



Military coup in Egypt
and the “hypocrisy” of the “human rights industry”

by Julia Savage

“There are many striking things about the political situation in Egypt. But perhaps the most striking thing is the silence of those who pose as human-rights cheerleaders, of the West’s head shakers over tyranny in far off lands, who have gone strangely mute, or at least uncharacteristically coy, in the face of the Egyptian military’s seizure of power and repression of dissent.”

Brendan O’Neill, Spiked, 30 July 2013

There is no doubt that the present political drama in Egypt poses problems for any outsider

trying to make sense of an incredibly complicated and fast moving situation. Following years of oppression under President Hosni Mubarak, including the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, the Arab Spring which ignited in Tunisia in 2010 hit Egypt with spectacular effect, resulting in the resignation of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 after 30 years of rule and 18 days of revolutionary fervour (most strikingly symbolised by the iconic occupation by citizens of Cairo's Tahrir Square). The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces took control of Egypt, suspended the constitution and dissolved the legislature.

A constitutional referendum in March paved the way for parliamentary and presidential elections, which resulted in the Muslim Brotherhood winning nearly half the seats of the legislature, and Salafis another quarter. The Supreme Constitutional Court dissolved the lower house of parliament in June 2012 on the grounds that one third of its members had been illegitimately elected, the systems in place having allowed political parties to compete for seats intended for independent candidates. Mohammed Morsi emerged as the victor in the presidential vote, narrowly beating opponent Ahmed Shafik with 51.7 per cent of the vote on a turn out of nearly 52 per cent of the vote.

Morsi embarked on a constitutional process, under a panel controlled by Brotherhood and Salafist figures. This process proved deeply divisive and controversial. A first constituent assembly was dissolved in April following a court ruling. A reconstituted assembly was subsequently boycotted by secular groups, labour syndicates and church representatives, and forty three separate legal challenges to the drafting panel were filed. On 22 November Morsi issued a decree giving the panel until January to complete its work. He decreed that his decisions were *"final and unchallengeable by any individual or body until a new constitution has been ratified and a new parliament has been elected"*, pre-empting the ruling of the Supreme Constitutional Court on the legitimacy of the assembly. After the SCC said it would soon rule anyway, the drafting assembly carried out a marathon overnight session, rushing through a constitution which was subsequently ratified in a referendum. 17.1 million or 32.9% of nearly 51 million eligible voters participated in the referendum, which was carried by a 63.8% yes vote. As well as a constitution which many saw as cementing the role of religion in the state, draft laws to organise the work of non governmental organisations, rights of protest, and the development of the Suez canal all proved controversial from a civil rights point of view. An increasing political polarisation became evident.

On July 3rd, following four days of sustained giant street protests in Cairo marking one year of Morsi's presidency President Morsi was deposed by the Egyptian army. This has been followed by arrests of the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, mass demonstrations by Morsi's supporters, a crackdown against supporters of the ousted President and clashes between his supporters and opponents. At the time of writing, the Brotherhood was refusing to engage in any political process until their President is returned to office and many in Egypt and elsewhere are holding their breath.

So what to make of this for a discussion for a British current affairs group? Well, what has happened in Egypt is undoubtedly an army coup, deposing a democratically elected president. Like all coups, it has happened in a very specific context. The Egyptian army, which consolidated its reach and power under Mubarak, has its finger in every part of Egyptian society, accounting by some estimates in its public-private enterprises for up to 40 per cent of GDP. It played a specific and unusual role in the revolution that ousted Mubarak, being largely proclaimed by the protesters as a friend of the revolution and finally coming down on the side of the protesters. Now it has come down again, against a democratically elected President, albeit one who had deeply divided Egyptian society and who some would see as being no friend of democracy.

International reaction to the coup has been circumspect. President Obama said he was "*deeply concerned*"

by the removal of Morsi, but stopped short of calling it a coup d'état or of asking for Morsi's reinstatement. He stated

"I now call on the Egyptian military to move quickly and responsibly to return full authority back to a democratically elected civilian government through an inclusive and transparent process, and to avoid any arbitrary arrests of President Morsi and his supporters"

. David Cameron stated

"We never support in countries intervention by the military, but what needs to happen in Egypt now is for democracy to flourish and a genuine democratic transition to take place".

