

# Egypt: Coups Modern and Postmodern

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Global Research, August 15, 2013

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

*Already the early enthusiasm for Egypt's 3 July coup is waning, as EU leaders demand President Morsi's release and US President Obama prevaricates. Senator John McCain, who soon after the coup called for an end to US military funding as stipulated by law, arrived in Cairo Monday to mediate. As a kind of cruel joke, the new 'president' Adly Mansour, who is also president of the Supreme Constitutional Court, has scheduled a trial 25 August of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Badie and his deputies, including Khairat el-Shater, who are accused of killing protesters, though it is the Egyptian coupmakers who since 2011 have killed hundreds of unarmed Egyptians with impunity.*

This situation, both tragic and absurd, recalls Pakistan's coupmaker Zia ul-Haq, who overthrew and proceeded to execute his democratically-elected predecessor Zulfikar Bhutto on trumped-up charges in 1979. Take heed, Sisi and Obama. A short decade later, Zia died in a mysterious plane crash, along with US Ambassador Raphel, and Bhutto's daughter Benazir Bhutto became prime minister.

## Coup #1

Egypt has in fact had three coups since the 25 January 2011 revolution—one per year, ending in the bloody, unfinished 2013 coup. The collapse of the seemingly impregnable Mubarakite order in 2011 resulted in the first coup, a benign 'modern' coup, with grim generals on TV and soldiers in tanks, pushing the geriatric corrupt president out when a spontaneous revulsion with Egypt's version of western-imposed modernity erupted.

This finally opened the road for Egypt to seek its destiny as a devout Islamic society, as confirmed the next year when Islamists, led by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and its Freedom and Justice Party, gained 2/3 of the seats in the most democratic elections in recent history—anywhere.

## Coup #2

This alarming situation (for secularists and the old elite) led to the second, 'postmodern' coup, meaning one which the world can be convinced is not really a coup at all. Before the 2012 presidential election, *de facto* president Field Marshall Mohamed Tantawi disbanded the newly elected (Islamist) parliament, stripped the incumbent (Islamist) President Mohamed Morsi of most of his powers, and presented him with a neoliberal budget as a *fait accompli*. The military were then able to discretely 'retire' (though Tantawi initially remained as minister of defense). The hamstrung Morsi was sure to fail, so the logic went, discrediting the Islamists, and paving the way for a return to 'business as usual'.

The postmodern coup takes the place of the old-style brutal modern coup to restore

precarious US hegemony around the world. The last time the world witnessed a modern coup to oust an anti-empire leader was in Venezuela in 2002, and it backfired for the US with a vengeance. The whole rationale of the New World Order is that it is 'democratic', governed by elections, which are intended to rubber stamp the empire's world order.

So the current coup, an open return to the bloody tradition of Chile 1973, is alarming for both Washington and Egypt. What went wrong?

#### Morsi's record

The murder of 16 Egyptian border guards in early August 2012 provided early fuel for the anti-MB forces, but Morsi turned the tables, shifting the blame for the crisis onto the incompetent military. He seized the moment, forced the retirement of Tantawi and other top generals, appointing as minister of defense General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who cleverly paraded himself as a 'devout Muslim' and seemed to be more amenable to genuine change.

Sisi, like the entire army leadership which matured over the past 40 years under presidents Sadat and Mubarak, was trained in the UK/ US (UK Joint Command and Staff College, 1992/ US Army War College, 2006). But Sisi also had close ties to Saudi Arabia, which is probably what attracted Morsi's attention. His thesis at the US Army War College argued that democracy in the Middle East and North Africa would only take root if it sought "public support from religious leaders (who) can help build strong support for the establishment of democratic systems," and sustained "the religious base versus devaluing religion and creating instability."

The US/ Egyptian army had decided initially to give Morsi some democratic rope, hoping to scare him into accepting a token figurehead role, expecting him to give real power to the liberal opposition to carry on Washington's agenda (Elbaradei was the first choice).

But Morsi surprised everyone. He

- \*attempted to assert control over the military,

- \*forced Israel to put on hold another slaughter in Gaza,

- \*refused to bow to IMF pressure on food subsidies (instead mobilizing MBers to end corruption in the delivery of bread),

- \*rejected intense pressure to join Turkey and the West in invading Syria,

- \*made overtures to Iran on normalizing relations and finding a peaceful solution to the Syrian civil war.

- \*forged ahead with the Shura Council as the last legitimate elected body left by the Mubarakite judiciary and military, whose broad-based Constitutional Constituent Assembly wrote a fine constitution, incorporating much sharia.

Looking back on this rollercoaster year, the Muslim Brotherhood can take pride in its accomplishments in the face of open treason by the secular establishment and the pro-Saudi Salafis, who broke ranks in a foolish political move that will damage them long into the future.

