

Egypt's Descent Into Civil War

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 15, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

"The rule of reason had quit Egypt." That powerful sentence in [an essay in the Wall Street Journal](#) [1] by scholar Fouad Ajami embodies the difficulty we all face, including the Obama administration, in trying to figure out a way forward for an Egypt now engulfed in violence. When secular liberals in Egypt discern an American plot in the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power, you know that reason has indeed left the field. And, where there is no reason, there can be no check on power.

Ajami makes the further point that "patience could have served the Egyptians." The government of Mohammed Morsi was unable to address the severe economic conditions afflicting most Egyptians. It had used its democratically elected authority badly, adopting non-democratic methods and claiming emergency powers. Its unpopularity was soaring. How many Egyptian souls would still be alive today if those who opposed the Morsi government had merely waited for the next election?

Nor is it clear that the resort to violence yesterday was in anyway necessary. The pro-Morsi groups gathered in several squares. In Islamist strongholds in the country, they were more bold, taking over a provincial headquarters here, arresting military officials there. They were not much of a threat to the military regime that removed Morsi. They were a nuisance, to be sure. They represented a thorn in the side of the new order. Some of them undoubtedly stockpiled weapons and thought that violence could bring back the government they sought to defend.

Instead, violence was brought to them. With its crushing effectiveness and indifference to casualties, the new military regime looked like nothing so much as the old military regime. From whatever sickbed he is watching events, Hosni Mubarak is surly thinking "I told you so." His government, too, had failed to address the severe economic situation facing the country. His government was riddled with corruption, old-style corruption, just as Morsi's government was riddled with a different kind of corruption, the kind that is born of an ideological commitment that trumps the commitment to democratic norms. In short, there are no good options in Egypt, no obvious path to peace, stability and prosperity. The country today is as divided as ever.

The one thing that is obvious is that violence will solve nothing. The Muslim Brotherhood cannot shoot its way back into power. The military government cannot end the fundamental debate about the role of Islam in public life with guns. I am not someone who thinks that there is never a role for military force. But, in this instance, it is virtually impossible to see how violence can quell, rather than exacerbate, the divisions that plague Egyptian society.

Certainly, after the killings yesterday, the path for the Obama administration is clear: We must admit that a coup took place and suspend military aid. This is also no panacea. Mr. Putin had a penchant for insinuating the last vestiges of Russian military might into situations that will make the U.S. look weak. The Gulf Arab states with all their petro-dollars are surely not going to exert their influence to encourage the military to open negotiations with the Muslim Brotherhood. The one person who might have been able to emerge as a genuine political

leader, Mohammed ElBaradei, had the decency to quit the government yesterday. The U.S. should follow his lead. It is not a great option but it is a morally necessary option.

Egypt may go the way of Syria and descend into civil war, but the analogy is imprecise. The U.S. probably could have helped remove Assad in Syria a year ago. Now, the Syrian opposition is so riddled with Islamist fundamentalists, their victory might only bring further instability and carnage. The divisions within Syria are different from those that afflict Egypt, although in both places, the rise of armed Muslim extremists makes the ancient Christian communities in the two countries exceedingly nervous or worse: Pro-Morsi forces destroyed several churches yesterday and, in Syria, Christians recognize that the removal of Assad might be good for Syria but it would not be good for them.

Critics of Israel should pay attention to the carnage in Nasr City and elsewhere too. This is a rough neighborhood. Security checkpoints that strike the rest of us as oppressive make a great deal of sense when you live in such a neighborhood. But, friends of Israel must pay attention too. Instability along two of its borders is not good for Israel either. And, from Israel's perspective, the fact that the Egyptian military has always honored the peace treaty with Israel invites them to look the other way when that same military acts in ways that are abhorrent to political norms within the Jewish State.

I always try to see signs of hope in the events of the world. This morning, I can find none. The situation in Egypt is likely to get worse before it gets better. The guns deployed in the streets of Cairo yesterday sounded a lot like the guns of Fort Sumter to my ears. There is nothing so grim as the prospect of civil war, but that prospect seems more and more likely in Egypt. It may take years for the violence to manifest itself again, but the resort to violence yesterday only makes more violence more likely. The Muslim Brotherhood may retreat but they will not abandon the field.

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