

President Obama Touts Partnership With Egypt's Military Regime: Yet Repression Continues Unabated

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CAIRO--Egypt's capital is crowded, busy, confused, and messy, like so many cities in poorer nations. Security isn't obvious, until you get close to a sensitive site, such as the Interior Ministry. Blocks away the street is closed. There are metal fences, concrete barriers, and barbed wire. Uniformed and plain clothes security personnel. Armored personnel carriers. And multiple checks to get to the ministry's door.

In Minya a few months ago a judge handed down 683 death sentences against protestors in one case. The street leading to the courthouse was blocked by an APC topped by armed soldiers and backed by abundant security personnel. Tanks stood as sentinels at the Burja al-Arab prison, where ousted president Mohamed al-Morsi is being held.

The military has taken firm control, elevating its leader, Gen. Abdel Fata al-Sisi, to the presidency. He follows in the footsteps of dictators Gamal Abdel Al-Nasser, Anwar al-Sadat, and Hosni al-Mubarak. The uniformed services are a profitable caste for their members. Complained Kaled Badawy, one of Morsi's attorneys, "we need a professional armed forces, not mercenaries which results in corruption." The army permitted Mubarak's popular ouster because he planned to turn military rule into a family dynasty, with his son as heir apparent.

Not that this has stopped the Obama administration from forging a pleasant relationship with now President Sisi. The two leaders had a warm phone call last week in which President Obama lauded the two nations' security partnership. He added obligatory concern over mass trials, which have continued, and other notable human rights abuses. But the administration won't let a little repression get in the way of Casablancaesque "beautiful friendship."

Morsi never had a chance to succeed. He exhibited authoritarian and sectarian tendencies and made abundant political mistakes, playing into his critics' hands. Moreover, he never controlled

the bureaucracy or police. Indeed, the latter refused to protect the Brotherhood's headquarters from mob violence. Crony capitalists grown rich under Mubarak apparently manipulated markets to create artificial shortages and exacerbate economic hardship. Most important, the army never accepted Morsi and fomented the very demonstrations used to justify its seizure of power.

Had Morsi and the Brotherhood been defeated in a future election, they would have been discredited peacefully. However, the coup turned the movement's members into angry victims. In Cairo they took over Rab'a al-Adawiya and al-Nahda Squares, just as the anti-Mubarak and anti-Morsi crowds had done to Tahir Square. As many as 85,000 protestors, including more than a few women and children, turned out.

Then came a campaign of government-sponsored mass murder.

[In its devastating report](#), "All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protestors in Egypt," Human Rights Watch detailed the junta's crimes. From the beginning the military used deadly force with no concern for casualties. In the aftermath of the coup, reported HRW, "security forces repeatedly used excessive force to respond to demonstrations, indiscriminately and deliberately killing at least 281 protestors in different incidents." In fact, the army began using live ammunition against protestors just two days after the coup. On July 8, for instance, 61 demonstrators were killed by soldiers outside of the Republican Guard headquarters. On July 27 security forces cut down 95 "largely peaceful protestors" on Cairo streets. Medical personnel said the shootings were close range at people's heads, necks, and chests.

But the most horrific episode came on August 17, when the regime used overwhelming force against protest sites at Rab'a Square and al-Nahda Square. HRW found that the Sisi regime expected high casualties: "Numerous government statements and accounts from government meetings indicate that high-ranking officials knew that the attacks would result in widespread killings of protestors."

The regime deployed soldiers, APCs, bulldozers, police, and snipers to destroy a vast tent village in Rab'a. The authorities intended to kill. Explained HRW: "Security forces used lethal force indiscriminately, with snipers and gunmen inside and alongside APCs firing their weaponry on large crowds of protestors. Dozens of witnesses also said they saw snipers fire from helicopters over Rab'a Square."

