

Egypt and Argentina: The Right-Left Alliance

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Abstract

Once again world public opinion faces a most bizarre political event: an alliance between political forces on the extreme Right and the Left, including collaboration between NATO regimes and Marxist sects. The apparent 'unity of opposites' is a response to alleged policy and institutional changes made by center-left and center-right regimes, which adversely affect both economic and political elites as well as the popular sectors. The circumstances, under which this unholy alliance takes place, vary according to the type of regime, its policies and the class orientation of the opposition. The best way to analyze the left-right alliance is to examine the cases of Egypt and Argentina.

Egypt: The Alliance between Mubarak-Appointed Judges, Secular Liberals, Leftist Intellectuals and Disenchanted Workers

To understand the alliance between the corrupt remnants of the Mubarak state apparatus and their former political victims from the center-left and secular-right, it is essential to examine the political context, which has evolved since the overthrow of the Mubarak dictatorship in February 2011.

While Islamist and secular democratic forces played a major role in mobilizing millions of Egyptians in ousting the hated US-Israeli client, Hosni Mubarak, it was the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and their fundamentalist rivals, the Salafis, who won the majority of votes in the subsequent elections and formed the first democratically-elected government in Egypt.¹ In the beginning, the Muslim Brotherhood was forced to share power with the 'transitional military junta', which had seized power immediately after the ouster of Mubarak. Subsequently

¹ In the parliamentary elections the two major Islamist parties polled over 27 million votes (18 million for the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi), the liberal-left opposition received approximately 7.5 million votes and the Mubarak-era parties got 2 million. The Islamist parties totaled about two-thirds of the electorate, which translated into the same proportion of elected legislators (358 out of 508). The liberal-left parties received slightly over 26% of the vote and the Mubarak parties got about 8%. The anti-Morsi rioters are a clear and decisive minority and their violent assault on the governing regime is, by any measure, an attempt to impose minority rule, denying and marginalizing the nearly 18 million voters who elected the Morsi Government and Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Congress.

President Mohamed Morsi, from the Muslim Brotherhood, convoked elections to a constituent assembly and nominated a commission to write a new constitution. This was backed by a majority of the newly-elected Egyptian parliament. Reflecting the Muslim Brotherhood's electoral victory, the constitutional commission was dominated by its supporters. Many secular liberals and leftists rejected their minority status in the process.

Aside from his work on the constitutional front, Morsi negotiated a financial loan package of \$4.5 billion with the IMF, \$5 billion from the EU and an additional one billion dollars in US aid. These aid agreements were conditional on President Morsi implementing 'free market' policies, including an 'open-door' to foreign investment, ending food and fuel price subsidies to the poor and maintaining the humiliating Mubarak-era treaty with Israel, which included Egypt's participation in the brutal blockade of Gaza.

While the despised US-Israel-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak may have been ousted from power and a new democratically-elected legislature had taken office (temporarily) along with President Morsi, Mubarak supporters continued to dominate key positions in the ministries, the entire judiciary, military and police. Thus powerfully ensconced, the Mubarak elite strove in every way to undermine emerging democratic institutions and processes. The Minister of Defense, Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, shielded the police officials and paramilitary forces responsible for the jailing, torture and murder of thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators. Mubarak-appointed judges arbitrarily disqualified legislative and presidential candidates, invalidated democratic elections and even ordered the closing of parliament. They then moved to outlaw the elected constituent assembly and the commission set-up to draft the new Egyptian constitution.

In other words, Mubarakites, embedded in the state apparatus, were engaged in an institutional coup d'etat to retain power, destabilize and paralyze the democratically-elected Morsi regime and create political disorder, propitious for a return to their dictatorial rule.

It was the Mubarak-appointed judges' power-grab that eliminated the separation of powers by imposing arbitrary judicial decisions and powers over and above the hard-won electoral rights of Egyptian citizens and their elected legislature. The judges' self-proclaimed assumption of legislative and executive supremacy was a direct assault on the integrity of the emerging democratic process.

When President Morsi finally moved to counter the Mubarak-allied judges' dismissal of legitimately-elected bodies by assuming temporary emergency powers, these judges and their cheerleaders in the Western media accused him of subverting democracy and violating the 'independence' of the judiciary. The Western 'liberal' outcry at Morsi's so-called 'power grab' is laughable given the fact that they ignored the naked 'power grab' of the judges when they dismissed

Egypt's parliament, its free elections and the writing of its new constitution under the leadership of Egypt's new president. These cries of 'democracy' ring hollow from a judiciary, which had shamelessly legalized countless murder, tortures and dictatorial acts committed by Mubarak for over 30 years.

