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EGYPT

After the Power-Play in Egypt: Morsy and the Islamists Vs. Everyone Else

By Ashraf Khalil | Nov. 24, 2012 | 5 Comments

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EGYPTIAN PRESIDENCY / AP

President Morsy speaks to supporters outside the Presidential palace in Cairo, Egypt on Friday, Nov. 23, 2012.

Friday afternoon's broadcast of the Jazeera Arabic news channel presented a tableau that might well encapsulate the state of modern Egypt. On one side of the split screen, President Mohammed Morsy spoke before thousands of cheering supporters outside the presidential palace. "Don't be worried," he said, standing in front a backdrop of soaring birds. "Let's move together into a new phase."

Meanwhile, the other half of the screen showed tear gas canisters arcing into the ranks of protesters in Tahrir Square demonstrating against Morsy and chanting many of the slogans against Hosni Mubarak nearly two years earlier.

(MORE: Morsy's Gaza Challenge: How New Can the New Egypt Afford to Be?)

The latest flashpoint in Egypt's terminally messy post-revolutionary period was Morsy's night constitutional decree that granted himself sweeping and unchecked authority for the next several months and greatly limited the powers of Egypt's judiciary. According to the decree, Egypt's judges no longer have the power to dissolve the constituent assembly—effectively killing an in-progress court case that could have disbanded the body drafting the new constitution. That constituent assembly, via the decree, now has an extra two months to finish its work, potentially extending the process into early 2013 and subsequent parliamentary elections into the spring. Public Prosecutor Abdel Meguid Mahmoud, who Morsy tried and failed to fire earlier this year, is finally out via the retroactive creation of term limits on his time in power.

Most disturbingly, the decree states that any presidential decisions made since Morsy took office in June and until

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there is a new elected parliament and an approved constitution, "are final and binding and cannot be appealed by any way or to any entity."

It also includes the following simple, yet ominous, article: "The President may take the necessary actions and measures to protect the country and the goals of the revolution." ([Here is an English language version of Morsy's decree.](#))

(PHOTOS: A New Gaza War: Israel and Palestinian Militants Trade Fire)

Egypt's fractured political arena essentially exploded at the news. Major players from Mohammed ElBaradei and Amr Moussa to third place presidential finisher Hamdeen Sabahi quickly formed a united public front against the president. Numerous comparisons abounded to ancient Egypt, claiming Morsy had just named himself into the new Pharaoh, and clever Egyptian Twitter users began referring to the president as "Morsillini."

(One of the ironies is that many Egyptian revolutionaries would, in different circumstances, be thrilled to see Public Prosecutor Mahmoud, essentially the country's attorney general, sacked. The Mubarak era holdover is widely regarded as having bungled the post-revolutionary trials of the Mubarak family, their cronies and the security officials responsible for trying to suppress the 2011 revolution. Morsy's decree also stipulated retrials for many of the Mubarak officials who were either acquitted or received light sentences.)

Even before the decree, Tahrir Square had already been up in arms for several days, with protests to commemorate the one year anniversary of a series of violent November 2011 clashes with police in Tahrir's Mohammed Mahmoud Street that had quickly devolved last week into a fresh set of clashes over the same patch of ground.

All of which culminated in Friday's massive dueling protests. Thousands flooded into Tahrir square to chant against Morsy, and fought with police whenever they tried to march on the nearby Parliament and Interior Ministry. And across town, equally huge crowds—many bussed in by the Muslim Brotherhood—chanted in favor of their president. This parallel protest dynamic promises to play out throughout the coming week; both sides have called for further protests on Tuesday.

(MORE: The Gaza Crisis and Egypt: Can Cairo Manage a Complex Relationship?)

Morsy already holds both executive and legislative power after the previous Islamist-dominated Parliament was dissolved by court order over the summer. Now he has moved to place himself beyond the reach of the judicial branch as well.

"Morsy and his supporters are asking us to trust a president who will work within a system of absolute authority," wrote Ziad Akl, a political scientist with the state-funded Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. "Egypt is not in need of a trustworthy man, it rather needs a system that will make the president, regardless of who he is, accountable to the people, and only then he could be trusted."

