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David Owen: We cannot acquiesce to Egypt's military coup



Clashes: members of the Muslim Brotherhood and supporters of ousted Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi flee from tear gas and rubber bullets fired by riot police

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DAVID OWEN



When Hamas won fair elections in the West Bank and Gaza, the EU made a great mistake in brushing the results aside and refusing recognition. Unless we are very careful we will make the same mistake again over the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

It was very good that EU High Representative on Foreign Policy Catherine Ashton visited President Morsi in Cairo: this did much to correct the language and attitude that Tony Blair has used as the Spokesman for the Quartet over the military coup. The sooner this grouping of the US, Russia, EU and UN is wound up, or its spokesman changed and strictly limited to its mandate to improve the Palestinian economy the better.

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We have experience in Europe in equivocating over what constitutes a military coup. In April 1967 Greek democracy was overthrown by the military. Shockingly, the Western democracies in NATO allowed the Greek military government to remain a member. As today over Egypt, there were democratic politicians who argued it was not a *coup d'état* but a revolution. In assessing the seizure of power it is salutary to recall that by a vote of the restored Parliament in 1975 it was declared that the Colonels had perpetrated not a revolution but a *coup d'état*. On NATO membership Greece's allies put up with this affront to the standards of Western democracy for far too long.

There are also lessons of relevance today in Egypt from how the UK, France and Israel colluded to invade Egypt after Colonel Gamal Nasser, who had four years earlier overturned King Farouk and the Egyptian government in a military coup, announced on 26 July 1956 the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company.

Anthony Eden, the then British Prime Minister, was an Arabist and spoke the language fluently. He was well versed on British rule in Egypt from 1882 until 1922 and had over many years as Foreign Secretary influenced the Egyptian monarchy. He also, under Nasser's rule, negotiated the Suez Canal Base Agreement involving British troops withdrawing in 1954 and the last left Port Said on 13 June 1956.

He had furthermore been involved in the British Ambassador saying in Washington on 17 July that on balance we were not in favour of withdrawing from the Aswan High Dam project on the Nile - something which the US foolishly did two days later. The invasion of Suez in early November tragically coincided, and contributed to Khrushchev invading Hungary.

There was a rational non-military stance which could have been adopted by the UK of living with the political discomfort of accepting nationalisation as a *fait accompli* and securing international guarantees through negotiation. Nasser had from the start offered full financial compensation to the shareholders. Such a course was compatible with Eden's earlier stance towards Egypt and might have lead on to the slow evolution of democracy in Egypt. Instead the invasion of Suez contributed to the entrenchment of Nasser's military rule until Mubarak's overthrow more than 50 years later.

Most of this time the Muslim Brotherhood was viciously repressed. Initially Nasser wanted regional hegemony and got involved with sister Arab countries in two wars. The civil war in the Yemen with Saudi Arabia cost many lives and then the attack on Israel with Syria in June 1967 finished in disaster. Sadat was easily the best of the military leaders: brave in flying into Israel in 1977 paving the way for the Camp David agreement; brave in allowing the Shah of Iran to die in Egypt which lead to his assassination at a military parade outside Cairo in October 1981.

But military rule did nothing to solve Egypt's deep-seated economic, social and religious problems, which actually got worse. There is nothing in this history to suggest that military rule again in 2013 will do any better. Overthrowing a tentative and not-very-successful short attempt at democracy by the Muslim Brotherhood could hardly be a worse start.

We should learn from military coups and counter-coups. Democracy requires patience: it is something that has to be carefully fostered overtime and consistently championed even when rebuffed.

We cannot avoid dealing with the de facto government in Cairo. But we must go on demanding to meet with President Morsi and insist on all his freedoms being restored and that he be treated with dignity and respect. All aid, whether UK or EU, should be contingent - sizeably reduced immediately on any clampdown and the full extent depending on the nature of the abuses of



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human rights by the military and police.

The Arab Spring is now being written off by some. We should not let this happen in Egypt any more than we did when in 1968 the Prague Spring was crushed by Brezhnev. We persisted in the Western democracies over 20 years though we could do nothing militarily and little economically. The Helsinki Final Accords and Charter 77 followed and eventually the Berlin Wall fell.

Saudi Arabia and its allies will support the Egyptian government - so be it. We ought to have learnt over our behaviour to Gaddafi: there is still much to do in Libya and in Tunisia. Returning to the same relationship we had with Mubarak in Egypt is not an acceptable option.

Lord Owen is a former Foreign Secretary.

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