In roughly 12 hours HRW figured that at least 817 and likely more than 1000 people were killed. Kenneth Roth, HRW's executive director, said: "In Rab'a Square, Egyptian security forces carried out one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history." In contrast, clearing Tiananmen Square in Beijing took twice as long and killed between 400 and 800 protestors. Moreover, reported HRW: "Security forces detained over 800 protestors over the course of the day, some of whom they beat, tortured and in some cases summarily executed," according to witnesses. (Other groups, such as the International Coalition for Freedoms and Rights, put the death toll much higher.)

There was no respite for the wounded or those treating the wounded. Added HRW: "Security forces from the morning fired at makeshift medical facilities and positioned snipers to fire on

those who sought to enter or exit Rab'a hospital." After taking control of the square later in the day, regime personnel expelled the doctors and set fire to both Rab'a hospital and the field hospital.

The Sisi junta claimed that the protestors had responded with violence. HRW reported that hundreds of protestors tossed rocks and Molotov cocktails. But the group found only "a few instances" of gunfire. The government claimed eight dead, a small toll if the demonstrators had been as well armed as officials suggested, which itself seemed unlikely since the Interior Minister only claimed to have seized 15 guns. Concluded HRW: "the protestors' violence in no way justified the deliberate and indiscriminate killings of protestors largely by police, in coordination with army forces."

Western journalists were among the victims of government snipers. The *Washington Post's* Daniela Deane wrote about the murder of her husband, a cameraman with Britain's Sky News. The killers were security personnel. His death almost certainly was premeditated, since it would have been hard to mistake him for a Brotherhood protestor.

Similar though smaller was the regime's clearance of al-Nahda Square, near Cairo University. HRW reported that security forces began "firing at protestors, including those attempting to leave from the designated 'safe' exit. Witnesses described how police fired at protestors both deliberately and indiscriminately, using teargas, birdshot and live ammunition."

The government justified its actions as necessary to get Cairo's life back to normal. Nevertheless, said HRW, "these allegations fail to justify a forcible dispersal that resulted in the deaths of at least 817 people and amounted to collective punishment of the overwhelming majority of peaceful protestors. The mass killings of protestors were clearly disproportionate to any threat to the lives of local residents, security personnel or anyone else." The regime failed to take any precautions, such as safe exits, which would have minimized casualties. The military obviously intended to kill promiscuously.

After taking control in Cairo the army continued to slaughter protestors. Ten days later regime forces killed 120 demonstrators. The government claimed that they attacked a police station, but "the number of protestors killed, statements by victims and witnesses, including independent observers, and video footage show that the police intentionally fired on largely peaceful protestors," said HRW. The group documented "several instances of police killing clearly unarmed protestors." Since then little has changed. Said HRW: "Security forces have continued to use excessive lethal force against demonstrators."

Moreover, by its own count the government has arrested 22,000 people, many of whom have been tortured. The regime also moved against liberals and youthful leaders of the revolution against Mubarak. For instance, Ahmed Maher, founder of the April 6 Youth Movement, is serving a three-year prison term for criticizing the new law against public protests.

Gamel al-Eid of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information said the regime's message was: "It is time to shut up, to stay quiet. There is only one choice--to support the military or to be

in jail." Bahey al-Din Hassan, head of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, argued that military control "is more horrible than the old regime."

Mass trials have been conducted based on negligible evidence. Attorneys have been arrested when they went to meet their clients. Family members have been detained as leverage against defendants. Hundreds of protestors have been sentenced to death at a time. Many others, including teenage girls, have received lengthy prison terms for organizing a peaceful protest. Independent journalists have been cowed or silenced. Students have been killed, arrested, and expelled. The regime has implemented a comprehensive program to monitor social media. Ayaalaa Hosni, spokeswoman for a women's anti-coup group, complained to me that you can't demonstrate without a warrant but if you "go to ask for a warrant you get arrested."

