

Egypt's Presidential Election: The Brotherhood, Egypt's military and the U.S

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Global Research, July 14, 2012
[revcom.us](#) 14 July 2012

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

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Sixteen months after the Egyptian people rose up and drove the hated U.S. puppet Hosni Mubarak from power, the country has elected a new president. On Sunday, June 24, a week after the June 16-17 run-off voting, Egypt's Constitutional Committee named Mohammed Morsi of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood the winner over former general Ahmed Shafik. Shafik was the candidate backed by Egypt's military which has run the country for the last 52 years.

The U.S. government and media called the vote Egypt's "first free and fair election." The Brotherhood, Egypt's military, and the U.S.—which had been closely involved in these events—all praised the outcome as a victory for "democracy," the transition from military rule to civilian control, and a big step toward fulfilling the aspirations of Egypt's 90 million people and completing their "revolution."

Egypt's vote may have served the agenda of the defenders of Egypt's intolerable social order, including the U.S., at least for now. But for the Egyptian people, it will not bring or open up possibilities for any meaningful change. Instead it is but another maneuver to keep the chains of oppression firmly around their necks.

This vote—and the whole 16-month transition leading up to it, including the Egyptian military's June 13-17 assertion of decisive control of the state apparatus right before this latest vote, very clearly showed what elections under the rule of oppressors and U.S.-led democracy are—and are not—about. They demonstrate that elections don't decide state power—state power decides the overall terms and outcome of elections. The dominant classes never put the fundamental nature of society and how it's ruled up for a vote.

Instead, Egypt's rulers worked to use elections to channel peoples' hopes, dreams and activism into political dead-ends and to legitimize—or re-legitimize—the very system that's abused and tormented them. The June 16-17 presidential election was a perfect example: the people were given the "choice" between two outmoded, reactionary oppressors—one an Islamic fundamentalist, the other a representative of the blood-soaked, pro-U.S. Egyptian military—with both part of the current horrific status quo. Emancipation was not on the ballot.

If anything, the last 16 months should teach oppressed people they'll never win liberation through elections—it takes a real revolution, a communist revolution aimed at the emancipation of all humanity to do that—a revolution Egypt has not had and urgently needs.

For that to happen, the most crucial task is forging the leadership and organization capable of seizing on the storms ahead and leading such a revolution. (See Bob Avakian, "[Egypt 2011: Millions Have Heroically Stood Up... The Future Remains to Be Written](#)," *Revolution* #224, February 11, 2011)

February 2011...A Hated Dictator Is Forced to Step Down

Life under Mubarak's 30-year U.S.-backed reign was a horror—for Egyptians and the millions across the Middle East who suffered from his regime's role in U.S. and Israeli crimes, interventions, and economic and political dominance. Mubarak's Egypt was a socially oppressive, patriarchal, and highly stratified class society, and a key cog in the U.S. empire. It was an enforcer of U.S. interests in the region, in particular backing and protecting Israel.

While a tiny elite grouped around the military and linked to foreign capital grew powerful and enormously wealthy, four of ten Egyptians lived near or below the poverty line, many families trying to survive on \$2 a day. Three of four young Egyptians were unemployed, with half of Cairo's 18 million people living in urban slums or shantytowns without basic services. Worst of all, it seemed Mubarak's grip was unshakable, a nightmare without end. (See, "[Interview with Raymond Lotta About Events in Egypt: Geopolitics, Political Economy, and 'No Permanent Necessity.'](#)" *Revolution* #224, February 11, 2011.)

Then came January 2011. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, millions of Egyptians courageously rose up. Sick of life under Mubarak and inspired by neighboring Tunisia's January uprising, Egyptians took to the streets in a series of massive demonstrations, work stoppages, and clashes with the military that forced Mubarak to step down on February 11. This powerful uprising in the Arab world's bellwether and largest country (with 90 million people) shook the Middle East, pierced the pervasive feeling of despair that the world's autocracies are all-powerful and unchallengeable, and spread the spark of revolt far and wide—including helping inspire the Occupy movement in the U.S.

But there was no Egyptian revolution. When Mubarak resigned, forced out by the gathering upheaval and the urging of the U.S., he formally handed power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF)—the same institution from which he had emerged, which formed the core of the Egyptian state and his regime, and which has deep ties with the U.S. Led by U.S.-trained Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, the generals pledged their loyalty to the people and the "revolution," and a peaceful transition to democracy and civilian rule. Their American backers hailed Egypt's generals and their pledge as a model for the transition to democratic rule for the entire region. Most ordinary people were swept up in the hope that Mubarak's departure would change everything, that the army would deliver on its promises, and that freedom was at hand. Crowds chanted, "The Army and the people are one hand."

