

Egyptians Deserve Their Elected Government

By [Jeffrey Sachs](#)

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Putting an end to Egypt's deepening polarization and rising bloodshed requires one urgent first step: the reinstatement of Mohamed Morsi as Egypt's duly elected president. His removal by military coup was unjustified. While it is true that millions of demonstrators opposed Morsi's rule, even massive street protests do not constitute a valid case for a military coup in the name of the "people" when election results repeatedly say otherwise.

There is no doubt that Egyptian society is deeply divided along sectarian, ideological, class and regional lines. Yet the country has gone to the polls several times since the February 2011 overthrow of Mubarak's 30-year rule. The results have demonstrated strong popular support for Islamist parties and positions, though they also make clear the country's schisms.

In late 2011 and early 2012, Egypt held parliamentary elections. Morsi's Freedom and Justice Party, created by the Muslim Brotherhood, secured a plurality, and the two major Islamist blocs together received roughly two-thirds of the vote. In June 2012, Morsi defeated his rival Ahmed Shafik, Mubarak's final prime minister, by a margin of 52-48 percent to win

the presidency. In a national referendum in last December, a 64 percent majority of those voting approved a draft constitution backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, although turnout was low.

The secular argument that Morsi's lust for power jeopardized Egypt's nascent democracy does not bear scrutiny. Secular, military and Mubarak-era foes of the Muslim Brotherhood have used every lever at their disposal, democratic or not, to block the Islamist parties' democratic exercise of power. This is consistent with a decades-old pattern in Egyptian history, in which the Muslim Brotherhood — and Islamist political forces in general — were outlawed, and their members imprisoned, tortured and exiled.

Claims that Morsi ruled undemocratically stem from his repeated attempts to extricate the popularly elected parliament and presidency from anti-democratic traps set by the military. After the Islamist parties' huge victory in the 2011-12 parliamentary elections, the military leadership and the Supreme Court, which was filled with Mubarak-era judges, worked to derail the new parliament and prevent it from establishing an assembly to draft a new constitution.

The key action came in June 2012, when the Supreme Court, staffed entirely with Mubarak-era holdovers, nullified the results of the parliamentary elections on specious grounds. The military was set to reassert full legislative powers.

Morsi's subsequent victory in the presidential election therefore set up an epic battle over the future of the parliament and the constitution, as Morsi attempted to protect the democratically elected parliament while the military fought to dissolve it. In the end, Morsi insisted that the elected parliament create a constitutional assembly, which produced the draft approved in the December 2012 referendum.

As is typical of political revolutions, Egypt's economic situation has gone from bad to worse in the course of these power struggles. Revolutions tend to confront new governments with steeply rising social demands (for wage increases and higher welfare spending, for example) at a time of capital flight, financial turmoil, and deep disruptions of production. In Egypt's case, the crucial tourist sector contracted sharply after the revolution. Unemployment soared, the currency depreciated, and food prices rose dangerously.

None of this is surprising, and little of it can be managed by a new government that lacks experience, market confidence and full control of the levers of power. Historically, outside parties have thus played a decisive role. Will foreign governments and the International Monetary Fund extend vital finances to the new government, or will they let it flounder and drown in a tsunami of currency depreciation and inflation?

Here, the feckless West — torn between its democratic rhetoric and its antipathy toward the Islamists — showed its hand. The result was equivocation and delay, rather than commitment and assistance. The IMF has talked with the Egyptian government for 2 1/2 years since Mubarak's overthrow without so much as lending a single cent, sealing the Egyptian economy's fate and contributing to public unrest and the recent coup.

It appears from media reports that the West finally gave the green light to the Egyptian military to overthrow Morsi, arrest the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership and repress

the Islamist rank and file. U.S. President Barack Obama's was unwilling to stand up for Morsi and Egypt's other elected leaders. He also failed to officially call the army's overthrow what it really was — a coup — thereby protecting the continued flow of U.S. funds to the Egyptian military. Both of these failures show that when push came to shove, the West sided with the anti-Islamists in subverting democracy. At the same time, and in classic Orwellian fashion, the West did so in democracy's name.

Egypt's military coup and the West's complacency about it — if not complicity in it — could devastate the country. The Islamists are neither a marginal political group nor a terrorist force. They represent a large part of Egypt's population, perhaps half or more, and are certainly the country's best-organized political force. The attempt to repress the Muslim Brotherhood and to deny Morsi the presidency to which he was elected will most likely lead to massive violence and the strangulation of democracy, however the West and Egyptian anti-Islamists try to justify their actions.

At this point, the correct course for the West would be to call on Egypt's military to reinstate Morsi, to offer prompt financing to help stabilize the Egyptian economy and to support true pluralism, not the kind that reverts to military coups when elections produce inconvenient results.

True pluralism means accepting the strength and legitimacy of Islamist political forces in the new Egypt and other countries in the region. Short of this, the West will most likely end up as an accomplice to Egypt's continuing downward spiral into violence and economic collapse.

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