The military has recreated Egypt's Ancien Regime, only with Sisi in place of Mubarak. The government has appointed military officials as provincial governors, revived the secret and intelligence police, instituted harsh restrictions on dissent, dragged protestors before military tribunals, and deployed private toughs against regime critics. Human rights activists who I met in Egypt accepted the risk of arrest at any moment. One lawyer told me that the Sisi government is a "weak and cowardly regime."

Outside assessments are negative. David Kramer, president of the group Freedom House, declared in June: "the human rights situation has worsened compared to what it was at any point under Hosni Mubarak." The organization reported that Egypt had gone from "Partly Free" to "Not Free" with the coup, with significant deterioration almost across the board: political rights, political pluralism and participation, freedom of expression, associational rights, rule of law. Only in approving a new constitution and holding elections had there been much democratic progress over the last year. There was stasis or reversal in other areas: political participation, religious freedom, peaceful assembly, judicial independence, civilian control, media freedom.

In a separate study Freedom House rated Egypt's media "not free." The group explained: "After Morsi's overthrow in July, the press engaged in increased self-censorship due to the intimidation, arbitrary detention, and killings of journalists, particularly those who were viewed as critical of the military-supported interim government or sympathetic to Morsi and his Islamist supporters." Last December the Committee to Protect Journalists rated Egypt ninth in the world for jailing journalists.

An organizer for press freedom who I met in Cairo said ten journalists had been killed. Scores had been shot and injured, more than 100 had been assaulted, and scores more had been arrested. Newscaster Shahira Amin, dismissed from her position for "implying" the coup was a coup, complained that "now is the worst ever" for journalists. Another reporter told me: "Journalism has become a crime."

Ironically, repression is unlikely to deliver stability. Mubarak's jails helped turn Brotherhood activist Ayman al-Zawahiri into al-Qaeda's leader. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, both formerly with the State Department wrote: "Repression of Islamists in Egypt was an essential stage in the emergence of contemporary jihadism. As splinter groups that were significantly more radical than the Muslim Brotherhood formed, Islamists became more violent."

This experience is likely to recur. Terrorist attacks are on the rise and jihadist fighters returning from Iraq and Syria are likely to target the Sisi regime. Nor are Islamists the only potential terrorists. Mara Revkin, a graduate student at Yale, noted that some attacks have been claimed by youth groups, which "are looking to violence as the only means of challenging a regime that is rapidly closing off avenues for political competition."

Human rights activists share this concern. Maher spoke to Sec. Kerry when he said: "If your Apache helicopters are important in the fight against terrorism, I assure you that individual freedoms, democracy, respect for human rights, dialogue and inclusion are also important in the fight against terrorism."

There isn't much the U.S. can do to change events in Cairo. But the Obama administration has inadvertently highlighted its impotence -- endorsing Mubarak despite popular protests, blessing his departure once it was inevitable, endorsing Morsi after his election, opposing the coup, accepting the coup, and blessing the military regime for planning to restore democracy. Among Secretary John Kerry's low points were refusing to call a coup a coup, restoring foreign aid, promising to deliver the full \$1.3 billion to the coup regime this year, and babbling about President Sisi's supposed commitment to democracy. President Obama has affirmed the administration's determination to subsidize repression.

Washington has proclaimed itself "deeply troubled" by one or another abuse by Cairo. But even that was too much for the Sisi government. After the popular protests in Ferguson, Missouri, Cairo urged restraint. The latter also complained that HRW was "above the law" and refused to allow its staffers to enter Egypt to hold a press conference on their new report.

Egypt's military has reconstituted the Mubarak system. The U.S. should work with Cairo on issues of shared interest but otherwise maintain substantial distance. In particular, the administration should stop using foreign aid to bribe Egypt's generals. They don't have to be paid to keep the peace and shouldn't be paid for anything else.

In any case, Washington's influence is limited: The Sisi regime will do whatever it believes necessary to retain power. Whatever America does, Egypt is likely to end up without liberty or stability. Instead of pretending leadership, Washington should step back from a crisis that it cannot resolve.

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