

## EVERYTHING IS FOR THE BEST The US and Egypt one year after the coup

By Norman G. Finkelstein

[This text is based on a talk Finkelstein gave in Geneva, Switzerland in June 2014, at a news conference of Egyptians opposed to the military coup.]

I will talk about Western reactions this past year to the 3 July 2013 Egyptian coup.

I will not dwell on outliers and easy targets such as former British prime minister Tony Blair.

The day after 20 journalists were charged by coup leaders with terrorism, Blair voiced support for the illegal regime, saying, “I think it is fundamental...that we give it support in bringing in this new era for the people of Egypt.”<sup>i</sup>

That was par for the course. When former Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak was massacring Egyptians in 2011, Blair had praised him as “immensely courageous and a force for good.”<sup>ii</sup>

It’s what we’ve come to expect from this bizarre cross between a high-price call girl, crazed jihadist and Transylvanian vampire.

Blair happens to be the official representative of the Middle East Quartet, which perhaps says something about the EU, US, Russia and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

In any event, I want now to turn to US policy. Before doing so, however, it’s useful to set out the human rights situation in Egypt since the coup.

Shortly after Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was named president in June 2014, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch issued a joint statement depicting “a human rights crisis as dire as in any period in the country’s modern history.”<sup>iii</sup>

They reported multiple massacres, including “the worst incident of massive unlawful killings in Egypt’s recent history” on 14 August 2013 (upwards of 1,000 overwhelmingly unarmed protesters were shot dead by Egyptian security forces);<sup>iv</sup> mass arrests (more than 20,000 Egyptians since the coup), arbitrary detentions and sham trials, prolonged sentences (as well as two mass show trials in which a total of 1,200 people were sentenced to death), torture of detainees (including “severe beatings,” “being hung from doors,” and “electric shocks to extract confessions”), abductions to a secret detention facility, and “rampant

impunity” of the perpetrators (“not a single police or army officer has been held accountable for the repeated use of excessive force and other serious abuses since July 2013”).

“Instead of addressing the urgent need for reform,” Amnesty observed, “Egyptian authorities have spent the last year engaging in repression on a scale unprecedented in Egypt’s modern history.”

On the other hand, the most salient feature of Obama administration policy has been its dogmatic insistence that post-coup Egypt has embarked on what it calls a “democratic transition.” This mantra of a “democratic transition” recurs in virtually every official American statement, despite the fact that developments on the ground, indeed, developments Washington freely acknowledges and even occasionally criticizes, wholly contradict it.

The first thing to note is the oddity of a democratic transition that begins with an anti-democratic coup. It’s not every day that the overthrow of a democratically elected government, the jailing of the democratically elected president, and the mass slaughter of the unarmed supporters of the democratically elected governing party constitute stepping stones to democracy.

An observer focused narrowly on the facts might, contrariwise, conclude that the July coup marked the inception not of a democratic but of an anti-democratic transition. When the Egyptian court sentenced more than 500 Egyptians to death after a two-day mass trial, US Secretary of State John Kerry expressed befuddlement: “It simply defies logic.”<sup>v</sup> But it only defies logic if one starts from the premise that Egypt is in a democratic transition; the sentences make perfect sense if Egypt is witnessing an anti-democratic transition. On a related note, secular Egyptian liberals and leftists were wont to minimize the coup as merely one act in the great revolutionary drama. A writer in the *London Review of Books* astutely observed, “To each setback they have undergone since the overthrow of Mubarak, Egypt’s revolutionary forces have responded with the reassuring mantra: ‘revolution is a process.’ But so is counter-revolution.”<sup>vi</sup>

Be that as it may, the more interesting question is this. It is now a year since the coup took place, and barely a week passes without the media reporting yet another human rights atrocity committed by the Egyptian government. Still, the Obama administration, like Dr. Pangloss, optimistically maintains that Egypt is passing through a democratic transition. How does it manage to reconcile the shocking facts with its unshakeable faith?

First, it massages the facts. Each time the Egyptian government commits an atrocity, the US issues a ritual condemnation of violence by “all parties,” and “particularly attacks on police and on those elements of authority in the state.”<sup>vii</sup> After the mass killing on 14 August, Kerry deplored “today’s violence and bloodshed across Egypt.... Egyptians inside and outside of the government need to take a step back.”<sup>viii</sup> But after Bashar al-Assad (allegedly) used chemical

weapons killing a comparable number of unarmed Syrians, Kerry directly denounced his “indiscriminate slaughter of civilians, the killing of women and children and innocent bystanders” as a “moral obscenity...it is inexcusable and...undeniable.”<sup>ix</sup> Why didn’t he deplore “violence and bloodshed across Syria” and call on “Syrians inside and outside of the government...to take a step back”?

Second, when the Obama administration does acknowledge the true facts, it invariably situates them in the, so to speak, bigger picture of Egypt’s democratic transition, albeit a “very difficult transitional process.”<sup>x</sup> That is, however ugly the facts might be, one shouldn’t get too hung up on them, otherwise one loses sight of the overarching reality that Egypt is “on the march to democracy” (Kerry).<sup>xi</sup>

This mode of argumentation has a long and distinguished pedigree. When people wondered in Stalin’s day why the “socialist transition” was littered with corpses, show trials and internment camps, the Soviet dictator’s apologists proclaimed, “to make an omelet, you have to break eggs.” Sisi must be making quite the omelet.

