

All Coups Are Not Created Equal

By J. Michael Barrett¹

It feels uncomfortably counterintuitive for advocates of modernity, democracy and freedom to accept the Egyptian military's decision to remove the duly elected Muslim Brotherhood government led by President Mohammed Morsi. After all, most military coups are the work of a privileged few who seize power in their own interests, not in an effort to protect the rights of those outside the newly installed military regime. Worse, in this case the military in question has a history of taking a heavy-handed role in domestic affairs, while the actual process of Morsi's election was relatively free from fraud and abuse, meaning his election reflected the will of a majority of the Egyptian people on election day.

And yet at the practical level, the military's intervention has removed a serious challenge to Western policy objectives throughout the Middle East, meaning it must be assessed in its proper and full context.

It must be asked: Is the professed support of democracy reducible to no more than the nature of the electoral process itself? Stated differently, is the mere fact of a clean, one-time electoral process enough to justify or even demand broad acceptance of a burgeoning and significantly undemocratic tyranny?

Because, in the case of Egypt, the Morsi regime's restrictions on the press, oppression of religious and ethnic minorities, and usurpation of the judicial branch by packing the courts with his followers, show that a decidedly undemocratic society appears to be precisely what the Muslim Brotherhood intended to create, with or without future elections.

And yet the use of force to remove the elected leadership — much less the harsh treatment of protesters and closed governance processes of the post-coup military rulers — indicate an ominous path may lie ahead.

For better or worse, we've seen this set of events before, including most prominently in the case of Turkey, where the secular and modernist military intervened multiple times over the past century to protect founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's vision of a pluralistic society based on democratic values. Each of the Turkish military's coups was in response to periods of instability, but they each also resulted in a return of the power to the people through subsequent elections.

While the path was not always smooth, it was nevertheless a part of the transition toward a more permanent democracy, at least for a period of time.

Specifically, the Turkish experience gives rise to a few key principles. First, military interventions ought to be both rare and brief. While the people's right to ultimately determine their own fate must be protected, this cannot happen if the military's intervention lasts longer than absolutely necessary.

Furthermore, prolonged intervention in politics can only serve to delegitimize the military and all too often to embroil it in political scandal, as the line between keeper of civil order and enforcer of given policy decisions becomes blurred.

¹ Mr. Barrett is CEO of Diligent Innovations, a strategic consulting company in Arlington, Va., and a former director of strategy for the White House's Homeland Security Council.

Additionally, the military must keep faith with the people by explaining its actions and keeping open lines of communication, while stabilizing the situation and then transitioning back to civilian rule.

Indeed, for the better part of 100 years, the Turkish military did manage to keep the peace while (mostly) avoiding undue entanglements abroad. That's a legacy worth recognizing, even if the ultimate end-point of the Turkish approach is as yet unknown, because the current heavily Islamist regime in Ankara has made major moves to reorient Turkey away from the West and toward what the current rulers have idealized as its Muslim brethren to the East.

In the end, the Egyptian military's intervention in the political fortunes of that troubled nation creates a moral dilemma for the West, but one that we had better get used to, because there will likely be many more such decision points between pragmatism and blind faith in the power of the electoral process.

The mantra of free elections may be convenient rhetorical shorthand, but real and lasting modern democracy is about more than just the process of the election. It is about the nature of the policies themselves, and the protection of property and other rights, as well as other liberal ideals. Anything less is bound to result in an unholy combination of a freely elected but ideologically close-minded government leveraging a one-time election to run roughshod over the rights of minorities and those who dissent.

If stating this openly sounds a bit hypocritical, then so be it — better to be called a hypocrite while working toward the establishment of a modern, secular and sustainable democratic governance model than smugly sticking to an abstract image that mistakes a pure electoral process as the ends, and not merely a part of the means, of democracy.

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