



The Struggle for Real Power in Egypt



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The official presidential guard has arrived at Muhammad Morsi's new residence. Prior to Egypt's popular uprising, their visit to the home of a Muslim Brotherhood leader could have only entailed arrest and detention. Morsi himself had been jailed for a period in 2008 and again during the revolt last year, highlighting deposed dictator Hosni Mubarak's protracted efforts to suppress the Brotherhood and maintain power. Now, the presidential guard has come to take up its new role – protecting President Morsi as he settles into Mubarak's old office in the presidential palace, becoming the first freely elected leader in the nation's history.

The head to head confrontation between conservative Brotherhood candidate Muhammad Morsi and Mubarak's former Prime Minister, Ahmed Shafiq, truly represented the crucial struggle between the historically oppressed Islamist opposition and the establishment candidate of the previous regime. It seemed unthinkable that a senior figure of the ousted Mubarak government had the opportunity to legitimately reclaim the presidency, as many argued that such an outcome would have blatantly reversed the gains achieved throughout the uprising. But the fact that Ahmed Shafiq received 48% percent of the vote (Morsi earned 51%) means that roughly half the country either prefers the stability associated with the old guard or fears the uncertainty surrounding an Islamist dominated government. Liberal and secular sectors of society, in addition to women and members of the large Christian Coptic minority, remain cautious with respect to the future status of their social freedoms, awaiting to what extent Islam will be imposed on public life. Can President Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood party finally implement their vision of an Islamist state?

Clearly, the military would have preferred a Shafiq victory but avoided rigging the election in order to prevent an inevitable backlash of tremendous proportions. In anticipation of Morsi's victory, the military pre-empted a further Brotherhood power grab by dissolving the democratically elected, Islamist dominated, Parliament. The generals subsequently assumed the role of the legislature, re-instituted martial law, and inhibited most of the powers attributed to the incoming president. Most importantly, the military has ensured that it maintain veto power over any article it opposes in the drafting of the constitution. This arrangement effectively ensures that the military will remain free from civilian control and parliamentary oversight of the armed forces, the very hallmark of a democracy.

The June 17, 2012 constitutional decree reflects the generals' perception of appropriate civil-military relations, drawing inspiration from the former Turkish model, defending such measures as necessary precautions to prevent the rise of an overtly powerful president in the absence of a codified document outlining the executive's authority. The military may be eager to surrender its responsibility for the day-to-day administration of the country; however, it is become increasingly apparent that the generals have no intention of relinquishing its long held power since 1952.

Speaking with Iran's Fars news agency, Morsi declared that he was ready to enhance ties with Iran seeking to "create a strategic balance in the region."¹ Despite Morsi's pledge to respect existing international treaties, he reportedly wants to "reconsider" the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. As with most leaders, statements made in English to the international community often differ from proclamations to their population in the native tongue. Maintaining the Muslim Brotherhood's relatively pragmatic approach through the political campaign dictates a delicate balancing act between domestic constituencies' concerns and international considerations. The U.S. enforced agreement between Egypt and the Jewish state constitutes a major cornerstone of Middle East stability for the last 30 years and consistent calls for its reevaluation add risk to the prospects for regional peace. Even though anti-Israel rhetoric is often used as a scapegoat for the

Arab World's domestic problems, the Brotherhood's inherited array of internal economic woes and its ongoing political struggle with the military will continue to constitute Egypt's core priorities for the foreseeable future. It is likely that Morsi's victory will further intensify the confrontation between the generals and Islamists, perhaps forcing the military to sustain key elements of their recent power grab, which should allay Israeli and Western concerns of an impending hostile foreign policy.

The current jubilation in Tahrir Square by Morsi supporters over the first popularly elected leader in the Arab World reinforces the resilience by civil society to deter military interference in the elections. This momentous result, however, has thus far been largely symbolic. Any celebrations for a coherent transition to civilian rule may be premature. The delineation of real power, the role of government institutions, and the nature of the future constitution will only be realized following some sort of settlement between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood. As the two preeminent institutions continue to spar over the country's future composition, Egypt's struggle to redefine the nation's social contract and political order has just begun.

Endnotes:

¹ National Post Wire Services. "Egypt's new Islamist leader Mohammed Morsi to reconsider Israel peace deal, strengthen Iran ties." *National Post*. Jun 25, 2012. <http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/06/25/egypts-new-islamist-leader-mohammed-morsi-to-reconsider-israel-peace-deal-strengthen-iran-ties/>