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Egypt :

Army ousts Morsi from power in face of popular protests

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Jaisal Noor from the Real News Network interviewed Gilbert Achcar about developments in Egypt on 4 and 5 July, as Morsi was removed from government, about the background to those developments and their implications.

JN: Welcome to The Real News Network. I'm Jaisal Noor in Baltimore. In Egypt, President Mohamed Morsi has been taken out of power by the Egyptian military. The move comes 48 hours after the deadline the army had set for President Morsi either stepping aside or coming to a new power-sharing agreement with the millions of protesters who have taken to the streets since June 30.

Now joining us to talk more about the latest is Gilbert Achcar. He grew up in Lebanon, is currently a professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. His books include *The Clash of Barbarisms: The Making of the New World Disorder*, which is published in 13 languages; *Perilous Power, the Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy*, co-authored with Noam Chomsky; the critically acclaimed *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*; and most recently, *The People Want a Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*. Thank you so much for joining us.

GA: Thank you. Nice to talk to you.

JN: So can you give us your reaction to this breaking news that President Morsi, the democratically elected leader of Egypt, has been stripped of his power by the Egyptian army?

GA: Yeah. I mean, this is in some way a repetition of the same scenario of February 2011. And in both cases what you have is actually a coup, a military coup, on the background of a huge mass movement mobilization, except that the player or those who are in power are different, and the composition of the crowd, the mass mobilization, is different.

In January 2011, in January-February 2011, you had, you know, industry [incompr.] this huge protest movement, this big uprising, in which you had all shades of opposition to the regime of Mubarak. And that included liberals, left-wing movement, but also the Muslim Brotherhood. They were a major component of the mobilization at that time. And you had, you know, in this big mass mobilization the same kind of expectation towards the army, the idea that the army is with the people, can represent the interests of the people. And, I mean, it so happens that on 8 February 2011, just three days before the downfall of Mubarak, The Real News Network had recorded an interview with me in which I was warning against these kinds of illusions about the army, about the military.

And what we have now is just, you know, after a game of musical chairs, if you want. You have the Muslim Brotherhood in power and the partisans of the old regime, of the Mubarak regime, in the streets with the liberal, with the left, with the popular opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. So in a sense it's a repetition of the scenario with, okay, a key difference of the nature of the political force which is in power.

Now, of course, in both cases you had a huge mobilization. And this uprising is absolutely fascinating. It is something that actually went beyond the expectations of people, even people like me who rejected, you know, all these gloomy comments that you had ever since you had some elections bringing the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood to power. You had all kinds of comments on, you know, the spring turning into autumn or winter or "you know, and many" so in these events, a reason, if not a pretext, to just dismiss the whole uprising in the region. And there were

others like me who were insisting on the fact that we are only at the beginning of a long-term revolutionary process and that actuallyâ€”I was actuallyâ€”I stated that I was quite happy to see the Muslim Brotherhood come to government because that was the best possible way to expose them and to, you know, put an end to their ability to mystify the people with very demagogic slogans like Islam is the solution.

JN: And can you talk about the varying interests that took part in this uprising in Egypt and what political interests they serve?

GA: Yeah. Well, as I just mentioned, I mean, you have a very heterogenous crowd, politically speaking. I've seen someâ€”you know, on television some interviews with people in the street. And there are many of the people in coffee shops or things like that expressing their preference for Mubarak over Morsi. So you have, of course, a lot of partisans of the old regime, a lot of people who represent, how to say, a rather conservative mass who got [incompr.] the Muslim Brotherhood because of their absolute clumsiness in power. I mean, they behaved miserably, in the most stupid possible way, and so they managed to antagonize everybody else.

And so you have people who support the old regime, but at the same time you haveâ€”in this mobilization you have huge crowds of people who, you know, are motivated by class, if you want, feelings that the deterioration of their living conditions, a government which has only continued the economic and social policies of the previous regime, did not change anything in that regard, and so you have also the liberal opposition, which is against the Muslim Brotherhood for political reasons but not against their social-economic policies, because the liberals share basically the same views. Then you have the left. So it's a very heterogenous crowd. Theyâ€”as in the same way that in 2011 you had heterogenous forces, forces of a very different nature coming together with the only point in common being their opposition to Mubarak at that time, you have the same now with the opposition to Morsi.

But this of course won't solve the problem, and any illusion that the army and whoever the army brings to power or whoâ€”because now the army is kingmaker again for the second timeâ€”the illusion that this would lead to an improvement in the social and economic conditions and then the conditions of living of the laborers in Egypt is just, I mean, completely baseless. All illusions of this kind are just illusions, pure illusions.

And here you have, you know, a contradiction between those who are supporting this takeover by the army because they want the restoration of law and order, they believe that the Muslim Brotherhood were not efficient in doing that, and they are longing for a return of the country to normality, which means basically stopping the strike movement, stopping all these social movement that have been with us for the last two years in a very intensive way. So you have these kind of people. And you haveâ€”on the other hand, you have those people who are revolting against Morsi because he is continuing the social policies of Mubarak.

