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JENNIFER MCCOY

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Latin America holds lessons for understanding—and pointing the way through—the current upheaval in Egypt. As Egypt enters a new phase of polarization following the military intervention in the wake of massive protests against its elected leader, recent Latin American experience points to the risks of moving forward without addressing the roots of this polarization. It also shows some of the requirements for constructing a democratic bargain to overcome the social and political exclusion of important sectors of society.

In Latin America, 13 leaders were forced to end their terms prematurely, without having been constitutionally impeached, between 1990 and 2009. Eight of these cases involved intense citizen mobilization and mass protests in combination with military intervention or irregular congressional impeachment. Some scholars have called these “civil society coups” or “impeachment coups,” in reference to either the combination of traditional military intervention with massive citizen protest, or congressional removal of an executive without following constitutional procedures. The Egyptian coup, which has been justified by some as representing the demands of a majority of citizens or a best-case scenario for preventing further bloodshed, is reminiscent of these experiences.

The coups in Latin America generally did not strengthen Latin American democracies, however. The different outcomes of coups in two Latin American countries in particular—Venezuela and Honduras—illustrate the need for all sides to participate in constructing the democratic bargain, and the risks involved in failing to include them. In the first example, in Venezuela, the ousted president was reinstated; in the second, in Honduras, he was not.

The revolutionary movement of Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez attempted to carry out radical change after he won the 1999 presidential election in a landslide. But a new constitution rushed through by the new government, confrontation with the former power elite and controversial laws promulgated by decree eventually led to mass protests, violence and a military coup in 2002, with marked similarities to the current Egyptian upheaval. The military-installed president suspended the constitution, closed the Congress and Supreme Court, and began to round up ministers, elected governors and mayors from Chavez’s party. These clearly anti-democratic moves produced not only an outpouring of Chavez supporters into the streets, but also a reversal within the military. Chavez was reinstated 48 hours later. The experience, though, created paranoia about losing power among many chavistas, and further polarized Venezuelan society.

The conflict continued for two years until the government and its opposition each tried to vanquish the other through a presidential recall referendum, without real dialogue to address the underlying issues. The opposition, after losing the vote, withdrew from electoral politics, and the revolutionary governing party consolidated power.

In Honduras in 2009, on the other hand, the military, backed by Congress and the Supreme Court, forcefully removed and expelled from the country the democratically elected president, Jose Manuel Zelaya, who had pushed reforms past the comfort zone of the traditional power brokers.

Universal international condemnation of the coup soon gave way to divisions, as donor governments, including the U.S., accepted subsequent elections as signifying a return to constitutional rule, while much of Latin America, with recent memories of military coups, held out for Zelaya's reinstatement. Though never reinstated, Zelaya was eventually allowed to return to Honduras. But the social grievances that led to his ouster remained unaddressed, and violence and the trappings of state failure continue to plague Honduras.

These examples and other Latin American experiences teach us that removing an elected president by force does not resolve the problems that prompted his or her overthrow. First, even if the removal of a president is followed by new elections, in the absence of a democratic bargain on the rules of the game and distribution of resources, the underlying conflicts and societal polarization will continue.

Second, if one group is forcefully excluded from negotiations and elections through a ban, arrests or violence, or if a group excludes itself by boycotting talks or elections, no sustainable agreements on moving forward will be reached. Forced removal of an elected leader can also weaken his or her supporters' trust that institutions will protect their rights and interests, and thus reduce their incentives to continue to participate in the political game as structured.

Third, leaders must recognize that newly enfranchised citizens will use both the ballot box and the streets to express grievances, with protests often escalating to demands for an unpopular leader to step down. It is incumbent on social and political leaders to explain policy constraints to impatient populaces, and to call for only peaceful and legal protests. Clear impeachment mechanisms and presidential recall provisions can provide a midterm legal recourse when leaders abuse their power or become extremely unpopular. Otherwise, elected leaders should be held accountable, along with their political party, in the next scheduled elections.

So far Egypt's postcoup transition has included the arrest and detention of hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood leaders and members; violent clashes between security forces and supporters of deposed President Mohammed Morsi; a potentially exclusionary constitutional reform process; and an uncertain reconciliation process. A sustainable transition, however, requires just the opposite: respect for the rights of Muslim Brotherhood members, an inclusive government and reconciliation process, and a constitutional drafting process that ensures representation of and consensus-building among all sectors to achieve a democratic bargain for Egypt's future.

The lessons from Latin America suggest that creating a functioning democracy in Egypt will take time. It will also almost certainly be littered with retrocessions and volatility. But a willingness to learn from its own mistakes and the experiences of other countries could help Egypt move faster toward a positive accommodation that benefits all of its citizens. □

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Photo: Protest against ousted Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, Cairo, Egypt, Aug. 31, 2012 (photo by Flickr user gigiibrahim licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license](#)).

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