International Forum on "The Downfall of Morsi and the Future of Egypt" (Kuala Lumpur, 22 August 2013)

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On 22 August 2013, IAIS Malaysia organised the International Forum on the Downfall of Morsi and the Future of Egypt in collaboration with the International Movement for a Just World (JUST). On the panel were Chandra Muzaffar (President, JUST), Ahmad al-Farra (Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) and former Palestine Ambassador to Malaysia), Mohamed Abu Bakar (University of Malaya) and Daud Batchelor (IAIS Malaysia), while IAIS Chairman and CEO Mohammad Hashim Kamali delivered the Welcoming Address and Deputy CEO, Mohamed Azam Mohd Adil moderated the forum.

The speakers addressed (1) the legal, constitutional and moral status of the overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi by the military on 3 July 2013; (2) the shortcomings of Morsi's own leadership which may have contributed to popular discontent as indicated by the mass protests preceding the coup; (3) the political interests and agendas of the actors behind the crises; and (4) the possible future of Egypt.

There was consensus among the panellists that the overthrow was morally, legally and constitutionally wrong. Morsi, claimed Chandra Muzaffar, was a democratically elected leader and President: not only was his Freedom and Justice Party the biggest winner of the elections, even the constitution which was adopted was approved by referendum in late 2012. Leading analysts such as Robert Fisk have even suggested that the the number of protesters against his regime was exaggerated. Daud Batchelor looked from the standpoint of Islamic law to assert the unlawfulness of government based on usurpation. The Shariah permits resistance (*khuruj*) and rebellion (*bagha*) only in extreme cases, such as when the ruler commits manifest blasphemy or when he perpetrates tyranny and injustice, none of which applied to Morsi. Constitutionally, Morsi as President was also Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, thereby qualifying the coup also as treason. Batchelor saw the coup as a "counter-revolution", meant to reverse the accomplishments of the February 2011 Revolution at Tahrir Square. Chandra denied that it was a "revolution" but a military coup under the guise of civilian rule. Ahmad al-Farra was even more sceptical: what unfolded was neither "revolution" nor "coup" but a "state of confusion".

Notwithstanding the moral reprehensibility of the coup, Morsi's own shortcomings while in office partly contributed to popular discontent. Chandra enlisted among others that he was inept in managing the economy, failed to be inclusive in governance, even suppressed the media, and was ambivalent in his

foreign policy, often against Syria in alliance with the Arab League. All these reflect uncertainty and confusion. Still, Mohamed Abu Bakar cautioned against expecting too much from the mere one year that the Muslim Brotherhood had been in power. Even with such limited tenure, the Brotherhood had been able to provide jobs, houses and aid for single mothers, among others. These contributions have often been downplayed by the mainstream media, for the slightest prospect of success for the Brotherhood will beget further success and achieve a kind of "domino effect" across the region. Morsi's achievements, Chandra reminded however, were but the continuation of the role played by the Brotherhood even when it was out of power as a civil society movement.

What could possibly be the agenda of the coup? The military for one is reasserting its authority and power. The military realises, claimed Chandra, that it is losing power which it had enjoyed even before the Mubarak days. According to al-Farra, General 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sissi sees himself as a successor of sorts to the military regime of Gemal 'Abd al-Nasser, whom al-Sissi admired. Seen in this light, the military takeover was not surprising, for it was Nasser who appointed General Naguib to head the Free Officers movement, only to put him under house arrest after success in deposing the powers-that-be. But the scenario must also be analysed at the broader geopolitical level. Al-Farra said that Israel hopes that even the military itself would split into pro-Morsi and pro-regime factions. Chandra pointed out how Israel had always expressed misgivings about the Brotherhood, as with Islamist movements generally. In the US, the Zionist lobby is also very strong, even if the Obama administration itself is not as hostile towards Morsi. For theologico-ideological reasons, Saudi Arabia backs the Salafi-leaning Nur party; hence it hopes that the vacuum of power created by the fall of Morsi would then be filled by Salafis. It is rare for a Saudi monarch to express public support for a regime, as it did for the Egyptian military after the coup. Abu Bakar nonetheless disagreed: Saudi antagonism for the Brotherhood has less to do with ideology than with its suspicion against any novel developments, particularly when they mark transition towards civilian and democratic rule as opposed to the military regime which it has been familiar with for decades.

But has military rule itself any future? Military regimes in Muslim democracies, claimed Batchelor, are "dinosaurs marked for extinction". In the meantime, he expressed optimism in the role of religious establishments, specifically al-Azhar University as an institution independent of the state, in mediating conflicts and holding reconciliation talks. For Abu Bakar, Egypt had long since been subjected to experiments on the "virtues and victories of democratisation" yet had only experienced limited democratisation given the miltary tutelage it had been under. Consequently, democracy must be given another chance in Egypt.

In the meantime, it is impossible for Morsi or the Brotherhood to return to power, Chandra predicted. Egypt now is mired in bloodshed though admittedly not like the Algerian Civil War in the 1990s. The current impasse in Egypt will end if the economy improves. Islam will continue to play an important role in Egyptian politics, and so will Islamist movements.