



WILL THE EGYPTIAN COUP CHANGE THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL ISLAM?

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The statements made by the US Secretary of State John Kerry in his brief visit to Cairo, in the first week of November, make clear that the US is committed to work with Egypt's interim rulers. Arriving on the eve of Morsi's trial, Kerry refrained from making any statement regarding the ousted former President and his presence on the Egyptian soil, which marked the highest level visit since the coup on July 3, indicated, that the US has accepted Morsi's removal and is now less bothered about the fate of the democratically elected President. Besides stating that the cutting of the US aid to Egypt is "not a punishment," he called upon the Egyptian officials to move towards the restoration of democratic rule in the country. He extended the helping hand from the US in order to smoothen the transition to democracy and said, "We support you in the tremendous transition you are undergoing....We know it's difficult, and we want to help you."ⁱ

The statements of John Kerry in the context of overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi, the first democratically elected president of Egypt, on 3rd July 2013 in a military coup led by Egyptian army chief, General Abdul Fatah Al-Sisi, appear incongruent and contradicting. It is important to note that civilians were brutally repressed and August 14, 2013, became the bloodiest day since the 2011 Egyptian revolution, as more than 600 people lost their lives at the Raba al-Adawiya mosque and close to 4000 got injured in a single day, at the hands of the security forces.ⁱⁱ Yet, the US never called the military take over as a coup and rather claimed that the Egyptian army had been "restoring democracy."ⁱⁱⁱ In a recently concluded Overseas Security Advisory Council's 28th Annual

briefing, John Kerry further criticised the Muslim Brotherhood and endorsed the view of the military regime and claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood “stole” the revolution and it was not motivated by any religion or ideology.^{iv}

Whether John Kerry is right or wrong in his argument is a different debate altogether, however, one thing is for sure that the present US posture and the clearly visible contradictory stance it has taken towards Egyptian coup and the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood, will not only alienate the members of the Muslim Brotherhood, but a significant number of supporters and sympathisers all across the Muslim world. Muslim Brotherhood, which may be regarded as the progenitor of the twentieth century Islamic revivalist movements that came into existence in 1928, still holds significant influence among the masses, not only in the Arab world but also in South Asia. Seen as a moderate group calling for the revival of Islamic system of governance, many from the intelligentsia endorse Muslim Brotherhood’s views and consider it’s method of taking part in democracy to raise the voice for the revival of Political Islam as the most appropriate method to bring about a change in the society.

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However, the other side of the picture is that there are other Muslim groups, both violent and non-violent, who abhor democracy and advocate staying away from it. The debate that whether democracy is compatible with Islam or not has long been going on, however the credibility of Muslim Brotherhood among the masses made the majority inclined towards their moderate methodology to bring about the change and hence the non-democratic ways to bring the change, which includes *Jihad* as well, did not find resonance among the general masses. The credibility of Muslim Brotherhood could be gauged from the elections in Egypt post-Arab Spring wherein people voted in its favour as the large majority always stated that it wants Islam to play an influential role in their lives, in politics and in governance. The worldview of the masses found consonance in MB’s outlook and hence they came to power.^v

Now, with Egyptian coup and the subsequent posturing of the US in the background, if we see the different methods being advocated by different Muslim organisations for political change, it seems that those groups who oppose democratic change, whether belonging to the extremist groups or otherwise, will gain. The coup will perhaps give the impetus and bolster the claims, at least for those groups who say democracy is incompatible and see it as something alien to Islam. Besides, it will strip the opportunity from Muslim Brotherhood and those groups influenced by its methodology who have until now considered democracy as the most viable method to raise their concerns. Reza Aslan argues that “political participation has the power to moderate radical ideology in this region [Middle East]. If Islamists can be convinced to put down their guns and to pick up ballots, the necessity of governance, as opposed to the simplicity of being the oppressed opposition, will force them either to moderate their ideals or it will cost them their veneer of piety and incorruptibility.”^{vi} Zeyno Baran, scholar of Islamist ideology takes an inward look into the policies of the US and argues that the rise in the Islamic ideology denouncing capitalism and democracy is fuelled by “the restrictive economic, social and political conditions of the region, in which words such as “freedom,” “prosperity” and “democracy” are often heard but seldom seen in practice.”^{vii}

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Now, if we analyse, in the light of arguments put forward by Aslan and Baran, the deliberations that the coup demonstrates the failure of Political Islam, as argued by many scholars, it appears that it may not be so. Contrary to the claims, it may give a further push to the call for Political Islam and most importantly, it will give a thrust to those groups who have taken on to extremism as they would become firmer in the belief that “violence is stronger than democracy.”^{viii} And the hitherto medium of democracy which, according to Aslan used to force the groups to moderate their stance, will no longer be seen with the prism of idealism. It may add into the belief of the masses that democracy, as Baran argued, is just a word devoid of practical implementation and hence alienate the people more from

the available overt channels of venting out their frustrations and ideas and incline them to look for more covert actions, difficult to put a check on.

Now looking at the post coup scenario, it seems that the dynamics of Political Islam may change. The more radical groups, as analysed by Zeyno Baran a decade ago, may take advantage from the current posturing of the US and the calls for Political Islam may get a further push, perhaps by other more threatening and

Endnotes:

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

ⁱ Laura King, "Kerry's Cairo visit underlines differences between U.S., Egypt," November 3, 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/world/worldnow/la-fg-wn-kerry-visit-differences-us-egypt-20131103.0.4198847.story#axzz2mldzHB97>

ⁱⁱ Mohsen Manar, "Health Ministry raises death toll of Wednesday's clashes to 638," August 16, 2013, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/08/16/health-ministry-raises-death-toll-of-wednesdays-clashes-to-638/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Asmaa Waguh, "Muslim Brotherhood criticizes Kerry's endorsement of Mursi overthrow," August 2, 2013, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2013/08/02/egypt-protests-brotherhood-kerry-idINDEE9710BL20130802>

^{iv} John Kerry's remarks at the Overseas Security Advisory Council's 28th Annual Briefing held in Washington DC on November 20, 2013. For full speech <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/11/217782.htm>

^v Interview with Reza Aslan, "Political Islam in the Middle East," *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 7, 2012, <http://www.cfr.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/political-islam-middle-east/p29622>

^{vi} Interview with Reza Aslan, "Political Islam in the Middle East," *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 7, 2012, <http://www.cfr.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/political-islam-middle-east/p29622>

^{vii} Zeyno Baran, "Hizb ut - Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency," December 2004, The Nixon Centre

^{viii} Rachel E Davidson, "Egyptian Military Coup: Are Radical Islamists the Real Winners?" July 4, 2013, <http://www.policymic.com/articles/52943/egyptian-military-coup-are-radical-islamists-the-real-winners>