So you are in full contradiction. And the problem is that there is little awareness of that except for fringe groups, but there's little awareness of that. And that's the tragedy here is the absence of a left-wing core with a real popular credibility, able toâ€”with a clear strategic view of what is happening. This is badly missing.

JN: Now, you mentioned how this isâ€”the revolutionary process which began on January 25 is evolving. So you're saying you don't see any leaders emerging from the revolutionary movement that may be able to challenge for the leadership in this next election the army has promised?

GA: Well, I mean, you had the emergence of a figure who could play the role of bringing together the aspirations of, let's say, the social-progressive aspirations of the people. And that was the Nasserite candidateâ€”a reference to Nasser, who ruled Egypt until 1970. And so it's a kind of left-wing nationalism that this candidate represents. And he came third. That was the big surprise in the presidential election. In the first round of the presidential election, he

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came third. And he represents the only real popular figure in the broad spectrum of the Egyptian left.

But the problem is that he has completely shared the discourse, now the prevailing discourse about the army, about how the army are our friends, are with the people, and all that. And he is in alliance—he entered into an alliance with the liberal and with someone who is a remnant of the old regime, Amr Moussa. And he has made recently declarations saying that it was wrong in the previous periods before Morsi come to power, it was wrong for the popular movement to say, down with the military regime, when you had the supreme committee of the Armed Forces, the SCAF, ruling the country in a very terrible way. So all these statements are not reassuring at all, but, I mean, this is the only person who emerged as attracting the popular aspiration for a change on the left and not a change on the right or the—he—I mean, whether in the Islamic direction or the military, old-regime direction as you have.

So now the question is: if—and this is an if, of course—but if this program that the army put forward that includes holding early presidential elections, the question is: what will happen these elections, and how will this candidate precisely—because he's the only one who is able to do something on the left—what kind of discourse, what kind of program, how would he approach these elections? We'll have to see if—again, if these elections are held, and of course it's too early now to see, because the Muslim Brotherhood for the time being rejected and denounced the coup for what it is, a coup. Well, it is indeed a coup. Even though it's not a coup against a democratically elected government, period, it's a coup against a democratically elected government, but a government which managed to bring against itself the broad majority of the Egyptian people. I mean, this mobilization against Morsi reached, you know, unprecedented scales. It was completely unprecedented.

JN: What is the role of the United States in all of this? I mean, they were perfectly happy supporting Mubarak for decades with the military in power. But what role have they played in this situation, and what role might the U.S. play moving forward?

GA: The opposition movement in Egypt, that opposition to Morsi, had the strong conviction that Washington was backing Morsi. And indeed there were many signs showing Washington support to Morsi, indeed, warnings against a military coup, warnings against the intervention by the military, insistence on the necessity to follow the constitutional way and not any disruption of the constitutional way, although the Constitution, the present Constitution, is very much disputed in its legitimacy. I mean, now this huge movement does not recognize this constitution as legitimate but as something imposed by the Muslim Brotherhood. The U.S. ambassador in Cairo at the beginning of the mobilizations against Morsi made us a statement saying that they are detrimental to the economy of the country. I mean, that appeared as a blatant statement of support to Morsi. So there are many indications for that.

And the reality is Washington is in real disarray. And, you know, all these guys, and there are so many of them, especially on the internet, everywhere, with all these conspiracy theories who believe that Washington is Almighty and, you know, kind of puppet master of everything that's happening in the Arab world are just completely off of the mark. I mean, Washington, the United States in general, the U.S. influence in the region is at a very, very low point. It's a result of the defeat in Iraq, because Iraq has been a major defeat for the United States, for the U.S. imperial project. And you had this combination of this huge defeat, disaster, actually, for the U.S. imperial policies in Iraq, with the uprising toppling key friends of Washington like Mubarak.

So, I mean, Washington tried to bet on the Muslim Brotherhood. And for the last period, actually, since the beginning of the uprising, or soon after the beginning of the uprising in the Arab world, Washington has chosen the Muslim Brotherhood as the horse on which to bet. And, of course, they renewed their old alliance because they have been working closely, in close collaboration with the Muslim Brotherhood in the '50s, in the '60s, in the '70s, up actually—up to 1990, '91. They had a close collaboration with the Muslim Brotherhood. And so they renewed that, believing that, well, okay, in the present conditions of the Arab world, with all this mass mobilization, which is the major new—the major outcome, the major, if you want, development of everything that has been happening since

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December 2010, January 2011, they believe that, well, now they need allies with a real popular base, with a real popular organization. And, of course, the only ones who correspond to this definition and are willing to collaborate and cooperate with Washington are the Muslim Brotherhood. And they did so and they are doing so.

