Making sense of Egypt's popular "coup"

By Jayson Casper
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The military intervention to depose Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president, has been met with near universal approval by Coptic Christians. This community—which represents roughly 10 percent of the population—joined millions of Muslims in decrying the deterioration of security, the economy and national religious unity in the two years following the revolution. Morsi, they believe, was not only an incapable leader but also an active partisan for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Perhaps Morsi believed he had a mandate. Islamist parties won more than 70 percent of the seats in parliamentary elections held a year after the revolution. The Brotherhood and allied ultraconservative Salafi Muslim parties benefited from an innately conservative constituency, as well as from the opposition's general disorganization. But by the time run-off elections pitted Morsi against a representative of the deposed Mubarak regime, popular support for Islamism was whittling away. Morsi squeaked out a victory, aided by many who were simply voting against the other guy.

At first, Morsi appeared to understand the necessity of consensual governance. He won the support of several liberal activists and appointed a diverse team of advisors. But the challenge of the constitution made the whole situation unravel.

Islamist and liberal politicians jockeyed for positions on the committee to write the foundational document; once there, they sparred over its contents. In the end, the

liberal minority withdrew in protest, believing Morsi's supporters were ramming a flawed and religiously tinged constitution down the nation's throat. The president, who had promised to accept only a fully consensual effort, instead seized authority—claimed as temporary—to place his decisions above judicial review. With this he forced the constitution through to a public referendum, resulting in 64 percent approval—but of only a third of eligible voters.

Morsi's actions reminded Egyptians of Mubarak and sparked massive protests. Morsi endured the demonstrations and claimed validation in the popular vote, but the unity of his presidency was irrevocably broken. Many of his non-Islamist advisors resigned, and the opposition refused to accept the legitimacy of the new constitution.

Morsi, meanwhile, saw more and more signs of conspiracy. Liberal members of the constitutional committee did not want to reach consensus, he thought, but rather to prevent Egypt from stabilizing on an agreed-upon document. Accustomed to decades in the political wilderness, he and the Brotherhood believed the non-Islamist opposition and the entrenched state bureaucracy were doing everything in their power to oppose not only them but the success of the revolution.

Moris was ousted within this polarized setting. The Rebel movement began in April to collect signatures demanding early presidential elections, with a goal of 15 million by June 30, the anniversary of Morsi's presidency. Islamist leaders were dismissive, but the campaign gained steam. Days before the deadline, organizers announced their goal was reached—prompting Islamists to hold a massive demonstration in support of the president. But their hundreds of thousands near the presidential palace were soon dwarfed: Rebel supporters not only filled Tahrir Square but surrounded the palace in numbers exceeding the revolution itself.

Yet the situation was different. Morsi was legitimately elected. And unlike Mubarak, he had a substantial social base. The original Tahrir was a united revolution; now one side rallied against another.

Morsi was defiant, offering only superficial concessions. One was a national unity government, but in the previous months he had twice reshuffled the cabinet, each time putting more Brotherhood members into positions of influence. Another was a call for dialogue, but this had been issued as far back as the crisis over the constitution—and the opposition, outnumbered at the potential table, had rejected

it. Morsi had long been leaning on his conservative social base, addressing their increasingly sectarian spirit with platitudes only, failing to arrest aggressors on Coptic homes and churches.

These Islamist supporters, however, saw Copts as part of the grand conspiracy against them. While Copts were certainly anti-Morsi, the church took no official position. Still, Islamists felt beleaguered. Just as Mubarak's ruling party's headquarters were burned before, now Brotherhood buildings across the country were attacked. But while limited clashes took place in the Nile Delta, both pro- and anti-Morsi demonstrations in Cairo at that point remained peaceful.

Both sides were entrenched in their positions, forcing a showdown. The military issued a deadline for a compromise, but when it passed they sided with "the people," meaning the Rebel campaign and its larger social mobilization. Morsi called coup as Brotherhood leaders were arrested and Islamist television stations shut down. The masses in the streets rejoiced, but violent clashes soon followed.

The U.S. is now debating whether the removal of Morsi constitutes a military coup. If so, by law American aid must be suspended. But the better question is framed from an Egyptian perspective: Does this move further democracy, or hinder it?

The opposition viewed Morsi as a religious autocrat in the making, slowly but surely taking over the state apparatus. But many also fear the military is not an honest broker and is taking advantage of current popular support to entrench its own power and rule from behind the scenes. Time will tell which is the greater threat.

As for the nation's Christians, they view the military intervention as salvation. Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros, who had pledged to stay out of politics, appeared side by side with Egypt's chief Muslim leader to back the move. Protestants appreciated this as a public signal of Christian equality, while the Anglican bishop rejoiced that Egypt was free of the Brotherhood's "repressive rule."

But are such public celebrations wise? In the fluid chaos of Egypt's transition, who's to say the situation will not flip again? Copts are careful to align with the nation's moderate Muslims. Dare they align with an extra-constitutional putsch against a large swath of conservative neighbors? Will they find sufficient protection in the army and a hopeful emerging civil democratic order?

Perhaps they have no choice. Perhaps they see more clearly than anyone the issues at stake under Islamist rule. Only a year and a half earlier a Coptic protest was crushed under military tanks. Still, they took refuge.

This is the same question now faced by Egyptians as a whole, and as such the transition becomes more of a revolution proper. Islamist or civil; religious or secular—inasmuch as these are false dichotomies, they also represent the current struggle.