

From Democracy to Military Dictatorship: Egypt 2013 = Chile 1973

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ABSTRACT During the months leading up to July 3, 2013, the state of Egypt mirrored that of Chile 40 years ago. What Egypt's Mohamed Mursi and Chile's Salvador Allende shared was the misfortune of coming to power with a relatively large majority and an adamant refusal to surrender. While there is no evidence of U.S. involvement in the process, America and its allies in the European Union have refrained from calling what happened in Egypt a coup. Egypt – much like Chile – will likely return to the path of democracy, though after considerable time and effort, and a projected roadmap that will likely generate further economic hardship and instability.

For months, leading up to the climax on the third of July 2013, the Egyptian theatre was being set for a melodrama no less sensational than the one that unfolded on the Chilean theatre nearly forty years earlier. Yet, despite the striking resemblances, there have been some important dissimilarities. For one, the Egyptian coup d'état was not orchestrated primarily by the CIA, but allegedly by the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with tacit and active support from Jordan, Kuwait, Israel, and the U.S. Obama Administration. These regional and international players shared the concern of the local Egyptian secular liberal and nation-

alist elite that the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and some other parts of the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring was likely to threaten their long term interests.

Unlike the Chilean coup, where democratically elected President Salvador Allende was mysteriously liquidated on the day he was ousted by his Defense Minister Augusto Pinochet, Egypt's democratically elected President Muhammad Mursi was detained in an undisclosed location for nearly four months from the day he was toppled until he was paraded before a Cairo court on Monday the 4th of November, 2013. Whereas the Chilean coup authorities seemed to know

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Insight Turkey
Vol. 16 / No. 1 /
2014, pp. 45-53

what they wanted and how to achieve it, the Egyptian military and its liberal allies appeared unsure, confused, and incoherent. President Mursi, whose appearance his ousters wanted to use to their own advantage, stood defiantly telling the court judges he did recognize their court and insisted he was the legitimate, democratically elected, leader of the nation.

In President Mursi's first public appearance since the coup, albeit quite brief, he charged his supporters and fuelled their defiant rejection of the post coup regime. This points to a third difference between the Chilean and the Egyptian cases. Whereas in the former, the military managed to crush the opposing popular uprising immediately, in the latter, protests have not subsided since the coup in early July. This is despite the heavy-handedness of both the military and the police, as they perpetrated atrocities against their opponents. According to unofficial estimates no less than ten thousand people have so far lost their lives and many thousands, who happen to be primarily leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood, have been incarcerated. With the entire top leadership of the Brotherhood in detention, the street protests have adopted an increasingly decentralized organization. Students and young people seem to have taken over with no signs of fatiguing.

On 13 November 2013, a press conference was held in Cairo by a team of lawyers who volunteered to defend President Mursi. The main theme of



The president of the Chilean military junta, General Augusto Pinochet, smiles in Santiago in September 1973 following the CIA-aided coup against democratically elected President Salvador Allende.

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the press conference was a statement written by President Mursi and read to the press on his behalf by the head of the legal team. The gist of the statement was President Mursi's insistence that he was still the legitimate president of Egypt and that those who betrayed him and betrayed the people will soon be brought to justice. He stressed that what had happened on the 3rd of July 2013 was a full fledged

military coup d'état and called the coup an act of treason against God, His Messenger, the Egyptian army, the Egyptian people, and a betrayal of the oath made before him by the minister of defense who led the coup. President Mursi insisted that Egypt could never regain its well being unless all repercussions of the coup were eliminated and those responsible for shedding the blood of Egyptians were brought to trial. He explained that he was kidnapped on

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the 2nd of July and placed under arrest inside the headquarters of the Republican Guard until the morning of the 5th of July 2013 when he was removed against his will and transferred to a naval base belonging to the Egyptian armed forces. He added that throughout the four months he had been in custody he only saw EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner Ashton, the Delegation of African Elders, and Egyptian prosecutors. Mursi refused to answer questions put to him by the coup prosecutors. He stated that doing so would have been in violation of the constitution he swore to uphold. Saluting the Egyptian peo-

ple who stood against the coup and the martyrs, the detainees and the wounded, President Morsi assured the Egyptian people and the peoples of the world at large that the steadfastness of the Egyptians had defeated the coup, which would ultimately fail.

