The news coming out of Egypt these last couple weeks tells a dramatic story. Millions of Egyptians protested the authoritarianism of a political party that controlled not just the presidency but both houses of parliament. These demonstrations led to a military take-over and the appointment of a civilian government led by a high court judge.

According to the western media, the villains of the story are clear. They are the Muslim Brotherhood and Muhammad Morsi, the party’s leader who had been elected president. The Brotherhood is an “Islamist” religious party, which became a political force after spending decades as an outlawed religious organization.

The media likes stories that have clear good guys and bad guys. And so, in the months following the 2011 Arab Spring revolution, the good guys became the people who had protested, who were presented as civil heroes interested in the public good of the nation; and the bad guys were the Islamists, who were suspected of putting religious beliefs above the interests of the Egyptian people.

And so the ouster of President Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the installation of a secular interim government, forms a fitting climax to this story.

The problem is that matters are much more complicated than that. And, to be fair to the press, some writers have tried to present a broader picture as well. These stories have usually focused on the role of democracy in the Arab world and whether these events will make the democratization of Islamic countries more or less likely.

But there is an even deeper struggle in Egypt, as well as other Muslim nations, and that is the divide between Islam and western secularism. In Egypt, this divide began when Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798 and defeated the Egyptian armies with his superior weaponry – namely, cannons and guns that had been developed by cutting-edge science.

>From that beginning, western powers brought to Egypt superior science and technology, as well as western culture and ideas, but did so nearly always through foreign oppression. The French and the British used their economic power to run the country beginning in 1875, a role that became official in 1914. Even though Egypt gained independence in 1922, British troops remained there until 1952.

In 1952, a revolution led by the Free Officers Movement resulted in rule by a long series of military officers serving as president. The last one, Hosni Mubarak, stayed in power from 1981-2011. These governments often had the trappings of democracy, but not the reality.

Military rule required a source of weapons, and these came either from Soviet Russia or the United States. Along with them came western-style education in science, engineering and other western subjects. This resulted in a large portion of Egypt’s population becoming secularized and westernized.

Egypt’s Arab Spring revolution in 2011 was primarily promoted by this secular section of society. But its success resulted in a political power vacuum. Into this vacuum stepped the only organized political party, the religious Muslim Brotherhood. Their superior organization enabled them to win both the parliamentary and presidential elections that followed.

This July 3, these elected bodies were overthrown by the branches of government controlled by members of the secular wing of Egyptian society, the judiciary and the military. The western nations applauded. But none of these officials have ever been elected. In fact, most of them are holdovers from the Mubarak regime.

So the irony is that in our media reporting Egypt’s good guys of this July turn out to be the remains of the bad guys from the 2011 revolution. The military and the judiciary may be western-style secularists, with a scientific worldview and a diplomatic orientation towards the U.S. and Europe, but they are not necessarily in favor of democracy, at least not when election results do not go their way.

In the United States, we think that democracy and western secularism go hand-in-hand. (This is true even for our religious believers, for in comparison to Egypt’s religious believers, our religious believers are western secularists, no matter how much they may disclaim that label.) But, in Egypt, the problem may be that apparently that neither the religious side nor the secular side of society sees democracy as necessary to the successful governance of the country. Only the future will reveal whether either side is truly democratic or whether democracy is rather a means to acquiring authoritarian political power.