The judges' democratic posturing and cries of injustice were accompanied by theatrical walkouts and protests aimed at mobilizing public opinion. Apart from a few thousand die-hard Mubarak holdovers, these judges managed to attract very little support, until secular liberals, leftists, trade unionists and sectors of the unemployed decided to intervene and try to win in the streets what they lost at the ballot box.

The popular protests, in contrast to the judges' defense of Mubarak-era privilege and their blatant power grab, was based on Morsi's failure to tackle the problems of growing unemployment and plummeting income, as well as his acceptance of IMF demands to end public subsidies for the poor. The secular-liberals joined forces with Mubarak-era judges in their clamor against 'authoritarianism' and pushed their own secular agenda against the Islamist tendencies in the regime and in the drawing up of the constitution. Pro-democracy youth sought to exploit the legislative vacuum created when the right-wing judges dismissed the parliament and put forward a vague notion of 'alternative democracy' ... presumably one which would exclude the votes of the Islamist majority. The trade unions, which had led numerous strikes after the fall of Mubarak and remain a force among factory workers, joined the protests against Morsi, rejecting his embrace of the corporate elite. Even some Islamist groups, disgusted with Morsi's accommodation with Israel and the US, also joined took to the streets.

The US and the EU took advantage of the judges' protest to step in and warn Morsi to abide to a 'power sharing' agreement with the Mubarak officials and the military or lose financial aid.

Washington has been playing a clever 'two track policy': They support Morsi when he implements a neo-liberal 'free market' domestic agenda using the Muslim Brotherhood networks to contain and limit popular protest among Egypt's poor while threatening US aid if he vacillates on Mubarak-era agreements with Israel to starve Gaza. The White House insists that Morsi continue supplying cheap gas to Tel Aviv, as well as backing ongoing and future NATO wars against Syria and Iran. But the US and EU also want to keep the old reliable Mubarak power centers in place as a check and veto on Morsi in case a powerful anti-Zionist, populist urban movement pressures his regime to backtrack on the IMF program and the hated treaty with Israel.

The constitution, presented by the commission, is a compromise between Islamists, neo-liberals and democratic electoralists. This constitution undermines the judges' power grab and allows the Morsi government to prosecute or fire the corrupt Mubarak-era officials; it guarantees the primacy of

private, including foreign, property; it privileges Islamic law and provides 'space' and possibilities for Islamist leaders to restrict the rights of Egyptian women and religious minorities, notably the Coptic Christians.

A democratic vote on the constitutional referendum will test the strength of the pro and anti-government forces. A boycott by secular, liberal and populist-democratic forces will only demonstrate their weakness and strengthen the reactionary coup-makers embedded among the Mubarak-era officials in judiciary, police, military and civilian bureaucracy.

The Left and democratic-secular movements and leaders have formed an opportunistic, de-facto alliance with the Mubarak elite: a marriage of 'the police club' with its former victims, 'the clubbed democrats' of the recent past. The progressives overlook the danger of the judges' creeping coup, in their blind effort to undermine the Muslim Brotherhood and the Morsi regime: It's one thing to oppose Morsi's reactionary agenda and the anti-popular votes of a reactionary legislature; it's something totally different to promote the ouster of a democratically-elected legislature by hold-over judges pushing for the return of despotism. Undermining the democratic process will not only adversely affect President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood but also the democratic opposition. The prime beneficiaries will be the rightwing forces encrusted in the State.

The anti-Muslim Brotherhood demonstrators, who are the clear losers in democratic elections and a minority in the country, burned and trashed the offices and meeting places of the Brotherhood and assaulted their supporters in the worst traditions of the Mubarak era. The self-styled 'pro-democracy' activists' assaults on the Presidential palace and their rejection of Morsi's call for dialogue has opened the way for the return of military rule. The military command's thinly veiled threat was evident in their pronouncement that they would intervene with force to maintain order and protect the public if violence continues. The coincidence of prolonged street disorder and assaults on electoral politics with military overtures to take power have a distinct smell of a barnyard confabulation. The right-left alliance makes it difficult to decipher whether the violence is a staged provocation to bring the military back to power or an expression of leftist rage at their electoral impotence.

For strategic, pragmatic and principled reasons, the Left should have denounced the Mubarak-appointed judges the moment they outlawed the elected legislature. The Left should have demanded the ouster of these judges and military leaders and combined their demands with a campaign against Morsi's ties with the imperial West and Israel and a repudiation of the IMF program. By backing these corrupt judges, progressives gained the short-term support of the Western media and governments while strengthening their strategic enemy.