There are those commentators that see a rank hypocrisy in this kind of pronouncement, a kind of slippery, craven “when is a coup not a coup”? In his article for Spiked on 30th July Mr Brendan O’Neill took issue with Western reaction to the coup and more broadly with what he called the “*entire human rights industry*”, attacking “*the democratic pretensions of those Westerners who sing from the hymn sheet of human rights*”.

Well, you can’t deny that Mr O’Neill has a point. It wouldn’t take any political genius to speculate that the Americans, other Western powers, and, yes, indeed, many of those who profess to believe in the principles of human rights might be a bit antsy about the prospect of a government which showed signs of imposing an authoritarian Islamist agenda in one of the most important centres of power in the Middle East. There are an awful lot of Egyptians who are a bit antsy about it too. It would also be futile to pretend that the pronouncements of politicians weren’t strongly grounded in their sense of realpolitik. It was ever thus. With respect to Egypt, for example, in the face of blatant and continuing rights abuses western governments followed a policy over years and years which could be described as “constructive engagement” alternatively “immoral appeasement”, take your pick, with Hosni Mubarak’s dictatorship, choosing to find areas for dialogue on human rights which were largely cosmetic and where concrete change was slow (for which read pretty much non existent). Egypt has always been a pivotal player - and one very helpful to the West - in the political process in the Middle East, and this may have had something to do with this. Fact is if Obama called what’s just happened in Egypt a coup, under US law he’d be obliged to cut off American aid to Egypt. Probably doesn’t want to do that, and his reasons for not wanting to won’t be altruistic.

Mr O’Neill is also, of course, absolutely right to be outraged about the violence that is being perpetrated by the agents of the state against the supporters of the Morsi government and absolutely right to want to make a noise about it. However the Egyptian security apparatus’ seizure of power and repression of dissent did not start with the coup which has just taken place. It is human rights advocates like Tom Porteous of Human Rights Watch who have been pointing out that much of what is happening right now is business as usual in Egypt. It is the same security apparatus that wielded the tools of oppression under Mubarak that is now persecuting, once again, the Muslim Brotherhood. A security apparatus which has no interest in reforming itself, it’s far too cushy thank you very much, and which the newly elected government, albeit it didn’t have much time to do so, showed no interest in trying to reform and

an active interest in trying to appease. It's pretty evident from what's just happened in Egypt, indeed it's pretty evident in our everyday lives back home, here, that elections alone do not a democracy make.

Where I take exception with the kind of argument put forward by Mr O'Neill is in the conflation of his (absolutely justified) generalised anger at what he sees as the failures of the West in general, and as he sees it specifically of human rights organisations in particular, to adequately engage both themselves and others with the events that are happening in Egypt and elsewhere, and the labelling of entire human rights movement as somehow defunct, shallow, morally bankrupt, as a consequence. Mr O'Neill conflates Amnesty International and Tony Blair, something which takes a fairly immense leap of the imagination, as "*Western do gooders*", "*those who normally make a great display of being outraged by foreign tyranny*"

. This idea that because Western governments and in particular western human rights organisations are not perfect, they should all somehow shut up shop and somehow stop, go home is actually a deeply expressed cynicism about the whole rhetoric of human rights, a full broadside at anyone who professes to believe in the concept of human rights as an ideal.