A Complex Clash of Outmoded Forces

Mubarak was gone, but the repressive core of the old, reactionary state—the military, the courts, the judiciary—had never been defeated and dismantled. Instead they remained in power and in place. Yet the generals and their U.S. patrons understood that the regime couldn't simply carry on as before after Egypt was shaken by mass revolt and millions were beginning to awaken to political life. It needed a facelift and the incorporation of other social forces to maintain its legitimacy, stability, and ability to continue to function as a critical U.S. regional ally. The challenge for Egypt's military rulers was how to maintain their control of the essential levers of power, while re-legitimizing the state and harnessing the hopes

and energy of the Egyptian people toward that end.

This necessitated opening up Egypt's political space somewhat, including legalizing the Muslim Brotherhood as well as other political forces. (The Egyptian state promoted Islam and relied on it as a legitimizing tool, and encouraged the growth of Islamist forces to undercut the secular left at times, and clamped down on them at others. See Samuel Albert, ["Egypt: Will god and the ballot box keep the people enslaved?,"](#) A World to Win News Service, June 25.)

In the wake of Mubarak's fall, the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups have emerged as the strongest, most organized component of the anti-Mubarak opposition. They no more represent the people and liberation than the Egyptian military. The Brotherhood advocates market capitalism, and has no program (or intention) of breaking with the global capitalist system and world market. While it is not currently calling for overt Islamist rule, since its founding 84 years ago it has called for regressive Islamic Sharia law to be the basis of social mores and legitimacy, including its brutal patriarchal strictures against women. While the Brotherhood may draw supporters from many different strata, its program represents the interests of Egypt's big capitalists and landowners, including those who felt marginalized by the Mubarak-military clique and feared rapid secularization was undermining the country's traditional social order. Their overall interests lie in Egypt's integration and subordination to the U.S.-dominated global order.

Over the past 16 months, the Brotherhood has collaborated with the SCAF—which has continued to brutalize its opponents and has killed some 150 protesters—and reportedly worked out a "rough accord on power-sharing," with the Brotherhood agreeing to work with the military on national security issues, and not prosecute military officers or interfere with the military's commercial and budgetary prerogatives. A key element in these negotiations has been the Brotherhood's agreement to uphold Egypt's 1979 Camp David Accords with Israel, which essentially turned Egypt into an ally and military bulwark for the U.S. and Israel and is a cornerstone of U.S. imperialist interests in the region. In terms of being accepted by the U.S., abiding by this reactionary treaty is a litmus test for anyone seeking to be put in charge—and the Brotherhood has passed. ("Declaration of Winner Is Said to Be Near in Egypt," *New York Times*, June 23)

So in Egypt, the regional clash between imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism takes expression in the complex collusion and contention between the military and the Brotherhood for reactionary state power, illustrating how these outmoded forces reinforce each other, even as they clash.

June 13-17..."A Crisis of Legitimacy at Every Turn"

Four different nation-wide votes have been held since February 2011. In March 2011, Egyptians voted in a nationwide referendum on a "road map of transition to civil, democratic rule," as the military put it—with 77.2 per cent voting yes. In November 2011, Egypt held its first post-revolt parliamentary elections, with Islamist parties winning some three-quarters of the seats. On May 23-24 of this year, Egypt held its first post-Mubarak presidential elections. Then on June 17, a Presidential runoff election was held between Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood and Ahmed Shafik, the last premier under Mubarak.

Throughout this process the military and the Mubarak-appointed election commission had

set the terms, including deciding who could and couldn't run for office. Yet the Brotherhood's domination of parliament and the drafting of a new constitution, its decision to run a presidential candidate, and then Morsi's strong showing in the May 23-24 first round of the presidential elections, all heightened tensions with the military. "Clearly, the military must have guessed that the balance of power was shifting quickly under their feet....," one analyst told the *Christian Science Monitor*. ("Is Egypt's revolution over?" June 22)

So on June 13, 14, and 17—just before and even as the June 17 run-off presidential vote was taking place—the triumvirate of Egyptian state power—the Egyptian military, Ministry of Justice, and Supreme Constitutional Court—issued a series of decrees giving the SCAF sweeping and unchecked legislative, judicial and military powers.

