Will Egypt Become the Next Algeria?

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Brief Analysis

If Egypt carries out the same sort of undemocratic and misguided actions seen in Algeria during the 1990s, it will greatly reduce the revolution's prospects for success.

With growing violence in Egypt following the military's July 3 ouster of President Muhammad Morsi, a serious question has arisen as to whether the country will become the next Algeria. At first glance, the comparison seems warranted, at least as a cautionary tale. In 1992, the Algerian military cancelled the second round of parliamentary elections, which the Islamist front was poised to win in a landslide, and President Chadli Bendjedid was forced to resign. Those actions propelled the country into a tragic "black decade" in which over 200,000 people were killed. To this day, Algerian politics remains disoriented.

Of course, Egypt is not Algeria. More important, it refuses to be Algeria. The last thing Egyptians want to hear these days from "interfering" foreign pundits "lecturing" them on democracy is how much they have to learn from Algeria, Turkey, or other countries dealing with Islamism and democratization. "Egypt is an isolated case" analysis tends to lay out the country's cultural and political specificities and unique historical trajectories, usually followed by somewhat wishful analysis that Egypt will find its own unique way back to democracy (and, by extension, its rightful position of leadership in the Arab world and beyond). Yet if the transitional military and political leadership in Cairo pursues misguided policies in the name of short-term stability, Egypt could wind up resembling 1990s-era Algeria more than it would like.

DIFFERENCES ARE OVERSTATED

Those who believe that Egypt's situation is deeply different from Algeria's tend to base their view on several factors. First, they point out that Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) never formed a government, whereas in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party provoked mass demonstrations by mismanaging government during a year in power. Second, Egypt's Islamists are said to be different from Algeria's in that they eschew violence, either because of their long participation in politics or, conversely, because they failed to come to power through violence. Third, Egyptian geography is different, with no mountain redoubts for an insurgency (the Sinai excluded, of course). Fourth, Egypt's struggle for independence was different, and so was the government that

emerged from it. Fifth, the Egyptian street is much more mobilized and intolerant of threats to the revolution.

The problem with these distinctions is that some of them do not hold up under closer analysis, and none of them makes the Algerian cautionary tale less relevant. For example, the argument that Algerian Islamists were more inherently violent does not pass any historical or sociological test. To be sure, significant numbers of Algerian Islamists were veterans of the Afghan conflict, and others had been engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Chadli regime in the 1980s. Yet the vast majority were peaceful Islamists focused on proselytizing and other *dawa* activities, in many cases inspired and taught by Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood schoolteachers exiled to Algeria by Gamal Abdul Nasser. In short, Algerian and Egyptian Islamists are similarly diverse in their views on violence.

Furthermore, anyone who witnessed or studied the May-June 1991 general strike in Algiers knows how mobilized the population was, and how threatened the regime felt. A large portion of the populace, including millions of youths, were opposed to perceived gerrymandering by the National Liberation Front (FLN) aimed at diluting Islamist margins at the polls. The protests united political forces from Maoists to Salafists and shut down main squares in the capital over a period of several weeks.

As for the assertion that the FIS did not come to power, analysts have correctly pointed out that the group governed the majority of Algeria's cities and towns for eighteen months after electorally crushing the opposition. What both sides in the argument miss, however, is the party's continuing success after governing. The FIS was poised to win in a landslide in January 1992 after having governed for a year-and-a-half, largely because it had maintained its organizational strength, observed democratic principles (e.g., opposing the FLN-supported policy of men proxy-voting for female family members), and was seen as less corrupt. Like the Egyptian Brotherhood, the FIS would have continued to do well in elections.

The most important variable in the Algerian case was the behavior of the security forces and the deep state. After January 1992, the government initiated a ferocious crackdown under strict curfews, arresting tens of thousands and torturing hundreds. An armed struggle broke out between the military and thousands of armed youths, while some 25,000 more-moderate Islamists and democracy supporters were rounded up and sent to jails and remote Saharan internment camps, many until the late 1990s (as corroborated by several prison memoirs).

In addition, a powerful Algerian general confirmed to a Paris courtroom in 2002 that the government purposefully let some 800 "Afghan" Algerians go free in order to radicalize the Islamist opposition, provoke greater violence, and win the ensuing fight. The plan was to mop up the enraged and hardened opposition in a matter of months. While there is no evidence that the Egyptian government is engaged in such manipulations, Egypt's past use of *agents provocateurs* makes the cautionary tale relevant.

Egypt shares other similarities with Algeria. In a 2002 interview posted on Algeria Watch, one general called the 1992 events "the first feminist coup" in history, recalling that the primary force motivating military leaders to abort the democratic transition and "save the republic" was their wives and female family members streaming into their offices while holding their daughters' hands, pleading with them not to let Algeria "become another Iran." Some of these elite women joined the ranks of "regime feminists" in the 1990s, defending military actions in the name of protecting women while ignoring that in Algeria -- as in Egypt -- violence against women was just as likely to be perpetrated by armed forces and police as by Islamist forces. These women were fighting real threats to their legal and social status posed by the perceived Islamist agenda and reinforced by the fact that zealous partisans were attacking women. In the process, however, they were teaming up with a regime that had already failed to meet the legal and social demands of a restive, young, male and female population organized and mobilized against it.

STOPPING POLITICAL VIOLENCE IS THE KEY

Political violence is not endemic to Egypt, Algeria, or any society -- instead, it arises through an iterative process of tit for tat. In Algeria's polarized and manipulated environment, some feared the military more than the Islamists, while others feared the Islamists more than the military. Today, the "secular" political forces in Egypt are sounding more and more like the "secular" Algerian forces that supported the 1992 actions and later became known as the "eradicators." Ultimately, their methods proved fruitless and prolonged the political impasse and the war, while national youth organizations like Rassemblement Actions Jeunesse and leaders like President Abdelaziz Bouteflika who promoted national reconciliation saved the day -- and saved Algeria from its own worst self.

Algeria's true lesson for Egypt has everything to do with stopping that process of devolution toward irreversible violence. When faced with transitions and historical tipping points, what the regime does and how it behaves is what matters most, along with and in symbiosis with the actions of the street. Too much recent analysis on Egypt has focused on whether the Muslim Brothers have it in themselves to violently confront a regime that removed them from power, forgetting the essential "Arab Spring" lesson that what distinguishes one outcome from another is what regimes and militaries do in response to the crowd. Emergency decrees, mass arrests, press censorship, and other draconian measures may bring superficial quietude, as they did in Algeria in 1992, during which the underlying conflict worsened and then began to spiral out of control nine months later. Similar undemocratic and misguided actions in Egypt would greatly reduce the revolution's short- and long-term prospects for success.

William Lawrence just completed a two-year term as director of the International Crisis Group's North Africa Project and previously lived for two years in Egypt. ❖

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