Argentina: The Right-Left Alliance

President Cristina Fernandez is representative of the center-left regimes, which predominate in Latin America today. Her recent resounding electoral victory² is a product of the popular uprisings (2001-2003), the social reforms and independent foreign policy pursued by her predecessor (and husband) Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007) and several popular reforms implemented under her Presidency.

But like all center-left regimes, President Fernandez (2008-2012) has combined conservative, neo-liberal and populist progressive policies. On the one hand, Fernandez has encouraged foreign mining companies to exploit the Argentina's great mineral resources, charging very low royalty payments and imposing very few environmental restraints, while, on the other hand, she nationalized the abusive Spanish multinational oil company, Repsol, for non-compliance with its contract.

The government has substantially increased the minimum wage, including for farm workers, while opening up the country to overseas land speculators and investors to buy millions of acres of farmland. The government has allowed highly toxic-chemicals to be sprayed on fields next to rural communities while increasing corporate taxes and controls over agro-export earnings. The government passed legislation to restrict monopoly ownership of the mass media promising to expand media licensing to local communities and diverse social groups, while doing little to limit the power of big agro-export firms. President Fernandez has supported Latin American integration (excluding the US) and welcomed radical President Chavez as a valuable partner in trade and investment and diversified markets. At the same time Argentina has grown increasingly dependent on a narrow range of agro-mineral ('primary goods') exports to the detriment of domestic manufacturing. Presidents Fernandez and Kirchner encouraged trade union activity and, until recently, supported hefty increases in wage, pension and medical benefits, drastically reducing poverty levels – but they did so while maintaining the wealth, land, profits and dividends of the capitalist class.

The Argentine President was able to support both the economic elites and the working class as long as commodity prices and international demand remained high. However, with the economic slowdown in Asia and decline in commodity prices and therefore state revenue, the President is being squeezed from both sides. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the elite attacked the government more ferociously, led by the big and medium-size landowners and exporters. They demanded the government revoke its increase in export taxes and currency controls. The upper-middle and the affluent middle class of Buenos

² Cristina Fernandez was first elected in October 2007 with 45.3% of the vote, a 22% lead over her nearest rival. In the most recent elections in October 2011, she was re-elected with 54.1% of the vote, a 37.3% margin over her nearest competitor.

Aires, backed by supporters of the previous military dictatorship, organized mass marches and demonstrations to protest a medley of government policies, including limits on dollar purchases, inflation and inaction amidst rising crime rates.

Around the same time, conservative and radical leftist trade unionists organized a general strike – ostensibly because wage increases had failed to keep up with ‘real’ rates of inflation (double the ‘official rate’ – so they claimed). The major media monopoly, Clarin, organized a virulent systematic propaganda campaign trumpeting the demands of the economic elite, fabricating stories of government corruption and refusing to comply with the new government legislation in hopes of staving off the dismantling of its huge media monopoly.

The US and EU increased pressure on Argentina by excluding it from international capital markets, questioning its credibility, downgrading its ratings and promoting a virulently hostile anti-Fernandez mass media campaign in the financial press.

The destabilization campaign has been orchestrated by the same economic elites who supported the brutal seven-year military dictatorship during which an estimated 30,000 Argentines were murdered by the juntas. Elite opposition is rooted in reactionary social and economic demands, i.e. lower taxes on exports, deregulation of the dollar market, their monopoly of the mass media and a reversal of popular social legislation.

The ‘left opposition’ includes a variety of movements including Marxist grouplets and trade unions who demand salary increases commensurate with ‘real inflation’ as well as environmentalist demanding tighter controls over agro-chemical pollution, GM seeds and destructive mining operations. Many of these demands have legitimacy, however some of the Marxist and leftist groups have been participating in protests and strikes convoked by the rightwing parties and economic elites designed to destabilize and overthrow the government. Few if any have joined with the government to denounce the blatant US-EU credit squeeze and imperial offensive against Fernandez.

This de-facto Right-Left alliance on the streets is led by the most rancid, authoritarian and neo-liberal elites who ultimately will be the prime beneficiary if the Fernandez regime is destabilized and toppled. By joining general strikes organized by the far-Right, the left claims to be ‘furthering the interests of the workers’ and ‘acting independently’ of the economic elite. However, their activities take place at the same time and same location as the hordes of wealthy upper middle class protestors clamoring for the ouster of the democratically elected center-left regime. The left grouplets maintain that they are in favor of building a ‘workers state’ as they march abreast with the rich and militarists. Objectively, their capacity to catalyze a revolution is nil and the real outcome of their ‘opportunism’ will be a victory for the agro-export elite – mass media monopolies – US-EU alliance. The ‘leftist’ workers protest is mere window

dressings for the destabilization of a social-liberal democracy and will help return a far-right regime to power!

