



Political Advisory Briefing: Egypt

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Key points:

- Egypt's new administration between international praise and domestic unrest
- Morsi assumes pharaonic powers in an attempt to rid Egypt of Mubarak judges
- The *felool* take another shot in Egyptian politics
- The generals remain silent
- The Egyptian economy sinks

Egypt's new administration between international praise and domestic unrest

In our last report on Egypt ([EGF Middle East Briefing](#), March 2012), we discussed the issues of who would consolidate power between the military establishment and the Muslim Brotherhood and, regardless of the electoral results, which elite would prevail. The latter's electoral gains were confirmed by the victory of president Mohamed Morsi in June, who won with 51.7% against former Mubarak prime minister, Ahmed Shafiq (48.3%). This was a momentous first in Egypt's political history, considering that the last four leaders over six decades all belonged to the military.

Despite hopes that the first free elections in the country would open the path to democracy and stability, the seven-month-old Morsi administration has since been forced to navigate what analysts consider the worst political crisis since Mubarak's deposition. There have been some brighter notes, such as president Morsi's success in brokering a truce between Israel and Hamas last November (21st). This showed Egypt's willingness to maintain its pivotal role in the region, its reliability as a partner for the West, and its position as a credible interlocutor for its fellow Middle Easterners. Unfortunately, social unrest and the seeming inability of the Morsi administration to contain escalating violence have forced the president to declare a state of emergency for Port Said, Suez, and Ismailiya, where at least 50 have lost their lives and over 500 were injured. Morsi's decision,

compounded by the enforcement of a 30-day curfew from 9pm to 6am every night (which has been largely disregarded by the population), was seen by the opposition as a temporary and useless fix. Egyptian defence minister General Abdel Fattah al-Sissi claimed that if things were not addressed properly, Egypt would be on the path of a failed state. Egyptian opposition leaders have recently pressed Morsi to create a national unity government to stop simmering violence. During his visit to Berlin to meet with Chancellor Merkel, however, the Egyptian president has refused to comply, claiming instead that a new government will be formed after parliamentary elections in April.

Morsi assumes pharaonic powers in an attempt to rid Egypt of Mubarak era judges

Through his November decree, the president decided to assume an all-encompassing set of powers which allowed him to be (temporarily) immune from judicial challenge, allegedly in an attempt to prevent the Supreme Constitutional Court from dissolving the parliament (last June) and the Constituent Assembly (tasked with drafting Egypt's new constitution) once again. The harshest criticism came from the members of the National Salvation Front (NSF), led by Mohamed ElBaradei, former Secretary General of the IAEA, the UN energy watchdog, an 'alliance of convenience' which includes a wide range of liberal, leftist and even moderate Islamist parties. The NSF claims that the constitution approved through a referendum in December is not a balanced document,

as most of the non-Islamist members of the Constituent Assembly were not present during the drafting (most of these had boycotted the Assembly early last year because of concerns over a too Islamicised constitution). The NSF has refused to sit down and come to a compromise with the government, campaigning against the constitutional referendum and trying to convince Egyptians to boycott the vote. The so called *Ikhwanophobia* has brought together agents and actors that only two years ago were fighting against each other on opposite sides of the barricade. As a commentator has pointed out: 'in their desire to topple the Brotherhood [...] they seem prepared to commit the greatest of profanities: to ally themselves with the former regime's forces.'¹

Morsi's decision to disregard the Supreme Court was allegedly made as an attempt to finally end the constitutional process and give the country a fundamental document that would be able, among other things, to rid Egypt of the still-standing *ancien regime's* legal machinery and many prosecutors, handpicked by Mubarak himself, that have never concealed their distaste for the Brothers. Whichever justification the president might have had to assume extra-legal powers, even if temporarily, his action revealed an Achilles' heel of Egyptian politics: the tendency of leaders to seize extraordinary powers at the expense of other government branches. Furthermore, this decision and the apparent incapability of the central government to put an end