The military rulers of Egypt have sought to justify the bloody crackdown by claiming that pro-Mursi supporters had resorted to violence, a charge the opponents of the coup have constantly denied. In fact, the slogan of the supporters of legitimacy, as they prefer to be described, is that the peacefulness of their protests is more powerful than the bullets of the coup authorities. Most likely, the military rulers would have wished to see the pro-legitimacy camp slide into violent tactics. That would have aided these authorities in their defense of their heavy-handedness. It would have justified what has hitherto been rather difficult to justify. The peaceful tactics have indeed proven to be potent. An increasing number of people in Egypt from within the pro-coup camp have been coming out to declare publicly that they are withdrawing their support for the military having seen the ugly repercussions of the coup.

In addition to defying the coup perpetrators, Mursi and Allende share in common the misfortune of having been elected by a relative majority to the highest office in a country whose deep state refused to surrender any of its tools or institutions to the new leader. Since day one, Mursi came

up against a highly antagonistic state apparatus, especially within the police and the judiciary, and an unbelievably hostile media, both state as well as privately owned. Like Allende, Mursi trusted his defense minister, whom he hand picked, believing in his ostentatious pledges of loyalty. Up to his very last few days in office, Mursi maintained his confidence in the army and therefore believed no threat was posed to his presidency by non-cooperating security agencies or the unfriendly judiciary or the extremely hostile media.

Unknown to President Mursi at the time, perhaps, was the fact that as early as November 2012, that is about

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four months after his election, his defense minister General Sisi started conspiring against him in collusion with former officials in the Mubarak regime as well as a host of opposition figures, whose share of the votes in all elections and referenda held since the toppling of the Mubarak regime was rather minimal. Unknown to him too was the fact that the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who we now know had secretly pledged billions of dollars, were directly in-

involved in the funding and planning of the coup that only seemed to need a show of popular support.

To fulfil that necessity, a group of young Egyptians were brought together under a banner called 'Tamarud' (rebellion) to pave the way by means of collecting signatures from members of the public in support of an army intervention to end what they called the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is now evident that the many millions that this group claimed had put their signatures to a statement demanding the resignation of the President and the intervention of the army as well as the thirty millions or so it was claimed took to Tahrir Square in central Cairo on 30 June to commission the army to oust the president were anything but genuine. Such tactics became the alternative to the ballot box, which had produced an elected parliament - that was afterwards dissolved by a pro-Mubarak judiciary. Furthermore, the institution of a democratically elected president, the elected Shura Council (Upper House), and the referendum in favor of a constitution formulated by the best within Egyptian society all came to a grinding halt with the coup.

President Muhammad Mursi was accused by his opponents, who plotted to oust him, of all sorts of things that ranged from 'Ikhwanising' the state (that's turning it into a state belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood) to selling the pyramids and the Suez Canal to Qatar, and surrendering Sinai to Hamas. Throughout Mursi's one year as president, the police force

was nearly nonexistent and therefore law enforcement was almost completely suspended. Law makers had already been sent home by a judiciary that decided to dissolve the elected parliament and whose members had been hand picked by former President Hosni Mubarak to prepare for bequeathing power to his elder son Gamal. President Mursi's priority was to rebuild the state institutions so as to render it functional. Yet, the judges hampered his efforts every inch of the way; aided by an extremely hostile and pernicious media.

The UAE and Saudi roles became indisputably apparent in the immediate aftermath with both countries, together with Kuwait, they pledged around 14 billion dollars to support the new regime. Such pledges were preceded by congratulatory messages and celebratory remarks by top officials in the two countries. The other regional player to express delight at what had happened was Israel, who believed its Camp David Treaty with Egypt had been jeopardized by the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power in Egypt. The loss of Mubarak as a strategic ally was a considerable loss for the Israelis, which was exacerbated by the election of an Islamist president to replace him. Since early July 2012, the Israelis tried unsuccessfully to persuade President Mursi to open up to them even if by means of a secret back channel. Mursi's decisive stance against the Israeli onslaught on Gaza in November 2012 may have convinced Israel's top leaders that this was a very dangerous man indeed. It might not have been sheer

coincidence for the plot to topple President Mursi as the timing seems questionable.

