

A bloody uncoiling of the Arab Spring

The scenes in Egypt are horrific, but it would be simplistic to see the country's current woes as a simple struggle between Islamists and secularists



David Lynch

Egypt has suffered a brutal week with legitimate fears that the coming days will see yet more bloodshed. Hundreds of supporters (the total as yet unclear) of ousted President Mohammed Morsi were buried this weekend following a vicious crackdown by security forces last Wednesday.

Yesterday, the Egyptian interior ministry reported that 1,000 Muslim Brotherhood "elements" had been arrested, accusing members of Morsi's movement of committing acts of terrorism during the violent clashes between the two sides. Reuters reported that the death toll had risen to 700 since Wednesday.

More than 100 people died in clashes last Friday, and others were yesterday trapped in the Al Fateh Mosque in the Ramses area of Cairo, which was surrounded by Egyptian security forces. Four of these included the family of Hussein Halawa – the imam of Ireland's largest mosque, in Clonskeagh in Dublin.

The logic behind the attack was also brutally simple. The military leadership decided to crush the tented villages which were established last month by the Muslim Brotherhood following Morsi's removal by the army and subsequent massive protests.

They decided this, not because of the disruption the tents caused in Cairo, but rather because their existence called into question the legitimacy of the current, military-backed government.

Local media reported that the military leadership had been in talks with the Brotherhood up until early last week in search of some solution to the crisis. The reasons for the talks' collapse are uncertain, but it is certain that the military is banking on the tacit support of the majority of Egyptians for their action.

This is a gamble. The scale of the massacre is so great that it will test the government's support. Already vice-president Mohamed ElBaradei has resigned and there has been plenty of international criticism of the violence.

However, despite the barbarity, supporters of the military leadership will feel that the Brotherhood has brought this event on itself. Egyptian media is deeply partisan and will spin the narrative most favoured by its political supporters, so newspapers and TV stations supportive of the regime have reported that arms were used by some Morsi supporters and that the security forces were provoked. They focus more on the funerals of the security force members who died, rather than the Brotherhood victims.

Since the revolution of January 2011 toppled dictator Hosni Mubarak, the security forces have been involved in a series of street massacres. At different times, Christians, young revolutionaries and most recently Islamists



Egyptians at a mosque in Cairo mourn over the bodies of people killed on Friday, during demonstrations in support of the ousted president Mohamed Morsi

AFP PHOTO/GETTY



Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood supporters carry the body of a comrade shot during clashes with security forces in Cairo



Supporters of Morsi protest in the city of Alexandria

have been the victims. But the military still has plenty of supporters. Many see it as the only stable force in Egypt and a bulwark against radical Islam.

Everyone has a relative who has served in the army; it is a significant employer and major financial power in the Egyptian economy. Some still regard it as a partner in revolution and celebrate the way it removed Morsi following massive protests last month.

They will also point to last week's attacks on Coptic Churches across Egypt as part of the Brotherhood's sectarian agenda, which they believe the army must guard against. Some Egyptians hate and fear the Brotherhood, and Morsi's year in office only intensified such feelings.

For the Brotherhood, with its leadership in prison (including Morsi) and hundreds of its supporters dead, this is a defeat of massive proportions.

It is now weakened and isolated from the political process. It could continue facing down the military on the streets, but at the cost of how many more lives it is hard to tell.

Internationally, recent events in Egypt are often seen through the prism of a vicious binary struggle between the military and the Brotherhood.

This is not totally erroneous, for there are many Egyptians who will carry the image of military chief Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi onto the streets in coming days and many Islamists who are willing to die clutching Morsi's portrait.

But huge numbers of Egyptians, particularly the revolutionaries, are represented by neither military nor Morsi.

Despite much of the media cover-

age focusing on the "Islamist versus secularist" or "Brotherhood versus army" narrative, the story is more nuanced than that.

It is simply not the case that in post-revolutionary Egypt one group stands on one side of the square and chants "Islam is the answer" and another diametrically opposed group faces them down chanting "Secularism is the way", with nobody in between.

Egypt is complex and contradictory not only at a political level, but at the level of the individual citizen.

A young teacher I knew in Cairo was fiercely anti-Brotherhood and a huge supporter of the young revolutionaries and their progressive aims. Although she was against political Islam, she proudly wore her hijab and regarded herself a pious Muslim.

Before the parliamentary elections in late 2011, I met a taxi driver who told me he was against Islam in politics. He angrily spoke against one of the local Brotherhood candidates in his district.

"He is a businessman but corrupt. He talks about Islam, but he does not live it," he said. However, when I asked him who he intended voting for he said he would support the (deeply religious) Sallists candidate.

"I might not agree with everything he says, but he is honest and trustworthy," he said.

At a political level, complexity also reigns. So both the Islamist Al-Nour party and the secularist April 6th movement supported the removal of Morsi last month, but condemned last week's attacks by the security forces.

