

The roots of the coup

Paolo Gerbaudo

It is political despair and lack of credible leadership that have led Egyptian revolutionaries to support the army's removal of Morsi.

A military coup? Or a popular insurrection? Or a popular insurrection turning into a military coup? The removal of the Islamist president Mohammed Morsi by the Egyptian army a few days after the massive protests of 30 June has cast into serious doubt the destiny of the 2011 revolution and its promise of democratic change. Moreover, the event has raised some troublesome questions for those who have seen in the Egyptian revolution and in the Arab Spring as a whole an exhilarating promise of global democratic change. How is it possible that the demonstrators in Cairo have been applauding the comeback of the very army they fought against after the departure of Mubarak? What has led revolutionary activists and opposition politicians, many of whom supported Morsi in the presidential election runoff in 2012, to sanction his removal by the armed forces? And what is left of the calls for democracy that were proclaimed as the most important of demonstrators' demands in January 2011?

The situation in Egypt was still very much in flux at the time of going to press, but this article looks at some of the background against which recent events have unfolded. It argues that support on the part of revolutionaries and the political opposition for the intervention of the army is the final result of the wave of political despair and nihilism of pure resistance that has been engulfing veterans of the 25 January revolution. The social and political opposition was unable to develop a credible alternative to Muslim Brotherhood rule; and it had no realistic mid-term strategy to defeat the Islamists - not just in the squares but also in the elections, where the Islamists had easily prevailed. And this ineptitude has ultimately resulted

The roots of the coup

in their seeing in the intervention of the army the only possible means of regaining control of what they have perceived to be their hijacked revolution.

Certainly much of the blame for the current situation of political chaos in Egypt lies with the Brotherhood's disastrous performance in power. With its arrogance and monopolising tendencies, the oldest of the political Islamist organisations has reinforced many of the suspicions that were harboured against it. Moreover, it has proved itself completely incompetent in economic policy, so preoccupied has it been with using the state as a vehicle of moral indoctrination - an endeavour that has quickly attracted the disapproval of large sections of the Egyptian population.

In confronting the Brotherhood in power, the opposition, spear-headed by the newly born Tamarod (Rebel) group, has demonstrated a renewed vitality, and has managed to generate a powerful wave of protest that has sent over ten million people onto the streets all over Egypt. However, its mobilising capacity has not been matched by efficient political leadership. By accepting the intervention of the army against an elected president, the opposition has committed a grave political mistake, raising the prospects of a civil war, and putting into serious doubt one of the few notable gains of the 25 January revolution, namely the transition to an elected political authority. As I will argue in this article, this disastrous decision is the ultimate manifestation of an underlying structural weakness of the revolutionary process in Egypt: there has been a nihilist focus on resistance to the powers that be, an inability to articulate a positive vision for the future of Egypt, and an absence of any credible leadership to pursue such a vision.

Against the brotherhood state

The current phase of political turmoil in Egypt is first and foremost the result of the arrogance of the Muslim Brotherhood in power, and its inability to construct a broad consensus base. Morsi insisted in his inauguration speech that he would be 'a president for all Egyptians', including women, Coptic Christians and youth. But his record during his presidency provided abundant evidence of an impending 'Brotherhoodisation' of the state; he inaugurated a process of monopolisation of all its different apparatuses - schools, courts, public companies, hospitals, the army - with the aim of long-term political domination.

In the period immediately following the June 2012 presidential elections, in

Soundings

which Morsi defeated regime figure Ahmed Shafiq, the Brotherhood appeared close to consolidating its hold of the country and putting to an end the long months of instability and violence. They seemed to have the upper hand when in August 2012 Morsi got rid of their opponents in the military. The president forced the resignation of Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, head of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, who after the fall of Mubarak had become the de facto president, and installed in his stead a group of more loyal Young Officers, presided over by general Fatah al-Sisi. But here the Brotherhood had underestimated the army's capacity to reorganise itself as a political actor - as demonstrated by the coup - and, more specifically, they also grossly overestimated the loyalty of al-Sisi.

Brewing discontent was ignited in November 2012 by the president's decision to fast-track the approval of the new constitution without seeking a compromise with the opposition, and at the same time to grant himself temporary extra-judicial powers under a 'constitutional declaration'. Clashes ensued, not only between protestors and police, but also - more worryingly - between revolutionaries and Islamists, climaxing in the 'bloody Wednesday' of 5 December, when confrontations around the presidential palace of Ettihadeya saw five casualties, some of them caused by gunshots fired from within both groups of protestors. Street battles continued in 2013, amidst signs of an increasing radicalisation of the revolutionary youth, as exemplified, for instance, by the appearance on the streets of Cairo of an anarchist Black Bloc. The Brotherhood's apparent victory in the constitutional referendum of December 2012, when 63 per cent of those voting said yes to the new constitution, should be seen in the context of only 33 per cent of eligible voters having voted, and the results showing a country deeply split along the rural/urban divide.

