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EGYPT: the International Community faces a “Coups Dilemma”

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Following massive demonstrations in Egypt the military gave 48 hours to President Morsi to meet the protesters demands. *Irhal*, go out. This was the demand and it could only be satisfied by Morsi leaving power, either forever or by calling early elections. The Muslim Brothers rejected the ultimatum and the military took the streets, held the President under arrest, suspended the constitution and presented a road-map which should lead to a civilian led interim government, a revised constitution and new parliamentary and presidential elections. The Minister of Defence announced the removal of President Morsi surrounded by opposition political figures, religious leaders and a member of the *Tamarod* (rebellion) movement that had called for demonstrations.

These are the facts but, was it really a coup d’etat? While analysts engage in the discussion on whether there was a coup and if so, which kind of coup it was, international powers try desperately to avoid this controversy and for the time being refrain from pronouncing the “C word”. This is the bottom line question that the EU and the US do not want to answer. If the answer is yes, it certainly was a coup, then the EU and the US should revise their aid programs, military cooperation and political relations with the new Egyptian government. Trying hard to avoid this dilemma, most Western governments, Turkey being the exception to the general rule, have been deliberately ambiguous in their definition of the July 3 “events”.

US officials are doing their best to explain how exceptional the situation is and the fact that they need time to elucidate what happened in Egypt and how to move forward. Should they admit that the 3rd of July developments were nothing but a coup, it would automatically imply cutting off the \$1.5 billion annual aid, a significant part of which is military cooperation. The US Foreign Assistance Act is crystal clear and states that funds cannot be made available to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by a military coup d’etat or an army decree.

Senator Patrick Leahy, Chairman of the Budget Committee for the State Department and Foreign Assistance argued that “Egypt’s military leaders say they have no intent or desire to govern” but also announced that “as we work on the new

budget, my committee also will review future aid to the Egyptian government as we wait for a clearer picture". A few days after this clear statement, the White House ruled out any automatic suspension of aid. In fact, the White House press secretary went even further by affirming that "it is not in our interests to make a precipitous decision or determination to change our assistance program right away" as the US hopes to use aid to try to influence events in Egypt.

On this particular issue, there is no significant difference between the EU and the US positions. European leaders have also expressed their concerns and have even characterised the July 3 events as "a severe setback for democracy" -to put it in the words of the German Foreign Affairs minister, Guido Westerwelle-, but have avoided openly calling it a coup. When asked to give a response to this particular matter, Bernardino León, EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean, stated: "we do not like military intervention, but such a complex situation cannot be defined as a coup". He went even further, asserting that the army "prevented a civil war". On a similar token, Michael Mann, Chief Spokesperson to HRVP Catherine Ashton, declared that there are "no plans to change" the European Union's aid regime for Egypt at this stage, although assistance is kept under review.

Contrary to what happens in the US, the EU is not obliged to automatically cut off aid programs as a result of a coup. For several reasons, Europeans prefer to avoid this term. Firstly, there is a coherence problem. In the last years, the EU froze assistance to several African countries such as Mauritania and Guinea-Bissau when a military takeover happened. True, Egypt is not a signatory of the Cotonou Agreement and its article 96 cannot be invoked, yet its association agreement with the EU includes an always quoted but never enforced "democratic clause". Secondly, it is also a matter of credibility: defining the events as a coup and then not reducing the financial support to Egypt visibly contradicts the EU's foreign policy doctrine which attempts to reinforce conditionality based on the principles of "more for more" and "less for less". Finally, there is the EU willingness to try to keep some level of political leverage in Cairo, hoping to be able to help the country to going back on track in its transition process.

Neither the US, nor the EU, are ready to fully acknowledge their failure in supporting political reforms and democratic transitions in North Africa, not least taking the risk of losing leverage in Egypt. As a consequence, we should be ready to hearing more ambiguous formulations when referring to the volatile situation in Egypt and, simultaneously, to witnessing additional pressure to the Egyptian authorities to move quickly in putting forward an electoral calendar. If presidential and parliamentary elections are effectively held in less than a year and all parties -including of course the political branch of the Muslim Brotherhood- are allowed to fairly participate in them, the military takeover could be portrayed as an unexpected accident in a very bumpy road to freedom and democracy.

In that scenario, the focus could quickly swift into the urgency to fully support the Egyptian transition going back on its feet. This is what Washington, Brussels and the Member States capitals wish to see happening, but the prospects for such an outcome of the current highly volatile situation is far from guaranteed. So, if there is any chance to keep some leverage in Cairo, they should also spell out which specific measures will be taken, should the military be tempted to remain in power if violence persists on the streets.