutionary passion play is thus necessarily a tragedy?

People who topple regimes either do not want to get involved in government or do not know how to do it – this is as fact. It is also a fact that it is easier to start revolutions than to finish them, to bring down despotic regimes than to construct constitutional democracies. All revolutions reach a stage where, free from the oppressors who masqueraded as liberators, people (the chorus) say: "This time it will be different." Yes, it is like a Shakespeare play - a tragedy.