The wishes of many Egyptians may be complex, but since the revolution, they have been offered choices that have been frustratingly simple.

So in last year's presidential election, the choice was between the Brotherhood's leader and the former right hand man of Hosni Mubarak?

Now it's either the military stay in charge with their new State of Emergency, or the Brotherhood comes back into power?

Many want neither. Back in the heady days of 2011 few expected it to turn out like this.

The young revolutionaries who led the initial revolution, demanding "bread, freedom and social justice" toppled Mubarak, but did not come to power.

That revolution had no clear leadership group or personality. Indeed it is a characteristic of the Arab Spring across the region, that it has never had a single charismatic figure like Che Guevara or Ayatollah Khomeini. Neither has one organisation conclusively embodied the hopes and demands of the revolution and led the masses.

When you contemplate the Egyptian revolution, you do not think of a single person or organisation, you think of the awe-inspiring camera shots of a Tahrir Square heaving with hundreds of thousands of protesters.

This is the Arab Spring's strength, for the self mobilisation of the masses on-line and on the streets was difficult for the old dictatorships to deal with.

But what was once a strength is also increasingly becoming a weakness. For in the absence of clear leadership and an agreed programme for reform from the revolutionary forces, other groups have filled the vacuum – principally the military and political Islam.

Neither of these groups led the revolution, but both have been its benefactors and are now fighting for

power, revolutionaries are caught in the middle.

Since 2011, the revolutionary forces have made mistakes and become divided, but these mistakes were almost inevitable. Decades of authorial rule did not create a space for civic society or open opposition to grow.

Under the Mubarak regime, almost every potential point of organised resistance was either crushed or incorporated. The trade union movement, the religious leadership, the media were all compromised. In contrast, the Brotherhood was organised and experienced and ready to take political advantage after Mubarak's fall. The military was also an established force, while the revolutionary forces have often been divided since the revolution.

The Arab uprising that swept the region over two years ago was one of the most staggering events in modern geopolitics. It crushed dictatorships and mobilised millions. The underlying reasons it happened – high unemployment especially among the young, deep economic and class division, corruption and authoritarian rule – remain in place. But the hope that it inspired in the hearts of many Arabs has been thoroughly tested by recent events.

From the continuing civil war in Syria to the threat of military counter revolution in Egypt, much of that early hope has dwindled. Egypt and its people face uncertain, fearful times. Spring is no longer in the air.

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Egypt's army kills democracy stone dead

An enfeebled United States can do nothing as the dream of the Arab Spring turns into a violent nightmare on the streets of Cairo

On August 1, when visiting Pakistan, US Secretary of State John Kerry spoke about the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi's government in Egypt. He said of the army's actions that "in effect, they were restoring democracy". He then went on to add: "The military did not take over, to the best of our judgment – so far, so far – to run the country. There's a civilian government."

Two weeks on and as Cairo's streets run with blood, Kerry's reaction points up, if anything, how feeble the US reaction has been to events in Egypt – and, probably more significantly, how increasingly powerless the US is becoming in relation to the Middle East.

Egypt, for so long its client Arab state, is not checking in advance with Washington anymore. Two years ago as the so-called Arab Spring spread across the region the western press and governments profoundly misunderstood and miscalculated. The presumption was that the upheavals were about producing copies of western-style democracies to ape our politics and increase Western influence has proved to be totally wrong.

If anything the very reverse is now happening.

Last week, on the streets of Egypt, prospects for any democracy in the near future surely died, alongside the hundreds of innocent civilians murdered by the Egyptian army. Clearly it will take a lot more than ballot boxes and voting papers to fundamentally change the traditional politics, the tribalism and the religious fundamentalism of the region.

Far from resolving the historic disputes and recasting the Middle East's notorious political configurations, the Arab Spring has produced a vast political uncertainty. Syria is deep in civil war, Libya is not much better and Tunisia is busy burying its assassinated politicians. Not since the end of the First World War has the region looked so disturbingly unpredictable.

As ever, our tendency is to view events there through the prism of Western sensibilities and requirements, but there is another vista emerging – especially in Egypt last week – that may in itself signal the beginning of the end of any western hegemony in the region. If anything there are now increasing signals that the Arab Spring has unleashed political demons long hidden and neutralised within the old pro-Western autocracies.

Egypt is now the prime example. Despite the fact that the annual £1.5 billion contribution by the US to the Egyptian military was supposed to be dependent on the military not staging coups, the generals went right ahead and staged one. Next, despite warnings from Washington that they should treat the subsequent Muslim Brotherhood protests non-violently the Egyptian army unleashed what was perhaps the world's first 24-hour globally-televised massacre. Can you imagine US President Barack Obama's TV viewing during his holiday in Martha's Vineyard?

One doesn't know how deep were the concerns were of General Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi – is he Egypt's new Nasser? – and his generals about the US reaction, but with billions of dollars in aid pouring in from the UAE and Saudi Arabia to go sort out the Muslim Brotherhood, who needs America?