Of all the reactions to the coup, the U.S. position was most crucial. Although there is no evidence that the U.S. Administration initiated the plot against Mursi as it did against Allende, it is obvious that the coup received the tacit backing of the Americans and was granted their political clout. The Americans and their allies in the European Union have refrained from calling what happened in Egypt a coup. Had they done so, legal measures would have been incumbent upon them. Many observers believe that had the Americans, in particular, said publicly that it was a coup, it would have most probably been aborted soon afterwards. The Egyptian military has since Camp David in 1978 received a generous U.S. aid package amounting to \$1.3 billion annually; making Egypt the second biggest recipient of US aid in the world. This aid made top Egyptian army officials wholly dependent on U.S. tax-payers. Furthermore, it sustained a luxury life style for the Egyptian elite at the expense of the rest of the country. Several months after the coup, the Americans announced the suspension of a large part of its military aid to Egypt. This included the withholding of the delivery of large-scale military systems as well as cash assistance until "credible progress" was made toward free and fair elections. The BBC quoted U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki as saying: "We will continue to hold the delivery of certain

large-scale military systems and cash assistance to the government pending credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government through free and fair elections.” Yet, BBC’s Kim Ghattas in Washington says the suspension of aid is more symbolic - a slap on the wrist - than a painful cut in essential aid.

One wonders if a democratically elected civilian government through free and fair elections was really what the Americans were proposing as the solution for Egypt’s predicament why have they not been vocal about condemning those that used military power to topple such a government? A critical perspective would conclude that the U.S. Administration and many EU governments, like the liberal supporters of the coup inside Egypt, would prefer a democratically elected government as long as it did not include Islamists.

The U.S. and its EU allies came under heavy criticism from pro-democracy groups within as well as outside Egypt for failing to condemn the coup and for showing little outrage at the measures taken by the new rulers. As soon as General Sisi finished reading his coup statement on the 3rd of July scores of satellite TV channels deemed potentially opposed to the coup were immediately shut down and their equipment seized and hundreds of journalists were rounded up and detained. Then as days passed, wide scale violations of human rights started being reported across Egypt, including the use of live ammunition

against peaceful unarmed demonstrators. One important sign of international popular indignation at the coup and its repercussions has been the various initiatives worldwide to prosecute the coup perpetrators and associates before international courts.

In the United Kingdom a high profile legal team has been appointed by Egypt’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) as well as other members of the country’s deposed parliament. Led by Tayab Ali, a solicitor and partner of the human rights law firm ITN Solicitors, the team comprises some of the world’s most distinguished legal minds, including: the former Director of Public Prosecutions, Lord Ken Macdonald QC; South African International Lawyer and former UN Human Rights Special Rapporteur, Professor John Dugard SC; and renowned human rights barrister, Michael Mansfield QC. These international lawyers recently convened a press conference in London, in which they were joined by Dr Abdul Mawgoud Dardery, a member of Egypt’s suspended parliament, and Professor Richard Falk, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Palestine, to present the initial findings of their investigation into the Egyptian military regime’s crimes against humanity since the military coup on 3 July.

Soon afterwards an international human rights conference was organized in Istanbul for the purpose of paving the ground for international legal action against those accused of crimes



Egypt holds a presidential election prior to a vote on the new Parliament.