Protestors' anger was further exacerbated by the fact that the new government had resorted to the old methods of Mubarak and the military junta. It erected separation walls all around Tahrir Square, denounced protestors as 'thugs' and 'counter-revolutionaries' acting in complicity with 'foreign forces', and appealed for support to all 'responsible citizens', and those seeking 'stability'. Moreover it tried to stifle dissent by putting pressure on critical newspapers; and it also briefly arrested popular television host Bassem Youssef, the 'Egyptian Jon Stewart', accused of insulting the president. Slogans like 'Morsi-Mubarak' came to capture the widespread perception that the Muslim Brotherhood was following in the

The roots of the coup

footsteps of the old regime - and that it needed to be rooted out of power in much the same way as Mubarak.

Furthermore, the political conflict is taking place against the background of a pitiful economic situation; as *The Economist* has well summed up, the Egyptian economy is 'going to the dogs'.¹ Unemployment stands above 20 per cent, the deficit is nearing 12 per cent of GDP; the Egyptian pound has lost 10 per cent of its value since January 2013; and foreign reserves are close to depletion. Morsi's solution was to seek financial help from the Gulf monarchies, and to adopt neoliberal austerity policies. At the time he was ousted he was in the process of implementing a series of deep budget cuts to satisfy IMF conditions for a loan worth \$4.5 billion; these included suggested cuts to fuel subsidies - one of the main budgetary policies that had been used to maintain social peace under the previous regime.

The degree of dissatisfaction with the government could be seen in the success of the Tamarod petition campaign against Morsi, which by June 2013 had collected 15 million signatures from Egyptians wanting the president to resign. It was this campaign that called for the 30 June protests that would ultimately mark the end of Morsi's troubled tenure.

Youth in opposition

In order to understand how the protesting youths of Tahrir have ended up applauding the army's removal of the president we need to appreciate the degree of political despair that has affected many young veterans of the revolution in the year and a half since the fall of Mubarak. They felt that the election of Morsi, and his arrogant and exclusivist attitude in power, was putting into jeopardy the gains of the revolution.

The unlikely debut of the anarchist Black Bloc was perhaps the most glaring symptom of the deep alienation that was being experienced by large sectors of revolutionary youth, whose attitude towards the political arena could be summed up by the slogan 'mafish selmiya' ['no to non-violence'] - which features heavily in their Facebook pages and Twitter channels. A sense of deep frustration about the hijacked revolution, combined with existential despair in the face of the total absence of employment opportunities, produced a visceral anger that found

Soundings

its outlet in the heroic experience of street fighting, from which many young Egyptians have derived a sense of group solidarity and personal purpose.

This hard-line antagonism does not come out of the blue. It is but the latest manifestation of the successive youth subcultures that have strongly contributed to the Egyptian revolution. It is often overlooked that, in the absence of strong secular political forces, and because of the weakness of the labour movement, the mobilisation and organisation of the Egyptian revolution of 2011 was to a great extent channelled through the informal structures of urban youth subcultures.² These subcultures - which are highly diverse both in practice and in class composition - include Football Ultras hooligans and alternative rap, rock and folk music and street art scenes, as well as the much higher profile internet-connected groups, such as the so-called *shabab-al-Facebook* (the Facebook Youth).³

The importance of these youth groupings in the revolution is a function of the peculiar demographic situation of Egypt, which, as has happened in other countries affected by the Arab Spring, finds itself just past a 'youth bulge', a rapid increase in the number of young people as a percentage of the population - which is often considered as a factor determining revolutionary situations. More than 50 per cent of the population are under 25 years old, and this increase in the numbers of young people has not been matched by an equivalent increase of employment opportunities. And, if anything, the situation became worse after the onset of the revolution. According to figures relating to the second quarter of 2012, the unemployment rate for those in the age range 15-29 was 77.5 per cent, and 8 out of 10 young people with university education were out of work.⁴

Since the eve of the anti-Mubarak revolution, urban youth has come to define itself explicitly as an autonomous actor with a specific identity, and this has been manifested in a number of youth protest groups. Protest organisations such as the famous 6 April Youth Movement and several other groups (including the dissident Youth of the Muslim Brotherhood, which later formed the Egyptian Current Party) sought to organise the defiance of Egyptian youth during the revolution. But although these explicitly political groups were important in providing a direction to the revolutionary mobilisations, they have attracted rather a small membership and support base compared to those of the subcultural groups, particularly the football Ultras.

