

# Witnessing a Coup in Egypt

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Jul 5, 2013

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Police that suffocated protesters with tear gas in 2011 were now standing alongside them.

**A**t the end of the long boulevard leading up to the Egyptian presidential palace in northern Cairo, a uniformed police lieutenant joined many thousands of protesters in demanding President Mohammed Morsi's ouster on Wednesday afternoon. It was a bizarre sight: Egypt's notoriously abusive police force was among the chief targets of the 2011 uprising that toppled President Hosni Mubarak. Now, barely two years later, uniformed officers stood alongside many of the same protesters who had once been the target of police tear gas.

"This is the best revolution that ever happened in the history of our entire country," the lieutenant told me. "It gathered all types of people together -- the police, the army, all the Egyptian people, and the judges." But if President Morsi doesn't step down, I asked, will you leave the streets and continue reporting to him? "If he doesn't step down," the cop replied, "we are still with the people."

The brazen participation of police in the massive uprising that catalyzed the military coup forcing Mr. Morsi from power only hours later reflects the thoroughly undemocratic nature of this week's political developments in Egypt. Yet the officers' rebelliousness also illustrates the very reason why the collapse of the Morsi government was inevitable: Mr. Morsi exerted virtually no real control over state institutions, particularly the military and police, and was increasingly a president in name only.

The turning point in Mr. Morsi's presidency came on Nov. 22, when he asserted unchecked executive authority through a constitutional declaration and, weeks later, rammed an Islamist constitution through to ratification. When mass protests erupted in response, Mr. Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood colleagues dispatched Brotherhood cadres to attack the protesters, and seven people were killed in the fighting.

"The constitution was the breaking point," Magda Yaacoub, a protester in her late 50s, told me in Tahrir Square on Tuesday. A woman sitting on a plastic chair next to her agreed. "This was the day we decided we couldn't take it

anymore," she said. It is a widely held position: In the months that followed, large and often violent protests were as frequent as they were widespread. By January, rising havoc forced the military to assume control over three Suez Canal cities.

The Brotherhood tells itself a very different -- and largely fanciful -- story. In the Brothers' view, Mr. Morsi inherited a nearly impossible situation upon taking office, and a broad coalition of nefarious forces conspired to ensure his failure.

"Some of them are people who don't understand what's going on," Mohamed Sudan, a foreign-relations official in the Brotherhood's political party told me on Wednesday morning. "There's also the media...Some of them hate Muslims. Some of them are Christians who are scared from the Muslim power, or from Muslims being in power. And some of them -- the majority -- are from the former regime."

Muslim Brothers routinely told me in recent weeks that despite hours-long gas lines, multiple daily power outages, and rising food prices, Mr. Morsi was actually a successful president.

"Life has improved for most people," a Muslim Brother told me a few weeks ago as we sipped tea in the organization's offices in a quiet Cairo suburb. "The poor make much more money. The middle class is also much better off. The problem, though, is that some of the wealthy are not making as much money as they used to, and they are funding the campaign against the president."

The Brothers' belief in Mr. Morsi's victimhood only increased on Sunday, when millions of Egyptians poured into the streets to demand his removal. In response, the Brotherhood set up a protest encampment of its own outside the Rabaa al-Adaweya mosque in northern Cairo. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood were bussed in from across the country to bolster the numbers. When the police declined to protect Brotherhood headquarters, which were subsequently ransacked and burned, the group began organizing its cadres into makeshift vigilante units, equipping them with helmets and batons.

"We will stay until Morsi has full power," Imad Mustafa, a Muslim Brother from Fayoum, a city southwest of Cairo, told me. "Or we die."

But far from demonstrating strength, the Brotherhood's response to the anti-Morsi protests only reinforced the organization's utter incompetence. Despite the Brotherhood's reputation for being able to mobilize huge crowds of supporters, the organization ultimately managed to occupy only one public square. Meanwhile, countless thousands of protesters overwhelmed two squares in Cairo alone, and dozens of others in cities and towns throughout Egypt.

The Brotherhood's amateur battalions, which they would surely describe as menacing militias, hardly inspired fear. Some of the would-be fighters carried tree branches instead of batons. In one formation I saw outside the Rabaa al-Adaweya mosque, the pack was being led by a Muslim Brother who could not have been more than four feet tall.

At the anti-Morsi protests throughout Wednesday, the atmosphere was gleeful. "We will finish the game," a protester named Maikal Adel told me in the afternoon in Tahrir Square, amid a carnival-like atmosphere that included drumming, horn blowing, and lots of popcorn being eaten. "Today will be the last day."

And when Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi announced Mr. Morsi's ouster that evening, the people in Tahrir let out a deafening cheer. Men in the hotel where I watched the announcement embraced. With Egypt's first Islamist president now out of the picture, one middle-aged man whispered to himself, "Allahu Akbar."

Only a year ago, I witnessed a very different Tahrir celebration -- one that included far more passionate "Allahu Akbar" chants -- when Mr. Morsi was declared the winner of Egypt's 2012 presidential elections. The masses who packed the square on that day sought an unmistakably theocratic project. The fact that Mr. Morsi made little progress in implementing sharia law may be the most memorable failure of his tenure.

"Failure" -- Wednesday's protesters often shouted the word in Arabic when describing Mr. Morsi -- created the conditions that made his presidency untenable and ultimately brought Egypt to the brink. The undemocratic way in which he was removed will significantly complicate efforts to build consensus in Egypt during the days and months ahead. But given the depth of Egypt's problems, the fate of democracy was not much on the minds of the protesters who helped bring down a president.

*Eric Trager is the Next Generation fellow at the Washington Institute.* ❖

*Wall Street Journal*

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