First, the Ministry of Justice issued a decree giving the military and police the right to arrest anyone deemed "harmful to the government" or who "resists orders." Democracy Now! correspondent Sharif Abdel Kouddous called it a return to "elements of martial law to Egypt" that "allows the military widespread powers of arrest and detention of civilians." (Democracy Now!, June 15)

The next day, Thursday, June 14, Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court, a hold-over from the Mubarak regime, dissolved the Islamist-dominated parliament as well as the Constituent Assembly it had just formed to write a new constitution, and ruled that former Mubarak officials—in particular the military's choice Ahmed Shafik—could indeed stand for election and hold office. "The parliamentary dissolution has erased the legislative elections in which 30 million participated," the International Crisis Group (ICG) wrote. ("Media Release: Egypt," International Crisis Group, June 25)

Then, on June 17, moments after the polls closed, the SCAF issued a decree giving it the right to rule until a new parliament was in place, control over the budget and legislation, the right to choose a new Constituent Assembly to write the new constitution, expanded political and economic power, and most importantly total control over Egypt's military and internal policing affairs, including selecting military leaders and having the final say-so on deploying the military and waging war.

Democracy Now!'s Kouddous (June 15) described the June 13-14 decisions as "monumental" and the 16-month transition as "a crisis of legitimacy at every turn":

"We spent three months going to parliamentary elections, and that's just been voided. There's been no reform in the security apparatus. There's been no reform of the media. There's been no reform of the judiciary. So, really, the Mubarak regime is still very much in place. And to top it all off, its last prime minister is now in a runoff against the Muslim Brotherhood, which is really the same political landscape that Egypt has had for many decades now."

Then, in another high-stakes maneuver to shape the post-election terrain, the military refused to announce election results for a full week after the June 17 vote—even though it was clear the next day that the Muslim Brotherhood's Morsi had won. In short, after controlling who could and couldn't be a candidate for office, the military was now fighting to ensure its continued control of the state no matter who got the most votes.

Egyptian activists are increasingly confronting these bitter realities. "When you think about it, the revolutionaries were never in power, so what kind of revolution is it?" one activist now

organizing a boycott of the elections told the New York Times. Another summed up, “The system was like a machine with a plastic cover, and what we did was knock off the cover.” He had thought if the people “ousted the head of state its body would fall. The roots of the ruling elite were ‘much deeper and darker’ than they initially understood, he said.” (“Revolt Leaders Cite Failure to Uproot Old Order in Egypt,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2012)

Another wrote:

“The army’s commanders and the government’s key ministers have not changed; the Interior Ministry violates human rights as brazenly as ever; thousands of ordinary Egyptians have been subjected to military trials; and injustices are being perpetrated on Egyptian citizens under a new decree giving the military police and intelligence officials the right to detain civilians.” (Sara Khorshid, “The Betrayal of Egypt’s Revolution,” *New York Times*, June 18)

The U.S.: Official Silence, Backroom Wheeling & Dealing

Think about it. If the military rulers of any country the U.S. had a beef with had so brazenly seized new powers, there would have been no end to the howls of protest and the denunciations of “dictatorship” and “coups” coming from every corner of the ruling establishment. Instead, the Egyptian military’s seizure of sweeping authoritarian powers was met largely with silence, or quiet expressions of concern, and support for the generals by U.S. officials and the media.

This low-key official response to the outrages in Egypt comes a few months after the Obama administration restored \$1.3 billion in annual aid to the Egyptian military, despite its ongoing and widespread abuses. This, as the U.S. hypocritically declares, “We will stand with the Egyptian people as they pursue their aspirations for democracy, dignity, and opportunity, and fulfill the promise of their revolution,” as a White House statement said. (“Egypt Results Leave White House Relieved but Watchful,” *New York Times*, June 24)

When the ruling military junta refused to announce the election results, thousands of Brotherhood supporters and others, fearing the military would simply declare its candidate Shafiq the winner, gathered in Tahrir Square, vowing to stay until their candidate was declared the winner.

