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Egypt after Morsi's Ouster:

Democracy Without Democrats?

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Assessing the "Arab Spring" after nearly three years of revolutionary convulsions that have swept through much of the Arab Middle East, including two successive upheavals in Egypt alone, one is reminded of a number of important books published about the region. Fifty-five years ago, the American social scientist Daniel Lerner wrote a classic of sorts, "The Passing of Traditional Society." Decades later, in the early 1990s, the noted Lebanese scholar Ghassan Salamé edited an anthology on the Middle East entitled "Democracy Without Democrats?" Together, these two titles, with some important variations, encapsulate what Fouad Ajami called "The *Arab Predicament," the title of his 1981 masterpiece.*

The present Arab predicament is largely a function of the fact that, as opposed to the thesis embedded in Lerner's book title, traditional society in the Arab world has not passed from the scene. On the contrary, many of its most important elements are alive and kicking. In the numerous upheavals and ongoing domestic socio-economic crises confronting nearly all Arab states, neo-traditionalism, in the form of Islamist politics in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, religious sectarianism (as in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Bahrain) and tribalism (as in Libya and Yemen), has become ever more pre-eminent and politically relevant. Moreover, contrary to so much that has been trumpeted in Western media and academe, the "Arab Spring" is not about the clash between the forces of democracy and the forces of autocracy. The title of Salamé's book pointed to an important fact, which twenty years later is still true: the forces of democracy in the Arab countries, and in Egypt in particular, are incredibly weak and it is extremely difficult, if not virtually impossible, to engineer democracies in societies lacking significant numbers of genuine democrats.

The real struggle in the Arab world is between the forces of tradition and those who represent the forces of modernity, the great majority of which, in both camps, are not really democrats. The so-called "secular, liberal democrats" in Egypt, not to mention the military, were, for the most part, not really secular, nor liberal or democratic. From the very beginning, in the early weeks and months of 2011, after the overthrow of Mubarak, realizing that they did not have a chance against the Islamists in a fair fight, the purported liberals tried desperately to persuade the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which ran the country in the initial transitional phase, to postpone the drafting of the new constitution. Moreover, they were more than willing to have the military arrest the democratic process the moment they realized that they would be handsomely defeated in the polls. And handsomely defeated they were.

The army, at that stage still in agreement with the Muslim Brotherhood, paid no heed to the appeals of the liberals and went ahead with the constitutional referendum in March 2011, and elections to the lower House of parliament from November 2011 to January 2012, the Shura Council (upper House) in January-February 2012, and the presidency in June 2012. The Islamists trounced their opponents in all of them, with the exception of the presidential elections, where Muhammad Morsi won by the very narrow margin of 51.7 to 48.3 percent.

The rather dour and unimpressive Morsi was not the Brotherhood's first choice. He was a poor substitute, the "spare tire" in the words of some of the Egyptian pundits, for the far more charismatic Hayrat al-Shatir, who was disqualified on a technicality. But even a "spare tire" from the Brotherhood was good enough to beat the so called secular-liberal opposition. The non-Islamist camp was led by one of the *fulul*, a leftover of the Mubarak era, Air Marshal Ahmad Shafiq, who still was only beaten by a hair's breadth. The turnout in all the elections and referendums was invariably low. Only about 40 percent of all eligible voters actually voted. This seemed to suggest that the general populace, even when given the opportunity of a lifetime to participate in free and fair elections, was not especially enthusiastic, indicating a relatively low level of commitment to the democratic process.

There are two major powers in Egyptian politics, neither of which has genuine democratic credentials. The one is the Muslim Brotherhood, by far the largest and best organized political party in Egypt, and the other is the military, which not only wields the might of the armed forces, but also controls a critical share in the Egyptian economy through a large variety of commercial enterprises. At first, the army clearly sided with the Brotherhood, having no reason or justification to

prevent them from assuming the upper hand in Egyptian politics as long as they did not interfere with the military's preferential status, budget, or sinecures.

But President Morsi in his dictatorial ways sought to impose an Islamist world view and control over all Egyptian institutions, including the army, even as he demonstrated incompetence in running the country, presiding over a chaotic collapse of law and order and failing to stem the further debilitation of the economy. The Muslim Brotherhood's abuse of power created a powerful *ad hoc* coalition of angry opponents, which included the "liberals," the salafis, the Copts and, most importantly, the army. Eventually, this coalition produced the massive anti-Morsi demonstrations in late June and early July 2013 and the popularly supported military coup that unseated Egypt's first democratically elected president.

The coup, however, was not one carried out in the name of a large majority of the public against a militant and unpopular minority. Rather, it was a coup supported by approximately one half of the Egyptian population against the other. The so-called liberals and their various allies colluded with the military, unashamedly turning a blind eye to the brutality of the armed forces as they suppressed the rank and file of the Muslim Brotherhood with mass killings in the streets and imprisoned the Brotherhood leadership in advance of possible show trials, while stifling the freedom of the press in the process.

To be sure, Morsi and the Brotherhood, were no paragons of democracy either. That is not to say that there is an inherent contradiction between Islam and democracy, but to be genuinely democratic any Islamist regime (or any religion-based regime for that matter) must fulfill at least four pre-conditions: 1) It must allow for the supremacy of man-made legislation, through a freely elected legislature, over religious law (e.g., the *Shari`a* in the Muslim case, or the *Halakha* in Judaism). After all, democracy is about government by the people and the sovereignty of man and not the sovereignty of God; 2) It must allow for the genuine and complete equality of religious minorities; 3) It must guarantee the complete and unfettered freedom and equality of women; and 4) It must allow for the freedom of religion, the freedom from religion, and the uninhibited freedom of thought and expression. The Brotherhood in practice failed miserably on all four counts.

Comparisons are often made between Islamism and the military in Turkey and Egypt. Traditionally in Turkey the military served as the guardian of the secular order through which it also guaranteed its own place of privilege in the Turkish political system. This remained true until the emergence of the AKP Islamist government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who successfully emasculated the military. In

Egypt, on the other hand, the military traditionally served as the guardian of the authoritarian order, which also guaranteed the army's place of privilege in the Egyptian political system. When Morsi seemed to be taking a leaf out of Erdoğan's book and seeking to impose his own domination over the military, the generals intervened to halt the process.

In August 2012, shortly after his election, Morsi deposed Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and Minister of Defense and replaced him with General `Abd al-Fattah al-Sissi, in what was widely seen as a shake-up designed to impose presidential authority over the armed forces. Sissi, according to many credible sources, is a devout Muslim and no secularist. Morsi apparently calculated that Sissi would therefore be a pliant, sympathetic general through whom the Brotherhood would subordinate the army, Turkish style.

Most Egyptians are devout Muslims, but are certainly not all Islamists. Sissi is first and foremost a man of the military, and while devout, he refused to countenance the pliant subordination of the military to the Brotherhood, or to any other political body for that matter. Sissi's repeated warnings to Morsi that he was overstepping the mark went unheeded, leaving the army no choice but to intervene. But the intervention was not against Islamism *per se* and not in the name of either secularism or democracy. The coup was carried out in order to secure the army's place of privilege in Egypt's modernizing authoritarian system, stabilize the economy, and cope with deteriorating security. As such, Sissi was following in the footsteps of Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak, no matter how he framed the army's reassertion of authority.

At the end of the day, the political forces in Egypt, the Brotherhood, the military and most of the so-called liberals are hardly democrats. In Egypt, just like anywhere else, there cannot be and will not be democracy until there are leagues of democrats to make it happen.

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