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against humanity in Egypt. According to sources close to the conference, the list of those being considered for prosecution by a team of international lawyers includes journalists and clerics associated with the coup in Egypt. A spokesman for the team said they intend to prosecute all those accused of crimes against humanity in Egypt, whether military or civilian officials, current or former. The source further explained that all those involved with inciting the killing of peaceful demonstrators face prosecution too. According to other sources close to the London based team of international lawyers, the list of defendants includes generals and civilian leaders who took power after the coup, such as General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's Minister of Defense; Sedki Sobhi, the army Chief of Staff; Adly Mansour, the interim

President; and Hazem Beblawi, the interim Prime Minister. The list also includes key members of the interim cabinet headed by Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim and Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy. The list of defendants is expected to include journalists and politicians who would stand accused of inciting the coup authorities to commit crimes against humanity. Reporting on the list of potential defendants, the London-based Middle East Monitor (MEMO) said that the journalists considered, include figures such as Lamees Al Hadidi, Amr Adeeb, Yousef al-Husseini, Wael Ebrashi, and Khairi Ramadan. Among the politicians threatened with prosecution are Tharwat Kherbawi and Abdel Halim Qandil. Muslim clerics on the list include the former Mufti of Egypt, Shaikh Ali Jumaa, who called openly on screen

for anti-coup protestors to be killed, calling them “infidels.”

The Istanbul conference, which was attended by jurists and human rights advocates from around the world, was soon seized upon by the coup authorities in Cairo so as to further downgrade diplomatic relations with the host country, Turkey. And so was also the remarks made by Turkish

erratic and unwise measures adopted by them in recent weeks, show how disturbed and frustrated they have been as a result of mounting local and global rejection of their coup and rising levels of condemnation of their heavy handed crackdown. The failure of the coup authorities to bring things under control and stop the deterioration of the economic and security situation is making even close allies restless. According to a recent report in the Guardian Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the deputy prime minister of the UAE, told Egyptian prime minister Hazem el-Beblawi during a recent visit that Arab support for Egypt would not last long. The coup is simply proving to be too expensive for its two main financiers, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, whose multibillion aid has been likened to giving blood transfusion to a patient who is bleeding continuously, in the words of David Hearst of the Guardian.

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Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in which he, reportedly, renewed his criticism of Egypt’s new leaders, dismissing the trial of President Morsi on charges of inciting murder of his opponents while in office and describing the situation in Egypt as a “humanitarian drama.” Mr. Erdogan had previously also called for the prosecution of Egypt’s coup leaders for the crimes they perpetrated while cracking down on peaceful demonstrators. The Istanbul human rights conference was portrayed by the Egyptian media as a gathering of international members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who “continued their plotting against Egypt in a meeting in Istanbul.”

If anything, the reaction of the coup authorities in Egypt, and the various

The coup has split the Egyptian public between those who see it as a correctional measure, or a second round of revolution, and those who see it as a betrayal of the Egyptian people’s 25 January 2013 uprising, or a counter-revolution. Understandably, therefore, they have been calls for reconciliation. Several initiatives have been reported by the local, regional and even international media. Yet, nothing concrete or tangible has come to fruition. The military is in no mode yet for such reconciliation and has thus far shown no signs of welcoming any of the initiatives reported in the media. On the other hand, the

coalition for the defense of legitimacy, a platform on which stands most of those opposed to the coup, insists that any breakthrough will not be possible without restoration of legitimacy, including the ousted president, the cancelled constitution, and the dissolved Shura Council popularly referred to as 'the symbols of legitimacy'. Appeals for reconciliation based on what has been portrayed by some members of the elite opposed to the coup as well as to President Morsi as the middle ground, namely the restoration of some form of democracy while excluding the ousted president and the other symbols of legitimacy, have not received much public attention.

Like Chile more than four decades earlier, Egypt will likely return to the democratic path after some time and

a lot of struggle. How long it would take for that to happen, only the Egyptian people will decide. Yet, it would seem likely that it might take much less time than the 17 years Chile's military dictator Pinoche stayed in power. On the one hand the defenders of democracy have, thus far, been able to maintain their peaceful struggle against the coup despite the oppressive measures taken against them by the military rulers. The impact this will have on the entire population is one of an eye opener. As days pass by more and more people who supported the coup are expressing regret and are shifting their sympathies to the anti-coup camp. On the other hand, the road map the current regime promised would lead to security, stability and prosperity has only led to further turmoil, economic hardship and instability. ■

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