

“Beware of the army”: and if we stopped treating Egyptians as stupid?

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Since the evening of July 3 the formula has been taken up by the media and social networks: “the Egyptian army has overthrown Mohammad Morsi”. This assertion seems at first sight indubitable, at least if we concentrate on the events of that evening and on their strictly institutional dimension. To those who affirm that the recent events amount to an army coup, others retort that we are at a new stage of the Egyptian revolution. In fact, the reality is midway between these two positions.

Coup d'état vs. revolution?

If the overthrow of the Egyptian President was formally organised (and announced) by the army, and not by the autonomous structures emerging from the movement of revolt which has shaken Egypt for 30 months, it would never have happened without the historic demonstrations of June 30 and the days which followed. It is because Egyptians mobilised in their millions that Mohammad Morsi was forced to depart, not because the Egyptian army suddenly decided to overthrow him. This focus on the institutional aspect of the events led many observers to neglect the motor role of popular mobilisation in the fall of Morsi.

The intense media coverage of the coup contrasts with the media's neglect of the mobilisations which have shaken Egypt uninterruptedly since the fall of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. The figures speak for themselves: during the first five months of 2013, there were 5,544 demonstrations in Egypt, the great majority concerning social and economic questions. The success of the “Tamarrod” (“Rebellion”) campaign also centred on these questions (and not on the denunciation of some “Islamisation of Egyptian society”), reflecting this dynamic of opposition to the policies of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The latter have proved incapable of responding to the demands of the Egyptian people, which led the latter to revolt massively against Mubarak's dictatorship in 2011. Elected democratically in June 2012, Mohammad Morsi, who presented himself as the candidate of the revolution, failed to satisfy those demands, especially in the economic and social areas, where there was on the contrary a degradation of the living conditions of the population. If it cannot be denied that the remnants of the old regime did everything to stop the Brotherhood from governing, it should be noted that the latter very rapidly lost their popular legitimacy because of their own political and economic choices.

The lead weight lifted in January 2011 has not returned. The overthrow of Mubarak convinced millions of Egyptian that they were not condemned to suffer the policies of their leaders and that

they could, on the contrary, hold them accountable and if necessary mobilize to overthrow them. That is what led to the events of recent days, to the great surprise of many observers who, blinded by a “religious” reading of the policies of the Brotherhood and the hostility towards them, underestimated the breadth and nature of the deep wave which has again overthrown a power considered as illegitimate by a large majority of Egyptians. And it should be no surprise that an elected president can be perceived as illegitimate including by his own voters, when he betrays the mandate entrusted to him.

The army intervention

The military intervention should obviously be clearly considered, and the authoritarian temptation among elements of the military leadership, who became hostile to the Mubarak dictatorship only when the latter was doomed by the size of the 2011 uprising, should not be underestimated. But this intervention, presented a little hastily by some commentators as a “revenge” of the military against the Muslim Brotherhood, should be understood above all as the breaking of a tacit (although conflictual) understanding between two forces, the army and the Brotherhood, who were set on bringing order to a country affected by a continuous revolutionary upheaval since the fall of Mubarak.

Indeed, President Morsi and his government have been incapable of stifling the protests of recent months, deepening a situation of political and above all economic instability which is hardly reassuring to an army which controls more than a third of Egypt’s wealth. The army believed that the Brotherhood had shown their inability to stabilise the country, and it should then itself restore calm and put a stop to a revolutionary process which could lose it a significant part of its political and economic influence.

Such is indeed the weakness of over-enthusiastic readings which see in the intervention of the army a new stage of the revolution, whereas the objective of the military leadership is precisely to put an end to it. The paradox is not small: the events of recent days have been both the expression of the existence of a popular and revolutionary dynamic and of a relationship of political forces which is very unfavourable for revolutionaries. The latter have not up until now succeeded in equipping structures which are sufficiently united, strong and legitimate to play the role that the military plays today, thus leaving the initiative to a social force which is essentially concerned with a return to normal and not the satisfaction of the demands of the revolution.

A new period of instability thus opens, already marked by the will of the army to dissuade anyone from opposing its “roadmap” with arbitrary decisions like the closure of the al-Jazeera offices or the arrest of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership. The military have for the moment exploited a situation of political paralysis, marked by the errors of the Brotherhood and the structural weaknesses of the opposition. But the revolution has not been defeated or confiscated. Many have seen the scenes of popular jubilation which accompanied the declarations of the military takeover and the deployment of tanks in the streets of Cairo as the Egyptians burying their revolution. A double error of analysis underlies these attitudes.

The revolution continues?

The first of these errors is the under-estimation of the central role of the Egyptian people in the fall of Morsi, linked to the massive rejection of the policy of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose defeat was considered by millions of Egyptians as their victory. What the people celebrated in the streets was

the defeat of a President who had satisfied none of the demands of the revolution, contrary to what he had promised, and not a seizure of power by the military. The latter have always been conscience of this, inasmuch as they immediately announced that they intended to play no lasting political role and took care during their press conference announcing Morsi's overthrow to surround themselves with representatives from the country's political parties and religious institutions.

The second error is linked to the first, and results from an infantilising vision of the Egyptian people, leading various commentators to state that Egyptians were in the process of learning democracy whereas they were precisely showing that they had better understood its essence than most of the Western lesson-givers. What could be more authentically democratic than the peaceful challenging by petition and demonstrations by the people who elected him of a President who has betrayed his mandate and follows policies opposed to the demands of the revolution which indirectly brought him to power?

Currently an obvious confusion reigns, and one can understand that the scenes of fraternization between demonstrators and the army, indeed the police, cause surprise and worry. But Egyptians are not imbeciles! All those who today stress the role of the army during the dictatorship and the exactions it committed before and after the fall of Mubarak are right to do so. But is it useful to recall that Egyptians, who were the first victims of them, are aware of all this, and probably know a good deal more about it than the self-proclaimed specialists? Visibly, yes.

It is obviously not about underestimating the contradictory aspects of the army intervention and showing a naive optimism after the fall of the President. But remember that one year ago, after Morsi's victory, some already said that the revolution was dead and that Egyptians had seen their victory "stolen" by the Muslim Brotherhood. They have just shown the whole world that this was not the case, and that they remain vigilant, not lowering their guard before the counter-revolutionary elements. For 30 months, the Egyptian people have in reality shown that they do not intend to let anybody, civilian or military, confiscate their revolution. And nothing indicates that this popular dynamic is broken - in fact the indications are quite to the contrary.

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P.S.

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