He has a right pop at Amnesty, saying they have chosen to focus their attentions exclusively on imprisoned poets in Belarus. If Mr O'Neill did take the time to type "Egypt" into the search engine on the front page of Amnesty's website, he would have found a lot of public noise there. Press release, 29 July 2013: "*Evidence that the Egyptian security forces have once again used unwarranted live fire and other excessive force underlines the crucial need for police reform*" ; an urgent action of 26 July 2013 mobilising Amnesty's many supporters to do what they have always done as a means of exerting pressure - to write to the Egyptian authorities to demand that the whereabouts of Mohammed Morsi be made public, that he be granted access to his family, lawyers and doctors, that he be released unless charged with a recognisable criminal offence and tried before a civilian court in compliance with internationally recognised standards. Three other press releases on the 25th for the security forces to refrain from the use of excessive force, to protect protesters, another on 23rd pointing out the security forces failure to protect the Coptic minority from sectarian attack in Luxor, on 17th calling for due process for arrested members of the Muslim Brotherhood, pointing out that evidence was that due process has not been followed, and that the security forces were guilty of human rights abuses. A report documenting evidence of the unlawful killings in political violence on 5th and 8th July, calls for urgent investigations into the deaths, a report documenting further violence since 30 June.

That's the last month. A press release once every couple of days for the last, erm, years. Seems to me, Mr O'Neill, these "do gooders" you accuse of being silent are doing a pretty good job, as they did indeed during the years of Mubarak's oppression, when Western governments were again falling over themselves to keep the man happy.

Point is, the rhetoric of human rights, and of democracy, can be used by anyone, and often is, in order to further particular political ends. It can be used by corrupt governments, war making ones, ones just trying to get by, warmongers, peacemakers, development agencies, non governmental organisations. It can, in simplistic terms, although life is rarely that simple, be used by some very "bad guys" as well as some very "good" ones. Which is precisely what makes it worth fighting for. Which is precisely what means we need more people rather than less coming out squarely in support of the concepts of human rights, and democratisation - as a process which respects everybody's right to participate - banging on about what these things actually mean, and making an active political choice to support them.

It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves of the basics: "Everyone has the right to life", "Noone shall be held in slavery or servitude", "Noone shall be subjected to torture", and "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion". Is anybody seriously going to argue that these are rights which only those in the West profess to, or do, care about? I think if we take even the most uninformed look at Egypt - as I fully admit to having done here - we'll see that this is not the case. Human rights are not "Western values". The concept that they are is outdated, patronising, and an insult to those people all over the world fighting to realise the things concretely in very difficult circumstances. Forget the West for a minute: shall we look at what the domestic human rights organisations in Egypt have been doing? Unsurprisingly, there's an "industry" there too. The El Nadim Centre for the rehabilitation of torture victims, the Human Rights Association for the Assistance of Prisoners, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights. And yes those are just a few of the ones I know about, organisations who are established enough and successful enough to have made links with Western human rights organisations. Representative of the whole of Egyptian society? Absolutely not. Perfect? Oh no. Politicised? Well, it's a political choice to sign up to these values, and everybody has their views. And some real "do-gooders" there, absolutely. People working at great personal risk in very difficult circumstances to point out abuses, whoever committed them, who assist victims of abuses, whoever they are, and ask for accountability for those who abused them. Far from being a sham, seems to me that cleaving to some sense of

accountability and justice is the only way to go.

The international framework for human rights, whilst constructed in a climate where, at least initially, western governments undoubtedly held the balance of power (and yes, still do), is not a perfect thing. It is, however, the only thing we have which attempts to articulate the rights of the person, those things which it has been agreed should be preserved in the relationship of the human being with the state.

When I look at the work of the “human rights industry” in Egypt, what I see is a lot of very brave people working at great personal risk in a very difficult situation supported to the extent possible by an international human rights movement which is concerned about preventing and exposing abuses, where and when they occur, no matter who has committed them. When I look in the West at the work of organisations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Euro Mediterranean Human Rights Network, the FIDH, the IRCT, what I see is not very many people working pretty hard for not a huge amount of money to bring attention internationally to the horrors that people in situations like that in Egypt face.

Arguments like that made by Mr O’Neill project a sense of disillusionment onto a lot of people trying to document, evidence, point out and prevent atrocity. If you’re angry Mr O’Neill, and well you should be, I can see a lot of people working very hard to mitigate the things you are angry about. Before you have a pop at them, maybe you should, maybe we all should, ask what exactly we ourselves are doing about all this?

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Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/>

Euro Mediterranean Human Rights Network www.euromedrights.org/

FIDH <http://www.fidh.org/-FIDH-movement->

OMCT www.omct.org

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