

Violating the Law to Subsidize Egypt's Coup: Bipartisan Foolishness in Washington

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U.S. policy in Egypt has been a disaster. For decades Washington backed rule by an authoritarian dictatorship that persecuted religious minorities and socialized the economy. Now the short-lived democratic revolution has been replaced by military rule with a meaningless civilian veneer. Washington should cut off foreign aid and disengage.

Instead, the Obama administration has embraced putative dictatorship, refusing to characterize the ouster of President Mohamed Morsi as a coup. If only George Orwell was alive today.

The military worked with the opposition to encourage demonstrations threatening public chaos. The military arrested the president, top officials, and high-level members of his party and movement. The military leveled fantastic criminal charges against the president and his supporters. The military closed down allied television stations and arrested journalists. The military appointed dictatorial retreads as interim president and other high officials.

The military treated all opponents as "terrorists." The military recreated the de facto secret police, the Interior Ministry departments which investigate political and religious activities. The military shot and killed protestors. But the administration says there was no coup. According to Secretary of State John Kerry, "the military did not take over to the best of our judgment so far." Rather, "there's a civilian government," he claimed. "In effect, they were restoring democracy."

The administration could have acknowledged that Gen. Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi ruled by force but then argued that the coup was justified. However, that would have been a difficult case to make.

There is obvious reason to suspect the Muslim Brotherhood and President Mohamed Morsi committed more than his share of mistakes. But the first elected leader in Egypt's 5000-year history was discrediting himself. Left alone he would have ruined the electoral appeal of political Islam without a shot being fired. Moreover, he had taken no irrevocable authoritarian steps. It would have been impossible for Morsi to become a dictator without the military behind him -- which explains why real dictators Gamal Abdel al-Nasser, Anwar al-Sadat, and Hosni al-Mubarak all were military men, like Gen. Sisi.

The administration ignored the obvious to avoid triggering the law which required cutting off aid to "the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d'état or decree or ... a coup d'état or decree in which the military plays a decisive role." You don't need an English Ph.D. to recognize that the restriction applies to Cairo today. Apparently administration lawyers agreed, only to be overruled by top policymakers.

Whether or not Washington was implicated in the coup itself -- it appears not -- the administration clearly endorsed the result. Yet officials appear surprised that a coup would lead to the killing of demonstrators, persecution of those ousted from power, and strengthening of state authority. Secretary Kerry announced that repression is "absolutely unacceptable. It cannot happen." Except that it has been going on publicly every day for more than a month.

The Obama administration has made as many mistakes as former president Morsi -- and may have claimed even greater power than him. Yet policy towards Egypt stands out as one of President Obama's greatest failures.

The administration reflexively supported the dictator Mubarak even as Egyptians were rallying against him. Only when his fall was inevitable did Washington acknowledge that he might have to go. The administration then accepted President Morsi's rise, counseling him, to no avail, to rule in an inclusive and democratic manner.

Administration officials were no more successful in urging the Egyptian military, which has received some \$40 billion in aid over the years, not to stage a coup. After effectively endorsing the takeover, the administration begged Gen. Sisi not to target the Muslim Brotherhood, lest doing so drive the organization underground and toward violence and terrorism. He ignored these entreaties as well.

Today virtually every Egyptian blames America. Gen. Sisi and the secular liberals criticize the administration for being pro-Muslim Brotherhood. Despite Washington's de facto endorsement of his putsch, Gen. Sisi complained: "You turned your back on Egyptians." The Brotherhood, with far greater cause, complains that Washington green-lighted the coup and supports it now. In Cairo American officials talk but no one listens. Administration fecklessness, hypocrisy, and impotence are on display around the world.

Yet leading Republicans have endorsed the Obama policy. Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) led a lonely campaign to cut off U.S. aid, \$1.55 billion annually. The Senate rejected his proposal by a vote of 86 to 13.

At least few Republicans echoed Secretary Kerry's ludicrous claim that the military is dedicated to birthing Jeffersonian democracy. The army spent six decades supporting authoritarian rule under a parade of dictators and resisted the revolution.

Moreover, coups rarely promote liberal values. Freedom House's initial assessment after President Morsi's ouster found that six of eight democratic parameters had declined and the other two had stalled. David Kramer, Freedom House's president, noted: "The justification for the coup was that Egypt was suffering a drift towards authoritarianism under Morsi. Our analysis, as reflected in the Egypt Democracy Compass, shows significant decline in most of the country's democratic institutions."

The military even is restoring the Mubarak elite to power. The interim president was a Mubarak court appointee. The police, who worked to sabotage the Morsi government, have reappeared in force. Secular politician Ehab Samir said: "You can't stay at odds with them. Your security is dependent on having a strong police force."

Moreover, reported the *Washington Post*: "Egypt's new power dynamic, following the July 3 coup that ousted Morsi, is eerily familiar. Gone are the Islamist rulers from the once-banned Muslim Brotherhood. Back are the faces of the old guard, many closely linked to Mubarak's reign or to the all-powerful generals."

Still, Republicans made their share of ludicrous claims. Tennessee Sen. Bob Corker referred to the U.S. as a "voice of calm." Perhaps Secretary Kerry was whispering sweet nothings in the ears of generals as they arrested opponents and gunned down protestors -- after using U.S. aid to purchase U.S. weapons.