The majority of the workers, pensioners and trade unionists reject any participation in the bosses' general strikes — even as they voice their legitimate demands for better pay and the indexing of wage rates to the real inflation rate. However they join with the government in rejecting the international creditor demands and US judicial rulings favoring Wall Street speculators over Argentina's social interests. Nevertheless, the left-right protest resonates with many rank and file employees, especially when export revenues decline and the Fernandez regime lacks the funds to maintain the social spending of the past decade.

The political challenge for the consequential Left is to defend democracy against this opportunist 'Left'-Right onslaught while defending workers' interests in the face of a decaying center-left regime bent on pursuing its contradictory program.

Conclusion: The Dilemmas of Capitalist Democracies

The capitalist democracies of Egypt and Argentina face similar Left-Right alliances, even though they differ sharply in their socio-economic trajectory and social bases of support. Both Argentina and Egypt have emerged from brutal dictatorships in recent years: Argentine democracy is nearly 30 years old while Egyptian democracy is less than a year old. Argentine democracy, like Egypt, has been confronting powerful authoritarian institutions leftover from the dictatorial period. These are entrenched especially in three areas: the military and police, the judiciary and among sectors of the capitalist class. They all benefited from the special privileges granted by the dictators.

In Argentina, over the past decade, Presidents Kirchner and Fernandez succeeded in purging the state apparatus of criminals, murderers and torturers among the military, police and judiciary. In Egypt, the Morsi regime, in its short time in office, hesitated at first, but then moved forward replacing some Mubarak military commanders and promising to investigate and prosecute those Mubarak-appointed officials involved in the killing and torture of pro-democracy demonstrators. The Egyptian reactionaries struck back: Mubarak-appointed judges denied the legality of the democratically elected legislature and constituent assembly. In Argentina, powerful agrarian interests and the rightwing mass media conglomerate, which had backed the dictatorships, struck back as the government moved to end the corporate media monopoly and tax concessions to the agro-export elite. The conflict between the dictatorial right and the democratic center-left in Argentina and the conflict between the Mubarak judiciary and the Islamist neo-liberal elected regime is partially obscured by the active involvement of leftists, secular liberals and other ostensibly 'pro-democracy' forces on the side of the Right.

Why has 'the left' crossed the line, joining forces with the anti-democratic right?

Their opportunism arises primarily from the fact that they did so poorly in the elections and do not see any role for themselves as an electoral opposition. By joining with the rightwing protests, the left and secular liberals mistakenly imagine they can revive their faltering support.

Secondly, the Left senses the economic and social vulnerability of the elected regimes because of the global and local crises, exacerbated by declining export revenues. They hope to attach their political demands to those of the upper and middle class protestors who have been mobilized by the Far Right.

Thirdly, by joining forces with the Right, allied with the US and EU, the leftist protestors hope to gain international (imperial) support, recognition, respectability and legitimacy ... temporarily. Of course if the Right succeeds, the Left will be marginalized and discarded as 'useful idiots'.

The imperial threats to cut off credits, loans and markets to both regimes should logically have led to a united front – a tactical alliance – between the Left and the embattled regime, especially in the case of Argentina. In the case of Egypt, secular liberals and leftists should have joined with the Morsi regime to oust the remnants of the brutal Mubarak regime. They should have supported the elected legislature, even while challenging Morsi's pacts with the IMF, the US, EU and Israel. Instead, secular liberals appear to agree with the regime in its reactionary socio-economic policies. Worse, by joining with the reactionary judges in totally rejecting the referendum vote on the new constitution, the Left missed an opportunity to mobilize and challenge the regime and educate the public about its specific reactionary clauses.

By opposing the progressive democratic process as well as the regime, the Left has opened the door for the Right to return. By forcing incumbent presidents to 'make a deal' or compromise with the elite, the left is further isolating themselves. Both Morsi and Fernandez are vulnerable to leftist pressure and, over time, popular and class-based movements could find themselves in a position to pose a real alternative.... if they clearly and honestly reject the authoritarian and imperialist right. By joining in opportunist alliances to score some small victories today, they foreclose any possible role in the near future of forming progressive democratic leftist governments. By burning government offices and destroying the electoral offices of the Muslim Brotherhood, the self-styled 'democrats' are creating the basis for the seizure of state power by the military.

http://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/journal/vol8/vol8_no1-2_petras_egypt_and_argentina.html