But now the situation has reached a point where, you know, Washington can see that the Muslim Brotherhood failed. It's obvious that they failed. So even from the point of view of Washington, betting on them is no longer possible. They failed in reestablishing law and order, if you want, in Egypt. They failed in controlling the situation. And of course the major ally of Washington in Egypt is the army. I mean, the army has very close ties with Washington. It is founded by Washington to a certain extent. I mean, but the bulk of U.S. funding to Egypt, which is second only to U.S. funding to Israel, goes to the army. And this generation of military officers have all been trained by the United States. They have been into military maneuvers and all that. So the army is very closely linked to Washington. And, of course, I mean, you can't expect Washington to take a position against the army. They wouldn't have to get into some conciliatory, I guess, stand. But the key point is that they are not running the show. And anyone believing that they are running the show is just, as I said, you know, off the mark.

JN: Now, can you share some more of your thoughts about what may come next for Egypt? Mohamed ElBaradei is an opposition figure who was among the leaders that met with the army today. It appears that leaders of labor unions did not meet with the army. Can you talk about the possible implications of that? And finally, do you feel that because of this crisis that's emerged with the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood in power, do feel that if there was another election, the Muslim Brotherhood would not win?

GA: Yeah. Well, I start with that last point. No, I can't see how the Muslim Brotherhood could win an election now. I mean, the next election will be a presidential one, according to the statement by the military, the commander-in-chief, his speech. Now, if Morsiâ€”I mean, if you look at what happened in the previous election, Morsi was elected in the second round thanks to votes which were not pro-Morsi but anti-Shafik, the other candidate, which is the formerâ€”an ex-military man and regarded as a representative of the continuity of the Mubarak regime. So even then, Morsi in the first round that only 25 percent. And I very much doubt that the Muslim Brotherhood would get now, again, even that 25 percent of the vote. So, no, I don't think this is really possible, not to mention the fact that, I mean, I can hardly imagine the army organizing elections to get Morsi back or the equivalent of Morsi back in power. So this is rather very much unlikely, to say the least.

Now, what will happen, I mean, that's precisely what I was hinting at when I was mentioning this issue of the Nasserite candidate. So, will this kind of heterogenous opposition front, will they go together in the election with one candidate? And, well, if that happens, this candidate won't be the Nasserite one but will be someone like Baradei or something like that, a liberal.

And in some way this will be but another stage, inauguration of another stage in a revolutionary process which will be far from extinct. It will carry on, and it will carry on for many years, if not many decades, of instability before you reach a situation where things can really change profoundly with a different social economic policy. So that means you need a profound social political change in order to get that. For the time being, this is not visible. So it's too early to make predictions in that regard.

But what we can say is, however, that it is really unlikely that the army tries to repeat what it did after the previous coup of 11 February 2011, when you had in the same way, I mean, the army pushing Mubarak out of power. Now they are doing that with Morsi. Now, the first time they presided over the country until the election of Morsi, for a long time, I can hardly imagine them doing the same, because they understood that this is detrimental to them and that actually today power in Egypt is a hot potato. It isâ€”I mean, who is willing, you know, to face all the problems that we'll be facing, not least of them the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood nowâ€”I mean, ifâ€”I mean, we'll see what will happen. But if they are just subdued, if they are justâ€”you know, if they just capitulate, they will do that with a huge

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resentment, and there will be a lot of opposition to whatever comes next from the Islamic circles.

And on the other hand, you have a terribly bad economic situation, extremely worrying that the country's on the brink of bankruptcy [incompr.] on the brink of a deep economic disaster. And the only policy put forward from the broad array of forces that goes from Morsi to Baradei through the military, etc., are the same neoliberal policies which the IMF is promoting in Egypt.

You know, it's just unbelievable how much the IMF isâ€”how to sayâ€”is really theâ€”as it has been called a long time ago already, the international monetary fundamentalism, I mean, how fundamentalist it is in its neoliberal perspective, to the point of advocating for Egypt, after everything you've seen, just more of the same economic policies that were applied under Mubarak and that led to this deep economic crisis, no growth anyhow, very low job creation, and huge unemployment, and especially youth unemployment. And they keep coming with the same. Now, the IMF has been, you know, exerting pressure on the Morsi government for the implementation of further austerity policies, further reductions in the subsidies for the prices of, like, fuel and other basic staples and the rest. And, you know, they keep coming with such policies, and actually Morsi did not implement them because he could not. He was not powerful enough politically to do so. When he attempted at one point, there was such an outcry that he had immediately to cancel the measure that he announced on his Facebook page. I mean, that was ridiculous.

So, I mean, it's a hot potato. And, I mean, that's why again what we are seeing is but an episode in a long story, which is actually still in its initial phase. We'll see a lot more of developments in the years to come in Egypt and in the rest of the Arab world.

JN: Thank you. And we'll certainly keep following all these developments as they unfold.

GA: Absolutely. You're most welcome.

JN: And thank you for joining us on The Real News Network.

The video of this interview is on the The Real News site [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).