¹<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/dec/12/polarised-egypt-thugs-islamists-morsi>.

to the outrage in the streets of Egypt shows how new democracies are still unused to power and to the methods needed to deal with demonstrators. The neophyte democracies² that have replaced despised dictators risk igniting another domino effect in the region with tremendous outcomes in the already precarious stability of the Middle East and North Africa. However, the widespread belief that such outrage is the result of Morsi's decision to assume temporary dictator-like powers last year misses the heart of the matter. Social unrest stems from the generalized inability to reconcile post-Mubarak society with the new Egypt that enjoys the results of the revolution that took the streets almost two years ago.

The *felool* take another shot in Egyptian politics,...

After the overthrow of Mubarak, Egyptians everywhere expected the remnants of the old regime, the *felool*, to be soon behind bars without any chance of getting involved in politics again. Contrary to what was anticipated, most of these old regime supporters have evaded trials or jail time and continue to live their luxurious lives as if nothing ever changed. Just 2 of the nearly 170 police officers accused of killing roughly 900 protesters are serving time in prison, while many others were acquitted.

The new trend in Egypt seems to be a warming of relations between liberal revolutionaries, moderate

² <http://world.time.com/2012/09/13/the-agents-of-outrage/>.

parties, and Mubarak loyalists (*felool*) in preparation for the electoral challenge against the Freedom and Justice Party, the political branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, in April. It seems likely that Egyptians are considering old cronies as 'the lesser evil' if compared to the Brothers. Electoral rules ban former Mubarak's party leaders to run for public office for a period of 10 years, but allow former ministers and rank-and-file members of the former National Democratic Party to participate. Trials against Mubarak supporters and the dictator's family members flop in court as plea deals are reached, showing how ineffective the legal system in Egypt is.

... the generals remain silent, ...

With the exception of providing the country with the security needed in these times of crisis, the military establishment has clearly signaled its intention to 'remain in the barracks'. Some commentators claim that the generals' inaction in the political arena points at concealed relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, since the Brothers needed support for the extra-legal powers decree and the draft constitution back in December of last year. It is not clear, however, how far such an alleged relationship goes and especially what are the real reasons behind Morsi's decision to fire Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi from the ministry of Defence and replace him with a younger officer, General Abdel Fattah al-Sissi (August 2012).

The new chief of the Defence Ministry started cultivating his contacts as soon as he assumed the

role, particularly by meeting with Obama's counterterrorism adviser and soon-to-be CIA head, John Brennan, and highlighting the continuity of good relations between the two countries.

The determination of the military establishment to stay on the sidelines of the crisis, however, could be primarily linked to the fact that the military establishment's mission is the protection of the country and not its day-to-day management. The armed forces will guarantee the protection of the country but will not take police responsibilities. It seems that the deal with the Brothers entails 'relieving [the military] of the burden of governing Egypt, ensuring the immunity of the officers for crimes during the eighteen months that the SCAF was in charge, and allowing the military to go about its business (literally and figuratively) with little or no interference from civilian leadership.'³

... while the Egyptian economy sinks

Amid political and social turmoil, Egypt's sinking economy promises to worsen the situation for the government in the following months, especially due to the imposition of tough austerity measures. Such measures are the only way by which the \$5 billion IMF loan will be released, regardless of the potential for their enforcement leading to political suicide. After all, one of the main reasons Egyptians took the streets

³ <http://blogs.cfr.org/cook/2012/12/17/are-egypts-officers-muslim-brothers/>.

in 2011 was because of deep inequality and impoverishment. Especially in Suez, a strategically reliable and stable source of (foreign) revenues for the country, protests could have the effect of hindering productivity and development. Unrest is hitting tourism as well, which accounts for at least 11% of the country's economy. Hopes are the IMF loan will revive Egypt's economy and provide a stable ground to help solve the political crisis that afflicts the country.

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