In the wake of the decree, Morsy has claimed that he doesn't seek unlimited power and that the decree is a temporary but necessary step in order to protect the revolution and ensure the achievement of the uprisings goals and ideals.

"If I see that the nation of the revolution might be in danger from those who are loyalists of the old regime...I will act. It is a must," he said on Friday.

The implication in that statement is that Egypt's judiciary as a whole is a Mubarak-era obstacle that must be sidelined and overcome in order for the revolution to succeed. Thursday's decree amounts to a declaration of war on the judges after months of simmering tensions between them and Morsy's Muslim Brotherhood—dating back to the dissolution of the Parliament.

But this time, the judges show every sign of fighting back. On Saturday evening, a group of senior judges along with the deposed Public Prosecutor held a defiant press conference denouncing the decree.

(PHOTOS: Mohamed Morsy Declared Egypt's First Islamist President)

In a statement, the Supreme Judicial Council called his move "an unprecedented attack on the independence of the judiciary," while judges in Egypt's second city, Alexandria, announced they were going on strike until Morsy withdrew the decree.

Morsy's maneuver comes at a time when his presidential stock was particularly high. His role last week in brokering a cease-fire between Israel and the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip had earned him international praise amid talk of a new and burgeoning relationship with U.S. President Barack Obama.

But on Friday, the State Department issued a statement flatly expressing its concern for his sudden accumulation of

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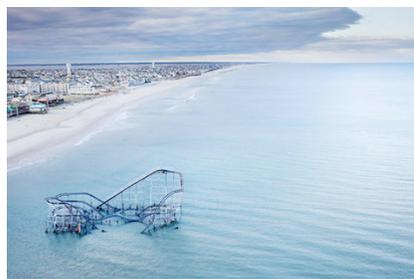
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nearly unchecked power. "One of the aspirations of the revolution was to ensure that power would not be overly concentrated in the hands of any one person or institution," the statement said. "The current constitutional vacuum in Egypt can only be resolved by the adoption of a constitution that includes checks and balances, and respects fundamental freedoms, individual rights, and the rule of law consistent with Egypt's international commitments."

Since taking office, Morsy has repeatedly stated that all of his power and legitimacy flows from the street—specifically from Tahrir Square. But now a large portion of that street has violently turned against him. Tahrir Square—which for several months this year was almost exclusively Islamist territory—has become the epicenter of the freshly galvanized movement against his rule.

In symbolism that's hard to ignore, Morsy and his supporters have abandoned Tahrir for the streets outside the presidential palace. Morsy appears to have won the behind-closed-doors battle for power. But it may be the street battles (peaceful or otherwise) looming this week that determine whether he can truly pull this off.

Ashraf Khalil is a Cairo-based journalist and author of Liberation Square: Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of a Nation



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Mahmoudhadi

56 minutes ago

The decisions and declarations announced on November 22 raise concerns for many Egyptians and for the international community. One of the aspirations of the revolution was to ensure that power would not be overly concentrated in the hands of any one person or institution. The current constitutional vacuum in Egypt can only be resolved by the adoption of a constitution that includes checks and balances, and respects fundamental freedoms, individual rights, and the rule of law consistent with Egypt's international commitments. We call for calm and encourage all parties to work together and call for all Egyptians to resolve their differences over these important issues peacefully and through democratic dialogue

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LaVoix

9 hours ago

Islam and Democracy are mutually exclusive. Morsi says Allah made him the President when really humans

elected him.

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Martian_14

11 hours ago

And American taxpayers are wasting billions of dollars with those fundamentalists.
What is the point of helping one's enemies?

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George

12 hours ago

It would be far better tor the Egyptians not to have elected a radical Islamist who believes in sharaia law who takes more and more freedoms away. Bur far better would be to give out and publish the true word of God, the Holy Bible, the Authorized King James Version in English. Which would also tell them of the the Lord God who can give more freedom when his word is believed and practiced. And they realize he was God manifest in the flesh who died for their sins on a cross 2000 years ago, was buried, and rose from the dead the third day and returned back up to heaven. And when one repents and believes the gospel they have God's gift of eternal life in heaven. That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead ; thou shalt be saved. Romans 10:9. Sincerely ;

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