

A Coup Isn't Always the Enemy of Democracy

by [Waller R. Newell](#) (September 2013)

Never one to mince words, Senator John McCain began his recent visit to Egypt by publicly describing his host government as having come to power through a “coup.” His travelling mate Senator Lindsey Graham amplified this by warning that American support to Egypt could not continue if Egypt did not follow the path to democracy by releasing detained ex-President Morsi and negotiating a settlement with the Muslim Brotherhood. The unfortunate violence that followed shortly after when Egyptian security forces expelled pro-Morsi demonstrators from their site might seem to have confirmed their worries about the military coup being extended.

The interesting implication here is that no government that comes to power through a coup could ever be anything but hostile or antithetical to democracy – and that, conversely, democracy can only be sustained by a government that is democratically elected. But is that necessarily true? The historical record shows a more complex pattern.

Governments formed through coups certainly can be destructive of the prospects for democracy. Lenin and the Bolsheviks seized power in a classic coup, taking advantage of a Tsarist regime collapsing under the catastrophe of World War I and of a fledgling reformist government under Alexander Kerensky that was attempting to introduce constitutional government while continuing to fight the war. Lenin's coup strangled the possibility of Russian democracy at birth, and introduced a

totalitarian government that lasted until 1989. The same pattern was followed after the defeat of Germany in World War II when Stalin, abrogating all the agreements he made at Yalta, installed Soviet puppet states through a series of coups across the liberated states of central and eastern Europe.

But there are other patterns. Adolf Hitler came to power through entirely constitutional means. His National Socialist party held the largest single bloc of seats in the German Reichstag, which made him a natural candidate for President Hindenburg to choose to lead a government, as long as entirely justified misgivings about what the Nazis would do in power were set aside. Having become Chancellor, Hitler then used the powers that had been legally granted to him under the constitution to seize dictatorial control, in effect staging what has been called a "legal coup." In this case, then, the democratic process helped a party come to power legally through elections – a party determined that, once it was in control, no such democratic elections would be permitted again.

In the case of the Third Reich, not only did free elections not prevent a totalitarian movement from coming to power and then staging a coup, but a coup was after that the only possible way that Hitler's grip on power, and the forces of war and genocide that it unleashed, could have been prevented. We know from records captured after the war that, had the western powers responded to Hitler's audacious re-occupation of the Rhineland, German generals who feared he was plunging Germany into another world war might well have removed him through a coup. In other words, a democratically-elected leader would have been removed by a coup in order to forestall a destructive war and restore the prospects for democracy in Germany and among its conquered subjects. Is there anyone who does not wish this coup had taken place?

That brings us to the situation in Egypt. Without a doubt, the

Morsi government came to power through elections as free and fair as could be expected under the circumstances. Equally without a doubt, once they had their grips on the reins of power, Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood began a steady and relentless process of the Islamicization of Egypt, both domestically and in foreign policy. Within weeks of former President Mubarak's ouster, the Muslim Brotherhood announced that the peace treaty with Israel was no longer guaranteed. For the first time since the revolution of the Ayatollahs in 1979, an Iranian naval vessel was allowed free passage through the Suez Canal to the Syrian coast. The Morsi government and Muslim Brotherhood actively championed the role of Hamas in Gaza, encouraging its hard-line rejectionism toward peace with Israel. Muslim Brotherhood criticism of Egyptian ballet as "obscene," disturbing reports of "virginity checks," attacks on the Copts and a general collapse of secular police authority were dismaying signs of what was to come. Morsi played both sides of the street over the attack on the American consulate in Libya, initially condemning only the anti-Muslim film alleged to be its chief cause while the Brotherhood itself exulted in the attack. Economic growth, which had been humming along at 8% a year during Mubarak's last period, ground to a halt, particularly the tourism industry, which employed thousands of young Egyptians, especially of the kind who were demonstrating for Mubarak's overthrow in Tahrir Square. Those who think that this economic decline is a consequence of the "disorder" caused by Morsi's ouster, and that a negotiation between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood would somehow restore "normal conditions" and "allow the economy to develop" miss the point of a radical revolutionary movement. The Muslim Brotherhood does not care about Egypt's economic development because it leads, in their view, to materialism, corruption and a slackening of religious rigor. They have for decades denounced the tourism industry as the reign of "Pharoah" – in other words, catering to foreigners who want to look at Egyptian ruins increased a degrading dependency on Western consumerism while actively

promoting pagan monuments that should by rights be destroyed.

Given the disturbing drift of the Morsi government toward precisely the kind of “legal coup” that would have made future elections impossible, we must at least remain open to the possibility that, by arresting this process of democratically-elected Islamicization early on, the military government of Egypt may well be guaranteeing that a genuine Egyptian multi-party democracy with guarantees for individual liberty regardless of religion can take firmer root in the long run. Moreover, Morsi’s political demise has enabled the Egyptian military to resume its important military operations against Hamas’ incursionary tunnel system in the Gaza-Egyptian border region, while also removing moral support for that Islamist regime’s relentless hostility toward Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. This can only increase the prospects for successful negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Many foreign policy neo-conservatives invoke the memory of Jean Kirkpatrick as one of their intellectual powerhouses. But Senators McCain and Graham and the wing of current Republican foreign policy thinking they represent, despite their good intentions, are going against Ambassador Kirkpatrick’s central maxim. American foreign policy, she argued, should never be the vehicle for overthrowing or undermining an authoritarian government if that increased the chances of a totalitarian government coming to power. She believed the Carter Administration had committed this mistake in Iran, undermining support for the Shah due to his regime’s imperfect democratic record, thereby paving the way for the Iranian Revolution and a regime where democratic reform of any kind would be impossible. Her teaching amounted to the old lesson: Don’t let the perfect be the enemy to the good. No one can be happy when the prospects for democracy can be secured only through a coup against a democratically elected government and by bloodshed in the streets, and negotiations are probably both necessary

and inevitable. But the current Egyptian military regime, while arguably authoritarian, has no long-term totalitarian blueprint for the revolutionary transformation of Egypt, and will likely wish to withdraw from politics and restore elections as soon as it is able. If they are governing by coup, it is a coup aimed at forestalling a Muslim Brotherhood coup whose effects would be far more destructive and would last far longer. Totalitarian movements favour elections when they can hope to win – but only once.

[Table of Contents](#)

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