



Russia's Reaction on the Egypt Crisis

*Dr. Indrani Talukdar**

The ousting of President Mohammed Morsi on July 3, 2013 drew different reactions all across the world. Russia, an important regional player, adopted a neutral approach towards the crisis and expressed its concern over the *coup d'état* by maintaining a stand of non-interference in Egypt's internal matters while extending its support for a peaceful solution.

On July 7, 2013, President Vladimir Putin expressed concern on the repercussions of the overthrow of President Morsi. He feared that, 'Egypt risked slipping into a civil war like situation', returning to the chaotic days of 2011 when former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was forced to abdicate power. The Russian government called upon the conflicting parties in Egypt to hold a dialogue and avoid violence, and resolve it in a peaceful manner. It, however, did not condemn the military action taken against the democratically elected government of Morsi. Reasons behind Russia's reaction can be traced to its national interests.

In December 2010, West Asia was engulfed by the Arab Spring and the repercussion of it in Egypt was the overthrow of President Mubarak in February 2011. Russia was caught off-guard and reacted to the expulsion of President Mubarak through an appeal to the Egyptians to restore stability and the normal functioning of all power structures in Egypt. It did not show overt support for any particular group contesting for power in Egypt; however, covertly Russia might have wanted the restoration of President Mubarak for umpteen reasons.

Many Russians assessed Mubarak's long reign positively as they looked at it through the prism of Egypt's capability to maintain peace with Israel, keeping the radical Islamists at bay, and a significant degree of economic growth. During Mubarak's regime, Russia did not have a good relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. In 2003, Russia's Supreme Court had banned the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and accused the group of supporting the Russian rebels in North Caucasus. However, after the fall of the Mubarak regime and the election of a new government under the Muslim Brotherhood, Russia emphasized the importance of a 'strong and democratic' post-Mubarak Egypt and signalled Moscow's willingness to work with the new government.

Russia's position in 'pre-Mubarak fall' and 'post-Mubarak change' is intriguing as it highlights its concern of protecting and promoting its national interest. The objectives of national interests have led Russia to overlook ideological leanings of the Muslim Brotherhood. It extended an olive branch to the newly-elected Islamic government of Muslim Brotherhood in June 2012. The primary reasons behind this support were Russia's need to protect its interests (economic and military deals) in West Asia, its security (threat from Islamic extremism), and to build influence in the region.

Overtly, Russia has been circumspect of the toppling of the Morsi government and has kept its bilateral relationship with Egypt constructive and non-interfering. It has expressed support to any government that comes to power in Egypt. But in hindsight, Russia might be relieved with the ouster of the Morsi government due to its Islamic leanings. Interestingly, the outcome of the crisis impacts Russia's internal and external objectives.

On the domestic front, Russia's foreign policy stand of non-intervention could be helpful in tackling its own internal challenges. Since December 2011, Russia is facing poor economic growth and authoritative rule. It does not allow participation of opposition political parties. This non-participation of the opposing groups was also evident during Mubarak's and Morsi's regime. Hence, it is plausible that an affinity could be drawn between Russia and the on-going crisis in Egypt. In external affairs, the stand of non-interference in Russia's foreign policy could be seen

as a signal to the external powers to adopt a similar non-intervention approach towards Russia's internal situations.

Russia's stand on the Egypt crisis highlights its insecurities vis-a-vis mass protest movements against the Morsi government. For Russia, the Egypt crisis revealed a slow and not necessarily-peaceful transition from authoritarian regime to democratic politics. President Putin stated that democracy is not the 'panacea' for non-Western states; the overthrow of the government in Egypt has vindicated this belief. However Russia, though not positive about the Western-model of democracy, has maintained its support for a democratic and peaceful outcome in Egypt, 'with the consent of the Egyptians'. This is an indication of Russia's desire not to be sidelined from the international community and remain at par with other major powers such as the US. Hence, Russia's reaction towards the Egyptian crisis highlights two important facts of its foreign policy: (a) it wants to play an important role in the international arena; and (b) it is a subtle warning to the external powers from interfering in Russia's domestic issues.

**Dr. Indrani Talukdar, Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*