Restore Egypt's Elected Government

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American politicians and pundits know almost nothing about Egypt but were quick to endorse the military coup against Mohamed Morsi. Nobody from President Obama on down has called on the Egyptian military to reinstate the elected president, which is the first and most obvious step to save Egypt from a descent into mass violence. The reason is Islamophobia: the biased U.S. presumption that Morsi's fall is simply the result of Islamist authoritarianism.

Yet the truth is a little more complicated. Half or more of the Egyptian population has supported the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties. The Islamist parties have repeatedly won at the polls, in votes for Parliament, the presidency, and constitutional change. The anti-Islamists are trying to win through a military coup what they've been unable to win at the ballot box.
It's good for the U.S. to call for tolerance and political inclusion, without believing it can or should dictate a government. It is fine to speak out against political or civil abuses on either side, and there have been abuses on all sides. It is an illusion, however, to believe that the recent coup is right, acceptable, proportionate to Morsi’s actions, or in any way useful in solving any of Egypt’s deep problems.

The Obama administration's response is as usual trapped in self-contradiction. It "defends" democracy not by calling on the military to reverse course (even despite an army-led massacre of Brotherhood supporters) but by calling on the Muslim Brotherhood to fall in line with the coup. There is little chance of success for this unprincipled and contradictory stance. The Islamist parties immediately and predictably rejected a post-coup transition plan to "democracy."

Prejudiced and ill-informed pundits like the New York Times columnist David Brooks bemoan the Islamists' supposed lack of capacity for democratic governance even as they support a violent coup in the name of democracy. And Egyptian politicians who could not win at the polls, like Mohamed El Baradei, tell us not to believe our own eyes in seeing a brutal military coup, claiming that demonstrators in the streets rather than voters at the polls are the voice of the nation. They want to wish away the Islamist support by half of the population.

Anyone who has followed Egyptian politics since the fall of Mubarak should recognize three things. First, the Islamists have substantial public support, reflected repeatedly at the polls. Second, anti-Islamist forces, following losses at the polls, have repeatedly turned to the military to impede election results, most importantly by barring the elected Parliament from sitting in 2012 and by deposing the president. Third, the West has done absolutely nothing to spare Egypt the descent into civil war. The IMF has not lent Egypt a single cent since the fall of Mubarak, a shocking failure to help stabilize the post-revolution finances of the country. Par for the course, now that the coup has taken
place the U.S. is apparently now interested in a quick IMF agreement.

American hubris in the Middle East operates under the premise that it can determine who rules in the region. If you don't like the regime (Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq) then overthrow it by force. If election results support Islamists or nationalists deemed hostile to Western interests (Algeria, Iran, Palestine), then ignore the results, and if necessary, support a coup. There is a long legacy of this failed approach since World War II, beginning with the CIA overthrow of the Iran government in 1953. Repeatedly this approach has led to war, oppression, economic failure, and of course raging anti-West sentiment. It is now being tried in Egypt.

While I don't hold my breath that it will happen, the right response for the U.S. now would be to call for Morsi's reinstatement, urge international financial support for Egypt to prevent a self-fulfilling financial collapse, and work on issues that unite Egyptians rather than divide them, like facing the massive crises of jobs, drought, and failing finances. Come to think of it, the administration might also focus at home on the same issues that unite 99 percent of Americans.

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