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Middle East Q&A: Egypt's 2013 Coup and the Demise of Democracy

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Egypt's future looks bleaker than ever. One year since its first ever democratic elections, mass protests and the military have ousted President Mohamed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood in a popularly-supported coup. Viewed by his secular liberal critics as an incapable authoritarian fundamentalist, Morsi's brief tenure at the helm of Egyptian politics was marred by consecutive crises. Egypt today is poorer, more polarized, and more unsafe than it was a year ago. However, his ouster should be no cause for celebration. This *Asan Issue Brief* argues that the Egyptian people have sold their hard-won democracy to the military in exchange for temporary relief from economic frustration. This is a deal with the devil whose long-term repercussions for the future of Egyptian democracy will soon become apparent.

Q. Is Egypt's 2013 military coup a setback for democracy?

Yes. It has set a dangerous precedent for the future of civil-military relations. It has set the stage for rule by the fickle and temperamental. It will alienate the country's moderate Islamists—both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wasat Party—from the democratic experiment. And, most importantly, it will entrench the misconception that democracy is simply the power of popular protest and not about elections, political settlement, and, most importantly, tolerance.

At its core, democracy encompasses free and fair elections and the supremacy of the rule of law. No matter how incompetent or incapable a government is, its electoral mandate should be respected. Public anger and opposition obstructionism are all legitimate reactions to bad governance, but the ultimate arbiter of a government's performance must be the ballot box. In democratizing countries such as Egypt, intervention risks further trapping the country in what Przeworski once called the "valley of transition" where the necessary reforms for democratization are hard to implement.

Q. What were the reasons behind the protests and coup?

Economic mismanagement and marginalization of the opposition. The greatest challenge for Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood has been their failure to improve Egypt's economic situation. Almost all economic indicators, from inflation to unemployment, show that Egypt today is worse off than a year ago. Political instability in the newly democratizing country deterred essential international investment, with the economy barely surviving on financial loans from wealthy Gulf states such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Yet there exists a fundamental misunderstanding of the fruits of democracy among the opposition. In new democracies, economic reform is the most urgent yet most difficult task. Democracy is not necessarily an economically efficient system, but people in all segments of society expect to be better off in a new system. That is why many of the conditions that international financial institutions place on the provision of loans—shrinking the size of the state and removing inefficient grants such as food and fuel subsidies—are often excruciatingly difficult for new democracies to meet. New democracies face resistance from not only the bloated state bureaucracy created by previous authoritarian regimes, but also the middle and lower classes who enjoyed the benefits of subsidies. And yet, democracies do not repress those complaints. In this regard, Egypt was not a deviant case in the trajectory of new democracies' economic challenges.

Secondly, it was always a difficult task for the Muslim Brotherhood to adopt an inclusive governing style. Having been repressed for decades and operated in the shad-

ows of Egyptian society, it lacks the experience of compromising and negotiating within an institutional setting. Using its grassroots influence, the Brotherhood was able to mobilize its supporters to capture an overwhelming parliamentary majority and win the presidency. However, those same attributes that helped it win power have not helped it from sharing power. Instead, the Brothers sought to exclude the secular liberal opposition from the new political order and push its pro-Islamic agenda on the country's religious minorities. Nevertheless, faced with growing pressure, Morsi did eventually pull back from some of his harsher rhetoric and policies.

Q. Why did so many people protest this time?

Democratization creates expectations. Egypt's 2011 revolution has opened the space for the people to express their grievances and preferences. Even during the height of 2011's revolution, many people remained fearful that if the protests failed, there would be violent consequences. With the fear that Egyptians lived under during the Mubarak era now gone, tens of millions have been able to take to the streets to voice their opinions and to seek their own interests. The people's newfound political freedom creates impatience when their livelihoods do not begin to improve. Watching the same old economic problems continue to fester leads to a sense of frustration; a sense that the revolution has failed. One of democracy's greatest strengths is that political expression will not risk retribution and punishment.

Q. Who are the winners and losers of the 2013 coup?

The military won and the Muslim Brotherhood lost. Looking back over the past year, one of the great falsehoods of Morsi's tenure was that he had tamed the Egyptian military. When Morsi orchestrated the resignation of Field Marshall Mohamed Tantawi, Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), in August 2012, many commentators hailed the move as a victory in civilian control over the military. What the 2013 coup has demonstrated, however, is that after six decades of accumulating power as an institution, the military cannot be tamed by politicians. We are witnessing the beginning of a dangerous chapter where periodic military interventions to 'stabilize' the country may become the new norm in Egypt. Having attempted during the tumultuous post-Mubarak transition to avoid being

blamed for the ensuing chaos, instability, and incompetence, the military prefers this to trying to actually rule. This way it can preserve its economic interests and also its high prestige among the Egyptian people.

In contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood now faces an existential dilemma since the military issued arrest warrants against 300 of its leaders. Having participated in the democratic process, been democratically-elected, yet been removed from power by the military after only a year, the question will arise for the Brothers: Why bother with democracy? To be sure, we are unlikely to see a total breakdown into civil war in the short-term. The Brothers will recall their long oppression during the Mubarak era when they were severely persecuted and imprisoned and will be hesitant to engage in a militant response. Nonetheless, in the long-term, these moderate Islamists may reject democracy as being unable to accommodate their political aspirations. Then, the consequences would be that any future government would be stuck in a vicious cycle, unable to effectively govern, and faced with entrenched resistance from a sizeable portion of the population. It should not be forgotten that the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party earned 47.2 percent of the vote in the previous parliamentary elections while Morsi was elected with 51.7 percent of the popular vote.

Q. What does the 2013 coup mean for South Korea?

It is a test for Korea's middle power aspirations. Given that Egypt is a critical player in the region's security and power configuration, Korea, as a member of the United Nations Security Council and emerging middle power, needs to closely observe the future of Egypt's democracy just as the entire international community is doing so. Of course, there is a certain detachment for many Koreans watching the current turmoil in Egypt. The country is not a major source of oil, nor does our bilateral trade rank particularly high at roughly $18 billion.

However, Egypt is the region's traditional great power and a key player in the Arab League mediating in the Israel-Palestine conflict and Iranian nuclear negotiations, and pushing to end the Syrian civil war. For Korea, the promise of an active, democratic Egypt that plays a constructive role in stabilizing the region's many flash-

points is something that must be strongly supported. To support Egypt's continued move towards democracy, Korea should use its position at the UNSC to pressure the Egyptian military to call for fresh elections as soon as possible.

Whether Egypt emerges as a peaceful, prosperous democracy also holds major implications for Korea's Middle East trade policy. Egypt represents a huge untapped market of 83 million potential consumers and a strategic trade location at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and Asia. As Korea continues to diversify its trade relationships in the region, fostering ties with newly emerging oil-rich democracies such as Iraq and Libya, interregional partners such as Egypt and Turkey will be even more important.

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