**The Battle for Sovereignty in Egypt**

*After becoming President of Egypt in June 2012, Mohamed Morsi had to face the difficult tasks of appointing a new representative government, extricate the military from governing structures and stimulate the economy. Above all, he had to “forge a new polity – to cultivate, alongside Egyptians, a new relationship between the people and the political realm.” Drafting a new transformative Constitution was supposed to incarnate Egypt’s democratic aspirations and popular participation. Yet, the process remained opaque and “there was no sustained effort to engage Egyptians about what they wanted in their constitution.” Considering the vast array of conflicting interests and grievances within the opposition, a genuine political decentralization will be the only way to reach what could one day be described as an Egyptian sovereign nation.*

**By Paul Sedra**

[***Counter Punch***](http://www.counterpunch.org/)

**December 10, 2012**

The lines are now drawn. Five months ago, when Muhammad Mursi presented himself as a revolutionary to Tahrir, there was still room to conceive that he might take up the principles for which hundreds of Egyptians had given their lives since 25 January 2011 – bread, freedom, and social justice. When he claimed that he was an Egyptian just like the Egyptians in the square, and that he derived his authority only from the people, there was still room to conceive that Egypt was finally on a starkly different path from that of the sixty years prior.

At that time, back in June, the president was given a remarkable opportunity. Despite the enormous challenges that the country faced and still faces, not least in the economic sphere, he had received a mandate from the people – the first democratic mandate that Egyptians have had the opportunity to deliver in their lifetimes. With this mandate, he was empowered not merely to appoint a new government, but in an important sense, to forge a new polity – to cultivate, alongside Egyptians, a new relationship between the people and the political realm.

Much to his credit, the president succeeded in largely extricating the military from governance and thus fulfilling one of the central demands of the revolution. This was substantive change – a stark reversal of course for a government that had, for sixty years, remained led by military men.

One can well understand the frustrations that the president faced in dealing with the courts. In particular, the decision of the Supreme Constitutional Court to dissolve Egypt’s first democratically elected parliament seemed regressive in the face of the movement towards popular sovereignty. That the court was populated by appointees from the Mubarak era hardly gave one confidence that the best interests of revolutionary Egypt motivated the decision. Further, the failure of the prosecutor-general and the judicial system as a whole to deliver what the families of the revolution’s martyrs could regard as ‘justice’ only heightened these frustrations.

Nevertheless, in spite of the apparent resistance from the courts, and in spite of the skeptics who doubted the Muslim Brotherhood’s capacity to rule, the all-important opportunity to forge a new polity remained – and there was no venue more important to this task than the Constituent Assembly. In contrast to Egypt’s past constitutions, drafted behind closed doors to contain rather than promote political participation, this was a constitution that might finally have meaning and impact.

But rather than foster a national dialogue about the central issues this constitution would address – the bounds of Egyptian citizenship, for instance – debate was vouchsafed exclusively to the members of the assembly. Leaks and rumors emerged at times from the deliberations, but there was no sustained effort to engage Egyptians about what *they* wanted in their constitution. As a result, in the place of a potentially transformative, indeed revolutionary, constitution-drafting project, Egyptians were left as spectators to a process that remained deliberately opaque throughout.

If the president indeed believed that he was an Egyptian like all the rest who were in Tahrir on 29 June when he took his memorable symbolic oath of office, if he believed that the people were the only source of sovereignty in Egypt, one wonders why he failed to spearhead this national dialogue himself. Why not lead Egypt through a constitution-writing process that would transform the country as much as the revolution had – a process that would value the contributions not merely of the ‘expert’ or the ‘technocrat,’ but of the countless Egyptians who had confronted Mubarak in the streets in February 2011?

Regrettably, we got the answer to this question this past week. Despite the fact that the revolution seems forever on the president’s lips, the principles of the revolution weigh very little on his decision-making. In handing down his constitutional declaration, the president professed that he sought merely to ‘protect’ the revolution. But of course, in making his rule immune to oversight from all who might challenge and criticize him, he made himself no less a dictator than Mubarak was.

The president insisted that the declaration was only a temporary measure. And we have now discovered why: The Constituent Assembly would press ahead to pass the existing constitutional draft, approving article after article with each passing minute. This constitutional draft, written behind closed doors, with the input of scarcely the 100 members of the assembly let alone the millions of Egyptians who made the revolution, would be presented to the nation as a *fait accompli*.

The lines are now drawn. Five months ago, Muhammad Mursi presented himself as a revolutionary to Tahrir. Now, we know better. Now, we know that he is not committed to the change that millions of Egyptians demanded in the revolution. Now, we know that his idea of sovereignty is much like Mubarak’s, and a world away from the truly popular sovereignty of which he spoke on 29 June.

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