Anyway the Egyptian generals may also calculated that the US – given its policy-determining relationship with Israel – was never going



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to completely cut ties with the Egyptian army. And, in retrospect, how right they were.

What we in the West have failed to read into last week's events in Egypt is that the blood on the streets may well be the first in what threatens to become a region-wide battle between political Islamism and the status quos. Meanwhile, with Iran and Qatar supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, the battle-lines are being drawn across the Middle East for a defining post Arab Spring dispute in which we in the West will have little or no say.

The other unmistakable signal from Egypt last week was that the prospect of any democratic revolution in the region may well have perished for a generation. If the Egyptian army can, on live TV, shoot into crowds of unarmed civilians including women and children and get away with it, what brave souls will attempt to huddle around protest camp-fires elsewhere in the region?

What has emerged unmistakably from the events in Egypt last week is that massive organised public and non-violent protest will no longer be regarded as sacrosanct by the authorities in the region. The guns of the Egyptian army have put an end to that protocol for the moment. Two years ago this form of protest began in Tunisia and subsequently swept through other countries, taking many regimes, including that of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, with it.

The Egyptian generals have changed all the rules and established an unmistakable new modus operandi for what ever the Arab Spring may throw up in the future.

But most worrying of all how many Muslim political activists this weekend will be remembering the warnings from al-Qaeda that participation in Western-style democratic politics was essentially a trap. As happened in Algeria in 1991, and as al-Qaeda has argued, even when you win at the polls they will send the army in to take over.

Earlier this month Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian-born leader of al-Qaeda posted a 15-minute recording on militant websites predicting what would happen next in Egypt after the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government. His predictions of an army takeover have been proved correct.

In his broadcast he argued, yet again, that the only way to power was to seize power through violent revolution and then impose sharia-law. Previously in his book – The Bitter Harvest published in 1991 – he had condemned Islamist parties for participating in "democracies, elections and parliaments". As bullets tore into protesters in Egypt last week who – even those of us in the West – can honestly deny al-Zawahiri's admonition of "I told you so!"

Obama under fire for stance on coup that wasn't

By Niall Stangané in Washington DC

US President Barack Obama is trying to walk a fine line in relation to the situation in Egypt, but he is coming under increasing criticism at home from those, on both the left and the right, who say he is not being assertive enough.

After violence flared in Cairo and other major cities last week, Obama announced that the United States would no longer participate in a scheduled military exercise with its Egyptian counterparts. Operation Bright Star,

which was due to begin next month, would have been the latest in a series of biennial war games involving troops from both countries.

But Obama steered clear of more dramatic action, such as suspending the huge sums of aid Egypt receives from Washington.

US aid to Egypt runs at around \$1.5 billion per year, placing the nation fifth on the overall list of American expenditure, behind Israel, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. Much of the aid goes to the Egyptian military.

Critics pointed to the sheer scale of the bloodshed to suggest that this was simply too weak a response.

Senator Rand Paul, a Republican senator from Kentucky, insisted that Obama should "stop skirting the issue, follow the law and cancel all foreign aid to Egypt".

Paul's mention of following the law was an allusion to an issue that has bothered people on both sides of the American political divide since Egypt's elected president, Mohamed Morsi, was toppled at the start of last month.

The Obama administration engaged in a considerable amount of semantic wriggling to avoid using the word "coup" to describe what had happened.

The reason they did so, it is widely assumed, is that the

laws governing foreign aid prohibit the United States from continuing to provide money in that scenario.

It has also drawn criticism from people who are, at base, sympathetic to Obama and his team. PJ Crowley, who served as a spokesman for Hillary Clinton during part of her tenure as Secretary of State, last week told CNN: "I think we missed an opportunity six weeks ago to call it a coup. The fact that we haven't undermines the credibility of the United States in the region."

The critics also say that Washington's approach calls into grave question US claims to be committed to the expansion of democracy, in the Middle East

and elsewhere. The Obama administration was, eventually, supportive of the 2011 efforts to topple Egypt's autocratic leader Hosni Mubarak, but now stands accused of permitting a junta to replace the elected president who succeeded him.

The administration's defenders insist that it is not as simple as that. In particular, they point to Morsi's failure while in government to include diverse voices in the debate over a new constitution and his attempts to bend the judiciary to his will. The effort to oust him, they point out, itself seemed to have considerable public support.

US Secretary of State John

Kerry is now widely perceived to have gone over the top when he told a Pakistani TV interviewer a few weeks ago that the military who deposed Morsi were "in effect... restoring democracy".

But there was certainly a hope in Washington that military rule would be relatively short-lived and could help stabilise the Arab world's most populous nation.

The big strategic fear is that other nations would be happy to fill the gap the United States would leave. Other major powers, such as China and Russia, are believed to be eyeing the situation to see if they might boost their own strategic interests.