### Coup #3

The final straw for the secularists was the constitution. Morsi stared them down, pushing a furious judiciary to monitor a referendum where, despite the loud campaign by the secularists—now openly in league with the Mubarakites—64% approved it. The Mubarakites, with control over the economy, were able to instigate shortages by suppliers, strikes by workers, and inundate the airwaves with disinformation belittling the MB. Founded *two months* before the coup, the opposition Tamarod (rebellion) claims to have got 22,134,460 signatures and attracted 30m demonstrators on 30 June, wildly exaggerated claims blindly repeated by the Mubarkite and western media.

The scenario of the 1973 US-funded coup in Chile was repeated in Egypt, right down to gasoline shortages and disruption of transportation. The Saudi princes withheld promised financial aid to the MB, clearly with the blessing of Washington, and welcomed Egypt's Pinochet with open arms, as he carried out the classic 'modern' coup with lots of bullets and tanks. The only difference with Chile is that Allende died with a rifle in his hands, defending the cause. Egypt's Morsi was arrested and spirited away, though at least 150 unarmed MBers have already been murdered, many by army snipers, captured on video.

The Muslim world has had more than its share of US-backed coups—Syria (1949+), Iran (1953), Turkey (1960, 1971, 1980), Iraq (1963), Libya (1969), Pakistan (1977), Yemen (1978). And they all backfired.

Coup leaders like Pakistani General Zia ul-Haq, or Yemen's Ali Abdallah Saleh, styling themselves as devout Muslims, were supported as long as they followed the 'rules of the game'. Others, like Saddam Hussein or Muammar al-Gaddafi, who didn't follow Washington's script, became the target of US wrath.

But since the 1980s, bald coups in the tradition of Pinochet have been frowned upon. The New World Order demands a patina of democracy; hence, Egypt's postmodern coup #2. One postmodern coup that 'worked' (at least so far) was in Indonesia, following the collapse of General Suharto's dictatorship in 1998. The Islamist Abdurrahman Wahid was handed formal power in the post-Suharto chaos, but by 2004, with the powerful military unreformed and no bringing-to-account of Suharto's cronies, the weary people despaired and voted in law-and-order candidate (and Suharto protégé) General Yudhoyono, who still governs Indonesia today and is a favorite in Washington.

Sisi is clearly positioning himself to continue the tradition of Pinochet, ul-Haq and Yudhoyono, appealing to Egyptians' weariness and desire for security—in his case, flavored with Salafist Islamo-correctness. Already mainstream media tout him as "Egypt's most popular man", and (surprise!) there is talk of him running for president.

This is clearly Washington's new-old Middle East strategy: use accommodationist Islamists like the Saudis to con the masses into supporting the imperial agenda. But like the litany of coups mentioned above, this too backfires—in the form of al-Qaeda.

Already, the US had to temporarily shut more than 20 embassies and consulates in Muslim countries due to the threat of an al-Qaeda attack. At the same time, an angry Sisi sharply criticized Obama for delaying the sale of military jets and for not embracing the coup enthusiastically. Now he must deal with Senator McCain. Clearly there is some disconnect in lines of communication between CIA, State Department, White House, the Senate, etc.

By not even giving the MB the chance to sell out to Washington, as its critics—left and right—never tire of claiming, and by mowing them down during their Ramadan prayers, the army makes sure the MB retains its aura of incorruptibility. Of course, it is the *army* that long ago ‘sold out’ to the US, taking its \$1.5b yearly bribe to leave Israel in peace, killing Egyptians rather than Egypt’s enemies.

It is true that British ‘intelligence’ and the CIA have long been manipulating Islamists—most notoriously the Saudis, and the ‘mujahideen’ in Afghanistan, and continue to do so, most recently the Tsarnaev brothers, accused of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. Their uncle Ruslan not only worked with Reagan’s ‘retired’ CIA honcho Graham Fuller, but married his daughter Samantha. Remembering the 1988 Soviet defeat in Afghanistan fondly, Fuller crows: “The same doctrines [manipulating Islamists] can still be used to destabilize what remains of Russian power, and especially to counter the Chinese influence in Central Asia.”

By standing firm as the army cuts them down in broad daylight, continuing their still growing mass vigil (and Ramadan dry fast) in 40 degree heat, these plucky, peaceful Islamists are imprinted on Egyptians’ minds as the nation’s conscience. Their enduring patience and suffering show that they are nobody’s stooges, nor are they willing to let the old guard restore its dictatorship without a fight to the death.

Eric Walberg is author of *From Postmodernism to Postsecularism: Re-emerging Islamic Civilization* <http://www.claritypress.com/WalbergII.html>

A version of this appeared at <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/08/05/317296/egypt-coups-modern-and-postmodern/>

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