Still, skeptics back then persisted, If Russia was en route to socialism, why is it that the repression keeps getting worse and worse? Stalin then conjured up the novel theory that, the closer Russia draws to a classless paradise, the more furious will be the resistance of the class enemy. That is, if things appear to be getting worse and worse, it’s because they are really getting better and better.

And, who can doubt that things are getting better and better in Egypt, even as they appear to get worse and worse? After all, just as Stalin promulgated in 1936 the “freest constitution in the world,” so Egypt has just witnessed a presidential election. Not missing a beat, the Obama administration immediately declared that it “looks forward to working with Abdelfattah al-Sisi, the winner of Egypt’s presidential elections,” while the EU “congratulate[d] Abdel-Fatah El-Sisi, as the new President of Egypt, and trusts that he will tackle the serious challenges faced by the country and the new government.”<sup>xiii</sup>

What’s not to celebrate? Sisi received 96.4 percent of the vote, which is just a tad shy of the 98.7 percent that Kim Il-sung, the Great Leader of North Korea, used to get.

In all fairness, the US and EU did express concern over the “restrictive political environment” and the fact that “respect of rights falls short of constitutional principles.”

To assess Egypt’s recent election, it might be useful to conduct a simple thought experiment. As is well known, President Barack Obama’s popularity has plummeted among the American people. A majority do not approve of the job he’s doing, and many among them positively detest him. Let’s imagine if the Republican party, capitalizing on this popular discontent, orchestrated an army coup to remove Obama from office, slaughtered his unarmed supporters in a

series of bloodbaths, declared the Democratic party a terrorist organization, banned it and jailed its leading members, then arrested the other opposition leaders and prohibited any and all public dissent. Finally, to appease international opinion, Republicans held an “election” in which the only other candidate was Jesse Jackson.

Except among party hacks, is there any doubt that such an election would evoke, not mild caveats concerning the “restrictive political environment” and shortfall in “respect of rights,” but full-throated howls of condemnation?

The dogma of Egypt’s post-coup democratic transition, if wholly detached from reality, nevertheless serves the useful function of enabling the Obama administration to welcome Egypt back into the fold of “our friends and allies” in the region, in particular, “Saudi Arabia” and “the Emirates,”<sup>xiii</sup> where the democratic transition has presumably been completed.

A couple of weeks after Sisi took office, the Obama administration announced that it was freeing up more than a half million dollars in military assistance to Egypt and promised to restore the full \$1.3 billion in annual assistance.<sup>xiv</sup> The day following this announcement, and not unrelated to it, the Egyptian government convicted three journalists of abetting “terrorism,” sentencing them to 7-10 years imprisonment.

What do these convictions presage if not that things are getting better and better in Egypt?

*“What is optimism?” asked Cacambo.  
“It’s the passion for maintaining that all is right when all goes wrong with us,” replied Candide.*

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<sup>i</sup> Patrick Kingsley, “Tony Blair Backs Egypt’s Government and Criticizes Brotherhood,” *Guardian* (30 January 2014).

<sup>ii</sup> Chris McGreal, “Tony Blair: Mubarak is ‘immensely courageous and a force for good,’” *Guardian* (1 February 2011).

<sup>iii</sup> “New Leader Faces Crisis; Should Not Ignore Worst Situation in Decades,” 9 June 2014.

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<sup>iv</sup> Besides this one, massacres were committed on 8 July 2013, 27 July 2013, 16 August 2013, 6 October 2013, and 25 January 2014. The total number of Egyptians killed by security forces this past year is put at a minimum of 1,400 “and most likely scores more.” In its *World Report 2014* entry for Egypt, Human Rights Watch indicates that only a handful of Egyptian protesters resorted to firearms, and only after and in response to murderous provocations.

<sup>v</sup> US Department of State, “Mass Trials and Sentencing in Egypt,” Press Statement of John Kerry (26 May 2014).

<sup>vi</sup> Adam Shatz, “Egypt’s Counter Revolution,” *London Review of Books* (16 August 2013).

<sup>vii</sup> US Department of State, “Press Briefing in Cairo by Kerry, Egypt’s Foreign Minister” (3 November 2013).

<sup>viii</sup> US Department of State, “Remarks by Secretary of State John Kerry on Egypt,” Press Briefing Room (14 August 2013).

<sup>ix</sup> US Department of State, “Remarks on Syria,” Press Briefing Room (26 August 2013).

<sup>x</sup> US Department of State, “Remarks with Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy before Their Meeting” (29 April 2014).

<sup>xi</sup> US Department of State, “Press Briefing in Cairo by Kerry, Egypt’s Foreign Minister” (3 November 2013).

<sup>xii</sup> The White House, “Statement by the Press Secretary on the Presidential Election in Egypt” (4 June 2014); “Declaration on Behalf of the European Union on the Presidential Election in Egypt” (5 June 2014).

<sup>xiii</sup> US Department of State, “Press Briefing in Cairo by Kerry, Egypt’s Foreign Minister” (3 November 2013).

<sup>xiv</sup> Lara Jakes, “UN Pressing Egypt to Adopt More Moderate Policies,” *Associated Press* (22 June 2014).