Officially founded in 2007, the Egyptian Ultras of the Cairene clubs el-Ahly

The roots of the coup

and Zamalek styled themselves after the Italian tradition of Ultras that harked back to the 1970s, as organised groups of supporters autonomous from the management of the clubs, and combining the pursuit of football fandom with a sort of supporters' trade unionism - on issues like ticket price, transport to away matches, transfer of players and team management. In a similar way to their Italian counterparts, the organisational structure of the Egyptian Ultras is held together by group solidarity and charismatic leadership, as epitomised by the 'kappos' (from the Italian 'capo' - chief), who are cheerleaders in football matches as well as in protest events.

After the revolution began, the Ultras became increasingly politicised. They have acted as a sort of revolutionary militia for the movement, proving decisive in many street battles with the police, and in the course of this paying a high blood tribute. The massacre of 72 el-Ahly fans in Port Said on 1 February 2012 was widely interpreted as the result of an ambush laid out by the surviving security apparatuses of the old regime, thirsty for revenge.

The slogans and imagery of the Egyptian Ultras are characterised by an anti-authoritarian irreverence directed against the repressive structures of an authoritarian state that manifests itself almost exclusively in the form of the stick (riot police) rather than the carrot (welfare measures, job opportunities, health and education). Within this anti-authoritarian cultural stream, over the course of the revolution new kinds of militants have coalesced. At least since the end of 2011 there has been talk of the emergence of the so-called *mushaghbeen* (the naughties) - small 'affinity groups' of friends, many of them members of Ultras groups, who engage in prolonged street fighting with police and have taken part in 'shock attacks' against a number of targets, including public buildings (courts, prisons, police stations) and private property belonging to their political opponents (such as shops and companies owned by Muslim Brotherhood figures). The Black Bloc as a mass noun has provided a common identifier for this diffuse *mushaghbeen* subjectivity, one that draws inspiration from the culture of urban riots in Europe, as seen for example in the ubiquity of the ACAB (All Cops are Bastards) slogan on the walls of Cairo and Alexandria. But all the energy that went into resisting the new incumbent took attention away from developing a coherent political alternative to Brotherhood rule. Furthermore, the revolutionary youth's almost exclusive reliance on informal organising has exacerbated the movement's lack of

Soundings

solid organising structures, thus reinforcing the tendency to look for leadership elsewhere, and in particular to the army, who have now been called on by many to act as a saviour of the country.

This increasing antagonism on the part of the revolutionary youth needs to be understood as an expression of their frustration with the ailing economy and lack of political alternatives. At the same time it is evident that this radical and uncompromising stance raises a number of serious issues when it comes to the development of an organic political strategy. Paradoxically, the anti-authoritarianism of revolutionary subcultures, and their suspicion of the state and of the electoral process, have ended up laying the ground for the worst of authoritarianism, and for renewed interference by the army in national politics.

A leaderless disaster

The road which has led to the coup d'état against Morsi is not solely the result of the nihilist anti-authoritarianism of the Tahrir movement; it is also the result of the inability of the political opposition to propose a credible political leadership for an impatient youth. With its internecine fighting, disagreements and irresoluteness, the opposition as organised in the National Salvation Front has squandered the opportunities it was presented with as a result of the bumpy ride experienced by the Muslim Brotherhood in power. Moreover, it earned itself a negative reputation among young activists, where it was perceived as old, bureaucratic and politically ambiguous.

The NSF alliance, formed in November 2012 in response to Morsi's constitutional declaration, and made up of fourteen opposition parties, is far too broad in scope to constitute a credible alternative for government. It includes 'revolutionary' parties such as al-Dostour (The Constitution), which was formed by Nobel peace prize winner Mohammed el-Baradei (who despite his reputation as honest and well-minded has repeatedly proven politically inept), and the Socialist Tayar-el-Shaabi (Popular Current), headed by the charismatic Nasserist politician and former presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabbahi, nicknamed the 'Egyptian Lula'. But it also encompasses a number of forces that are disliked by revolutionary youth. These include al-Muatmar al-Masri (Egyptian Conference), a centrist party founded by Mubarak's former minister of interior Amr Moussa, seen by many activists as a 'felool' (a left-over of the old regime), and largely discredited

The roots of the coup

traditional parties such as the social-democratic Tagammu, and the liberal party al-Wafd (which came close to pursuing an alliance with the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party in the 2011 parliamentary elections).