John Bolton made a different argument: "Everyone, whatever their politics, agrees that Egypt's economy needs massive assistance." Actually, the Egyptian economy needs reform, not subsidies. In fact, aid should be cut because it has helped wreck the Egyptian economy. Generous American "aid" allowed Sadat and Mubarak, and most recently Morsi, to keep the inefficient, bloated Egyptian state afloat despite its manifold failures.

Florida's Sen. Marco Rubio echoed the clueless Secretary Kerry, warning that if you cut off aid "you lose leverage." Oklahoma Sen. Jim Inhofe said he would have agreed with the amendment "before we realized the threats that we have in the Middle East." Sen. John McCain of Arizona worried that ending aid "would send the wrong message at the wrong time." Sen. Corker referred to sustaining "the values we extend around the world."

Where, one wonders, is the evidence of this vaunted leverage -- after nearly \$75 billion in "assistance" over the years? When Presidents Sadat and Mubarak jailed opponents, persecuted Coptic Christians, enriched supporters, and despoiled the economy? When President Morsi claimed extraordinary power and refused to conciliate his opponents? When Gen. Sisi staged the coup? When the general ignored the administration's advice to govern in an inclusive fashion? When he embraced the corrupt and authoritarian Mubarak elite? One unnamed official reluctantly admitted to the *New York Times*: "What we say might not be part of their calculus."

If the Obama administration is willing to torture language and ignore the law to keep shoveling money into Cairo, it is evident that nothing, except presumably war with Israel, would cause Washington to close the spigot. Since Gen. Sisi and his fellow officers can count on America's money -- as well as a promised \$12 billion from Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states -- they have no reason to pay the slightest attention to Secretary Kerry.

If there's no leverage, then how does subsidizing a coup provide a good message, reduce threats, or represent our values? As Robert Kagan of the Brookings Institution noted: "To those who argue that we must continue providing aid in the interest of stability, one has only to point to the past three years: Aid has flowed uninterrupted, and just look at all the stability."

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) relied on a letter from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee which opposed cutting aid to Egypt which could "negatively impact our Israeli ally." (Three weeks ago he and Sen. McCain wrote an article calling for an aid halt: "We may pay a short-term price by standing up for our democratic values, but it is in our long-term national

interest to do so.") Once patriotism, the last resort for the scoundrel in American politics today is to claim that something is necessary for Israel's security.

Aid is not why Cairo has kept the peace with Israel for 40 years. Syria has been at peace with Israel for the same period of time and Jordan even longer. Amman receives some U.S. cash, though not as much as Egypt. Damascus receives none. Yet the al-Assad regime did not respond even after Israel destroyed a nuclear plant and, more recently, missile shipments from Russia.

The Arab states know they would lose a war with Israel. Conflict would be particularly disastrous for the Egyptian generals, since they would lose their means of control and likely positions as well. The Argentinean generals discovered that starting and losing a war is a quick way to end up out of power and in prison. Washington does not need to pay the Egyptians for peace.

Moreover, the military is the force which most threatens both stability and democracy, pushing Egypt toward civil war. The armed services long have personified corruption in Egypt. Between 15 and 40 percent of the economy is thought to be controlled by the military. Service has become a hereditary caste or quasi-aristocracy with many sons following fathers in profitable service as praetorian guardians of the authoritarian political order. While the military regime called on demonstrators to "give priority to the interest of the homeland, to comply with the public interest," there is little reason to believe that the generals are acting on that basis.

Sam Tadros of the Hudson Institute was quoted by the *Post's* Jennifer Rubin as arguing that "one easy solution is to train the Egyptian military." But Gen. Sisi was trained by the U.S. Washington has educated soldiers from around the globe who have supported coups or committed atrocities. Train the soldiers "on basic policing," argued Tadros. The problem in Egypt is not basic policing. The problem is that the military has seized political power.

Gen. Sisi declared that "The army stands neutral before all factions." Actually, the military stands for the military. Indeed, the general has been described as an ambitious man with a "sense of destiny," always dangerous for democracy, especially one where liberal civil society has not taken root. Far from remaining in the background, Gen. Sisi has added titles and grabbed the limelight. There is no reason to expect him to surrender it.

Of course, secular liberals with a Napoleonic Complex hope to ride to power along with the celebrated man on horseback. Yet democratic-minded activists already have been disappointed by several of Gen. Sisi's decisions. More setbacks are likely. If secular liberals protest, they are likely to be branded as terrorists. And if political Islamists eventually rise again, secular liberals will find themselves discredited -- and with no one to turn to for support.

Unfortunately, America cannot avoid blowback. The situation will worsen with every new protestor who is killed or arrested. Warned Robert Kagan: "Despite our repeated claims of neutrality and our calls for reconciliation, in reality we have taken sides in the burgeoning violent confrontation." If opponents of the military decide to respond in kind -- and up the ante with terrorism -- Americans might find themselves on the front lines as well.

Democracy, stability, and security long have seemed to be mutually exclusive in Egypt. No outcome looks good. And the U.S. has little control over the outcome.

However, unnecessarily supporting military rule could generate the same sort of long-term harm as Washington's support for the 1953 coup against another democratically elected leader,

Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Americans are still paying for that misguided act.

The best policy would be to disengage. Washington should avoid being tied to any group or faction, whether the Brotherhood or the military. Let Egyptians decide their own future. The outcome still might be ugly. But at least someone else would bear the blame.