

Summary: The Egyptian military's August 14 massacre of supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood marked a reach for total power. The complicity of some parts of the democratic movement has placed in jeopardy the entire revolutionary wave that has gripped the country since 2011 – Editor

Egyptian Military Seeks to Extinguish Revolution

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On August 14, 2013, Egypt's military-police apparatus stormed two largely peaceful encampments of the Muslim Brotherhood, using live ammunition and armed bulldozers to kill thousands and injure many thousands more. On that horrific day, the entire revolutionary process that began in 2011 reached a crisis point, one that held the possibility of its unraveling in the face of outright counter-revolution.

The military's desire to move the country back toward the iron dictatorship of the Mubarak era was troubling enough, but what made August 14 a tragedy in the deepest sense was that they seemed, at least for the moment, to enjoy the support not only of Mubarak loyalists, but also many elements of the revolutionary and democratic movements that traced their origin to the non-Islamist wings of the 2011 revolution. This was especially true of Egyptian liberals.

On the day after the massacre, ruling general Abdel Fattah al-Sisi had his government declare not only a curfew but also a state of emergency, something the Mubarak regime had used for three decades, right up to 2011. Moreover, on the day before, Sisi showed his hand when he had 25 provincial governors appointed, almost all of them with hardline, pro-Mubarak military or police backgrounds.

For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood continued to demand its return to power, publicly fanning the flames of intolerance and sectarianism by characterizing its opponents as Christians and as Zionists, rather than “good” Egyptian Muslims. As a result, when pro-Muslim Brotherhood crowds took to the streets to protest the August 14 massacre, they targeted not only government buildings and the police, but also monasteries and churches belonging to the country’s beleaguered Coptic Christian minority.

Where did all this leave the multi-faceted, mass revolutionary-democratic movement that had sparked the June 30 demonstrations that drove the Muslim Brotherhood from power? On that day, the tens of millions on the streets appealed to the military to save the country from what was looming as the establishment of an authoritarian Islamist state, but did not call for a return to military rule. The success of that movement in toppling the Muslim Brotherhood’s authoritarian government created an opening for the democratic and revolutionary forces, but also one for the military.

Unfortunately, it was the military that came to the fore. Since June 30, the democratic and revolutionary movement has splintered, with many now touting not democracy but a military savior from on high. This has been true of the dominant, mainly liberal, wing of the Tamarod (Rebellion) Movement, the youth group that organized the June 30 demonstration. Totally co-opted now by the military, Tamarod continued to call demonstrations in support of the military, even after August 14. Another example of this is Hamdin Sabbahi, the leftist Nasserist who drew a large number of votes in the 2012 elections, but who more recently stated that it had been a mistake for the revolutionaries to have chanted “Down with military rule” during the 2011-12 regime of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

But the biggest offenders have been the scores of liberal politicians who continue to fill slots in the puppet government established by the military in early July. This kind of opportunism will have tragic consequences for the future of Egypt, and not only in the short run, for it will serve to discredit the very idea of democracy, as well as that of revolution in the positive, humanist sense.

Egyptians know full well that the U.S. bankrolls the Egyptian military, also supplying it and the police with many of the weapons being used in the repression. The very limited nature of Barack Obama's criticism of the massacre was captured in a headline from the Manchester *Guardian* on August 15, "Egypt death toll soars as Obama leads muted international condemnation." This too will come back to haunt those liberals who are now supporting the military, in a country and a region where U.S. imperialism is especially despised.

One small bright spot, however, was the principled stance of some members of the democratic and revolutionary movement. Liberal interim Vice-President Mohamed ElBaradei resigned to protest the August 14 massacre. The April 6 Movement, a key element in the mass youth mobilization of 2011, and since, declared: "Muslim Brotherhood leading figures and the interim government preferred bloody confrontation in order to achieve [their] goals; the regime wanted to enforce its rule and the Muslim Brotherhood wanted to use the blood of the victims to make political gains." It added: "The only way to end the current crisis and to put the country on the democratic path is through a political solution that allows achievement of the goals of the revolution — the solution that was expressed by resigned Vice President Mohamed ElBaradei" (*Al-Ahram Online*, August 15, 2013).

In response to the massacre, Egypt's Revolutionary Socialists termed August 14 "a bloody dress rehearsal for the liquidation of the Egyptian revolution. It aims to break the revolutionary will of all Egyptians who are claiming their rights, whether workers, poor, or revolutionary youth, by creating a state of terror" (*Al-Ahram Online*, August 15, 2013). This points to the real possibility that the generals will soon move directly against the democratic and revolutionary forces, just as they have against the Muslim Brotherhood.

As of now, the military seems to enjoy a substantial measure of popular support for its crackdown, as it trades on nationalist sentiment, while also stoking wild rumors about "terrorism" stemming from the Muslim Brotherhood. But as the scope of the crackdown becomes more evident, with all its gruesome, anti-human consequences, that support is sure to lessen. Moreover, the new military rulers have nothing to offer in terms of the economy than one or another variant of neoliberal capitalism.

Therefore, as the economy continues to nosedive, in a few months General Sisi could become just as discredited as had SCAF by 2012. Even assuming this, however, by then the military could well be entrenched in such way as to be unassailable for the near future. Still another possibility is that public sentiment could swing again toward the Islamists, should the military rapidly discredit itself. Or even absent that, the ongoing repression could lead to the development of an intransigent, violent wing of the Islamist movement, as happened in the 1990s. In any case though, the revolutionary and democratic movement has been marginalized. That is the true tragedy of Egypt in 2013.

And just as Egypt, given its size and historic importance, became a bellwether for the Arab revolutions as a whole in 2011, so today the August 14 massacre may drag down what remains of the spirit of 2011 in other countries. The events in Egypt will surely affect Syria in a negative way, and perhaps even Tunisia, where the secular left continues to assert itself in an ongoing struggle against the Islamist Ennahda Party. On a global scale, the latest developments in Egypt will serve to undermine the very idea of revolution.

If, however, the Egyptian and global left can learn the lessons of the recent tragic events, which not least would involve both avoiding opportunism – whether toward military or Islamist forces – and spelling out what we are for rather than just what we are against, we will emerge stronger for the future. Given the ongoing crisis of Egyptian society, it is more than possible that, sooner rather than later, another chance at mass mobilization may occur for the democratic and revolutionary movement. But at least for the near term, a period of retrogression has set in.