



POINT OF VIEW

IN THE NAME OF 25 JANUARY REVOLUTION:

Sisi's neoliberal "War on Terror" and the Muslim Brotherhood's ideological transformations

Panos Kourgiotis *

More than a year has passed since Abdel Fattah Sisi's coup d'état, which led to the ouster of elected President Muhammad Morsi from power. The supporters of the army's involvement in the political process spoke of a "corrective" movement, that was necessary in order to help the Egyptian people "save their revolution", while President Morsi's supporters spoke of "putschists" against legitimacy and "usurpers" of 25 January's legacy. Since then, both sides have clashed politically and ideologically on the streets, the suburbs, the universities, the Press and social media, fiercely defending their claim as protectors of the same revolution.

The modern Arab history is full of military-backed "corrective revolutions", that took place declaring their desire to "correct" the original revolutions, such as the Nasserist or the Ba'athist ones. That was exactly the case in the post-Arab Spring Egypt¹. General Abdel Fattah as – Sisi, Egypt's new president for the time being, has committed publicly to run the state as a real patriot and as a sincere reformer, promising to bring growth, develop the country's economy, correct social injustices, defend the citizens' dignity and create an atmosphere of stability and security, by fighting terrorism and religious extremism². His promises were highly illustrated as steps in the right direction for the successful continuation of the unfinished 25 January revolution. However, until this day, the only thing to show for is an excessive emphasis on the "war on terror" issue at the expense of the other socio-economic demands of the revolutionaries.

* PhD in Political Science, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Indeed, Sisi's regime has an impressive record regarding this war: in the context of fighting the dangerous Jihadists in the Sinai³, Sisi drastically confronted his main domestic opponent, the Muslim Brotherhood, massacring many of its members, banning its Freedom and Justice Party and having its leaders sentenced to death and life imprisonment. Due to their political and social activism, the Islamists were labeled by the state propaganda as "terrorists" with pro-ISIS leanings⁴ and were deemed far more dangerous than the tamed, apolitical Salafists, who were largely satisfied with the state's campaigns against atheists⁵. Furthermore, the recent regional threat of ISIS and the need for its containment⁶ represented a golden opportunity for all these Arab autocrats to impose a tougher rule, irrespectively of the damage that has been caused to the political transition in their countries. As far as his economic policy is concerned, Sisi's neoliberal ambitions, accompanied by privatization plans and austerity measures, are reminiscent of Anwar Sadat's "Infitah" policies⁷. At the same time, Sisi's rule reminds us that of Gamal Abdel Nasser in regard to the violent cracking down on Islamists. But unlike Nasser, who has been granted with the title of "decolonization's hero" thanks to the nationalization of the Suez Canal, two years after destroying the Muslim Brothers in 1954⁸, Sisi had to deal with a very serious energy crisis as well as with the discontent created by the implementation of his first economic reforms⁹.

Despite the suppression it faced during the last year, the Muslim Brotherhood retained its ability to mobilize its supporters in Cairo and other provincial cities and to show its well-established presence in Egyptian society. Given the weak position of the newly formed secular political parties vis-à-vis the figure of the "strong, popular President", who still haunts the Egyptian public sphere¹⁰ and their constant need to seek alliances among themselves in order to survive, the Muslim Brothers remain the only reliable alternative for those who oppose Sisi. It is not the first time when the Brotherhood is brutally suppressed or even banned from the Egyptian political life. As it occurred several times before, the ideological transformations and reorientations of this historic, Islamist organization stemmed from the great political shocks it experienced throughout its almost 90 years old history. Nasser's oppression, for instance, and the general uncertainty it caused in the Brothers' ranks, regarding the future of the relations between the Islamist movement and this type of military government, accelerated the emergence of an important schism, during the 1970s, between the reformist preachers on the one hand and the Takfiri – Jihadists on the other. Although both Islamist currents had their own approach and strategies on how to promote or enforce the "re-islamization" of state and society, none of them had a clear revolutionary vision based on the mobilization of the masses in popular uprisings. The eruption of a revolution was still an anathema for most of the Brothers until very recently, keeping in mind Hasan al-Banna's negative view towards revolutions in his political discourse¹¹.

However, the post-25th of January 2011 and especially the post-3rd of July 2013 Brotherhood has been something different, since it was the first time that a popular revolution had taken place on the streets. The Brothers embraced it, they came to power through the political process that was created, and in the end they lost it due to Sisi's coup. The events that followed helped them reinvent themselves as a revolutionary force, albeit a socially conservative one, hoping to speak in the name of all those disassociated from Sisi and badly affected by his neoliberal and suppressive policies. One of the most recent examples of this revolutionary discourse, was the Brotherhood's call for participation in the "Poor's Protest" of September 9, despite the fact that the activists of this "movement" affirmed that they are not related to the Islamist opposition¹². As the Brotherhood-led Anti-Coup Pro-Legitimacy National Alliance has stated: "*The National Alliance calls on the people of Egypt to rise up in a new revolutionary week beginning Friday under the slogan*

*"Revolution Until Victory", and exhorts all to rally around the youth's call for September 9 protests to reject the policies of the thieves to impoverish the people of Egypt. Let us make September 9 the day of "The Poor's Protest" – one of the forceful cries of the poor in Egypt, the cries of the oppressed against the murderers and the thieves of the military junta and their cold-blooded cronies. Let's all go out and protest on September 9. The Revolution continues... until victory is won and retribution is achieved"*¹³.

For the Muslim Brothers, these types of "revolutionary weeks" have become their favourite political tactic, transforming the pious Friday into a day of major revolutionary activity. There were indeed many "angry" weeks since Morsi's ouster and the Brothers attempted through them to "de-islamize" and "re-nationalize" their cause in order to present themselves as the real vanguards of 25 January Revolution: the classic Brotherhood banners with the crossed swords and the Quran were substituted by the Egyptian flag which represents national unity, by Morsi's posters as the unquestionable symbols of legitimacy and of course by the four-fingered "Rabaa" banners in remembrance of the killings of pro-Morsi supporters in Rabaa Square on August 14 2013¹⁴.

This last one especially holds a very special place in the post-Morsi Brotherhood narrative. It started as a symbol of solidarity and martyrdom and developed gradually into one of the most "fashionable" codes of revolutionary communication in Sisi's Egypt¹⁵. As a result, the Muslim Brothers know well that the ideological connection of the "Rabaa" symbol to the recent "Poor's Protests" is crucial for their future political re-emergence. It simply makes them look less Islamist and more patriotic and revolutionary. It seems that this is the highest political priority for a widely suppressed Brotherhood ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections. In a highly polarized Egypt where every side of the political spectrum speaks in the name of the 25 January Revolution, Sisi strives to "correct" it by declaring the war on terror and announcing huge developmental projects, while the Brothers strive to reconstruct their political influence and identity as part of a greater revolutionary legacy.

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