

## Lessons for the Secular Left

Mahmood Mamdani<sup>1</sup>\*

The debate surrounding events in Egypt reminds me of the Rwanda genocide in the 1990s. I went to Rwanda in late 1994. Everyone I spoke to agreed that there would have been no genocide without the enthusiastic participation of millions of machete-wielding ordinary people on the ground. On its own, the regime could only have organized isolated massacres. How does one make sense of an atrocity in which large sections of the population participated and which even more hailed as clearing the nation of insects? If somebody had then asked whether the bloody carnage in Rwanda was a popular event or a genocide, I would have said both. Africans who recall the popular genocide in Rwanda have little difficulty making sense of the popular coup – and, now, the popular war on terror – in Egypt.

The aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda also recalls another pertinent similarity. Then, official America refrained from saying the G word. Today, it refrains from saying the C word. Now as then, when it comes to strategic interests, officialdom is unmoved by the open breach between the values it pays homage to and the interests it pursues doggedly.

What is distinctive about events in Egypt is not just the similarities they evoke with the past but the possibilities they offer and the challenges they pose.

The January insurrection that toppled the Mubarak regime undermined the credibility of the War on Terror and the facile demonization of political Islam. The electoral victory of Muslim

---

\*<sup>1</sup> Mahmood Mamdani is Professor and Director of Makerere Institute of Social Research in Kampala and Herbert Lehman Professor of Government at Columbia University, New York City. He is the author of *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the War on Terror*. **TWO ?'s: 1) It doesn't say what you are the Professor of at MISR, so it reads that you are just "Professor...of MISR" 2) Why GMBM and not your most recent work (Define and Rule)**

Brotherhood, the best organized party in Egypt, signaled a differentiation within political Islam, between parliamentary-roaders and proponents of armed struggle.

The July coup that followed has driven a wedge within the broad ideological formation we know as Political Islam. The parliamentary-roaders in the region have opposed the coup. Prominent among these has been the ruling Islamist party in Turkey. Gulf monarchies like Saudi Arabia and UAE, fearful of the anti-monarchist ambitions of Muslim Brotherhood, have been among the most enthusiastic supporters of the coup. In the middle lies the monarchy in Qatar which has for some time been exploring links with both the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas as part of its ongoing effort to chart a foreign policy independent of Saudi Arabia.

The removal of the Mubarak regime posed a key challenge, how to hold together the broad coalition that had come together in Tahrir Square. In political terms, this was about forging a program and a practice that would manage relations between the majority and the minorities in the coalition. This challenge sheds light on a series of splits from the parent Muslim Brother organization, both during and after the Mubarak era.

During the Mubarak era, there was a long history of groups committed to armed struggle breaking from Muslim Brothers, accusing the parent organization of being preoccupied with electoral politics and peaceful methods. The best known of these were the Islamic Jihad, most notorious for the massacre of tourists in Luxor. This tendency has resurfaced in the Sinai and is sure to have a greater hearing in the coming period.

Of greater immediate significance, however, is the split that followed the removal of Mubarak. It is worth recalling the candidacy of Abdel Moneim Abdul Futuh, an activist doctor who had been jailed for many years under Mubarak, and who declared his candidacy for the presidency of Egypt after the fall of Mubarak. Abdel Futuh pledged to build bridges between Islamists on the one hand and secularists, women, Copts and liberals on the other. He said this was the central requirement for moving forward in post-Mubarak Egypt. Though a senior member of the Brotherhood, Abdel Futuh was forced out of the

organization by leaders who claimed – dishonestly it turned out –that they had no plans to run a candidate for the presidential election.

Muslim Brothers did field a candidate. Both the huge numbers that turned out in the demonstrations against Mohammed Morsi starting June 30, and the vehemence of their opposition, testify to his failure to address the middle ground in the coalition that removed Mubarak. Without a program broad enough to hold Islamist and secular tendencies under a single political umbrella, that coalition was unlikely to hold. At the same time, this failure to sustain a united front made even more difficult any attempt to hold security forces accountable and transform the upper reaches of the judiciary.

Both the manner of the removal of Morsi and subsequent events raise the question as to whether any political formation in Egypt has the capacity to forge and hold together a broad national coalition. The organized strength of Muslim Brotherhood was demonstrated over and over again in a series of elections and referenda. Unable to match it in the short run, the secular left turned to extra-parliamentary methods, wielding a coalition of the street, the army, and remnants of the Mubarak era (the *Fuloul*).

The result is a secular coalition that spans an ideological spectrum so broad that it is even less likely to build a credible national front. For a start, the secular left embraced the deep state created during the Mubarak era to combat the organized strength of Muslim Brotherhood. If the secular left, and in particular the youthful Tamarod Movement, has credibility with the street, it is the time-tested leadership and the resources wielded by the army generals and the *Fuloul* that has a strategic advantage in shaping the path this coalition is likely to take so long as it holds.

If the Muslim Brotherhood were unable to bring the army under civilian control, the secular left has delivered itself and those it leads to the army. If the Muslim Brotherhood were guilty of excluding allies in their preoccupation with power, and its fringe elements involved in killings in Port Said and the lynching of Shi'a in Cairo, the secular left is complicit in large-scale massacres on a regular basis.

There is a lesson here for the political left, not just in Egypt but in the wider region. Historically, seduced by the possible opportunity to implement its agenda, the left – both political and intellectual – has been attracted to an embrace of power, rather than holding accountable those in power. When faced with popular support for non-secular ideologies, whether religious or ethnic, the left has often and enthusiastically embraced the development of a statist nationalism. In the process, it has legitimized the use of deadly force against different sectors of society. Examples abound in the post-colonial history of the region, from Nasser to Nkrumah. In spite of the move from Nasser-era Arab nationalism to Sisi-era Egyptian nationalism, there is little change in the statist character of the new nationalism in Egypt.

Mao once wrote that all past popular uprisings in Chinese history had provided an opportunity to nobles out of power to displace those in power. The challenge for the left is to break out of this see-saw, change of one master for another. The secular left, in Egypt as well as in the rest of Africa, will do well to keep this sensible lesson in mind.