The U.S. was extremely concerned that naming Shafiq the winner could trigger violent clashes and further radicalize and destabilize Egypt. Behind the scenes, in private communications and meetings and occasional public statements, numerous top U.S. officials, including Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, and Sen. John Kerry, were in contact with Egyptian officials and the Muslim Brotherhood. Their message was two-fold: on one hand, backing the Egyptian military’s efforts to maintain its overall standing and role in the state, on the other insisting that the stability of imperialist-dominated rule in Egypt and its broader interests and image in the region depended on continuing the “democratic transition”—even if that meant a Brotherhood victory. (See, for example, “US defense secretary Panetta calls Egypt’s Tantawi,” AFP, June 16)

Massive protest, the Brotherhood’s willingness to protect the military’s overall role, and direct pressure from the U.S. apparently compelled the SCAF to accede to Morsi’s electoral victory. “On Sunday [June 24],” *The New York Times* reported, “the combination of the

growing, angry crowds in Tahrir Square and warnings from administration and international community may have influenced the military to avoid a potentially bloody showdown over the presidency..." ("Egypt Results," June 24)

However, this remains a high-wire act for the U.S. and the secular Egyptian military. Egypt's strategic importance to the U.S. as a key regional ally and military partner of the U.S. and Israel makes this particularly acute. The U.S. and Egypt's military remain concerned that empowering the Brotherhood—even if initially just by sharing power in a state dominated by the U.S. and the military—could add fuel to Islamism across the region and set in motion a process that could weaken or break Egypt's strategic partnership with Israel (a partnership the Egyptian military pledged to continue after Mubarak's departure).

"Beneath the White House's public pronouncements, fears are mounting inside U.S. national-security agencies about the prospects for Washington's alliance with Cairo, as well as for the regional interests of the U.S. and its allies," the Wall Street Journal noted. The U.S. is particularly concerned that "the Muslim Brotherhood's rise could accelerate the continuing expansion of Islamist governments across the region"—citing Libya, Tunisia and possibly Syria should Assad fall, and the growth of the Brotherhood in Jordan, a crucial U.S. and Israeli ally. "It's scary what the region could look like in a year," said a senior Arab official. "You could have one bloc of the Muslim Brothers and the others close to Iran." ("Morsi's Win in Egypt Draws Kudos, Caveats From U.S.," June 24)

"A Political System Still Paralyzed....Without Required Legitimacy....Social Polarization Reaching New Heights"

The U.S. and the Egyptian elite may have dodged a bullet for the moment, but the situation remains fluid and fraught with perils for all parties involved—including the masses of Egyptian people.

During the week between the end of the June 17 voting and the June 24 announcement of Morsi's victory, there were a series of backdoor meetings between the SCAF and the Brotherhood over the shape of post-election Egypt. U.S. officials reported that Morsi was saying "all the right things" on economic issues. In his acceptance speech, Morsi made clear his support for the military and his commitment to "respect agreements and international law as well as Egyptian commitments and treaties with the rest of the world"—a clear reference to Egypt's agreements with the U.S. and Israel. And the military SCAF may have agreed to modify or roll back some of their June 13-17 decrees. (The June 13 expansion of the military's powers to arrest and detain people has apparently already been struck down. "Egyptian court suspends military arrest powers," BBC, June 26)

Yet the struggle between the SCAF and the Brotherhood are continuing in this new situation. Morsi and the Brotherhood are demanding the decrees stripping the incoming president of power and nullifying their victory in the parliamentary elections and their role in drafting the new constitution be rescinded. Even as the military continues to control the key levers of state power, the potential exists for "duelling constitutional principles with no constitution," the ICG warns, "duelling understandings of how to create the constituent assembly; duelling legislative bodies...; duelling conceptions of SCAF prerogatives...; duelling perceptions of executive authority; duelling mass demonstrations setting one Egypt against the other; and no agreed mechanism or legitimate arbiter to settle these disputes." (ICG, June 25)

Calling the situation “deteriorating,” with deep problems the presidential election did “little to resolve,” the ICG concludes:

“[E]ighteen months after the uprising that led to President Hosni Mubarak’s ouster, the political system is paralysed, no institutions enjoy the required legitimacy or credibility to break the logjam, all political actors have been discredited to varying degrees, and societal polarisation has reached new heights...all this is enormously fragile, a brittle reality at the mercy of a single significant misstep.” (ICG, June 25)

Sixteen months ago, people around the world were inspired when the Egyptian people rose up and drove the hated U.S. puppet Hosni Mubarak from power. Now, Egypt’s rulers—determined that whatever “transition” happens does NOT include any fundamental change—have used these elections to hijack people’s desire for liberation into dead-end hope in the very system that has been—and continues to be—responsible for all their suffering. Even more urgently, the hopes, aspirations, and struggle of the people of Egypt cannot be allowed to be buried, but must be carried forward until real freedom is achieved.

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