The NSF was created to overcome the divisions that had damaged the secular forces in the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2011 and 2012, when the 'revolutionary vote' was dispersed because of the fragmentation of the political offer. But the presence of starkly different political agendas has seriously compromised its effectiveness. Indicative were the u-turns of the NSF in regard to its participation in the parliamentary elections that were initially scheduled for April 2013 and then postponed to October. The NSF first declared its intent to boycott the elections, doubting their fairness; then in April 2013 an official statement suggested a change in policy, and an intention to contest them. But since then there had been further confusing messages, thereby adding to the image of the Front as an ineffective 'alliance of the losers'.

No less important divisions inside the NSF had to do with economic policy, and in particular with their position in regard to the IMF loan. The liberal al-Wafd party, as well as Amr Moussa and Mohammed el-Baradei, supported the loan. In contrast, Hamdeen Sabbahi rejected it, arguing that its conditionality on austerity policies and cuts to subsidies meant it would end up badly affecting the poor.

Incapable of articulating a credible alternative, and scared of waging the confrontation with the Brotherhood in the place where it should have been undertaken - that is in the polls - the NSF has currently ended up enthusiastically supporting the intervention of the army against Morsi. Yet not only does this event constitute a shameful break with the rule of law: supporting it is a political mistake that the Egyptian left will pay for for years to come.

For all the bad things that Morsi has done during his tenure in power, the fact remains that he was an elected president (in fact the first in Egyptian history). In supporting his illegal ousting from power the opposition has demonstrated a blatant hypocrisy, and a deep distrust of the mechanisms of popular democracy. What is much worse, it has also put the country at serious peril of civil war, as the Islamists, feeling excluded from state power, are all too likely to turn to terrorist tactics. Furthermore, it is legitimate to suspect that, despite the promises coming from people like Mohammed el-Baradei, the army will not relinquish the control on power it has just regained.

Soundings

Regardless of the results of the ongoing crisis, it is apparent that the Egyptian case provides us with some important lessons about the nature of revolutionary events. Claims about 'horizontalism' and the use of terms such as 'leaderlessness' to describe the nature of contemporary revolutionary politics - such as reasserted by Paul Mason in the last issue of *Soundings* - are blatantly empirically flawed, given that activist elites continue to exist in contemporary movements, regardless of their use of social network sites.⁵ Moreover, this type of neo-anarchist discourse, very popular among activists themselves, tends to favour a nihilist attitude that sees formal organisations and the state as invariably evil and 'inauthentic', and thus leaves no room for imagining the new forms of organisation and institution that are urgently needed to fulfil people's hopes for systemic social change.

As Nicos Poulantzas suggested many years ago in *State, Power, Socialism*, the rising authoritarianism of the state can actually be aided by the kind of anti-statist attitude we have seen so frequently in contemporary libertarian politics of both the right and the left: when people refuse to engage with the state, the space they thereby vacate offers an opportunity for the state's worst autocratic tendencies. This proposition has been demonstrated to be disturbingly true in the case of Egypt, where declarations of horizontality within social movements, a highly irreverent protest culture and a reluctance to construct a credible political opposition leadership have combined together to produce a popular appeal for the paternalistic intervention of the army - a *deus ex machina*, a state above the state, called on to sort out militarily what civil forces could not sort out by themselves politically. If this were to be the last page in the Egyptian revolution it would have the flavour of a bitter historical indictment. Let us hope it is not.

Paolo Gerbaudo is lecturer in Digital Culture and Society at King's College, London. He is the author of *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, Pluto 2012.

Notes

1. 'Egypt's Economy: Going to the Dogs', *The Economist*, 30.3.13.
2. S. Mehrez, *Translating Egypt's revolution: The language of Tahrir*, American

The roots of the coup

University in Cairo Press 2012; P. Gerbaudo, 'The impermanent revolution: the organisational transformation of the Egyptian pro-democracy movement in the troubled transition', *Social Justice*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2013.

3. M.A. Peterson, *Connected in Cairo: Growing up cosmopolitan in the modern Middle East*, Indiana University Press 2011; P. Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, Pluto 2012.

4. H. El-Behary, 'Egypt's unemployment rate hits record high', *el-Ahram*, 14.8.13: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/>.

5. P. Mason, *Why it's kicking off everywhere: The new global revolutions*, Verso 2012.