



Coup in Egypt

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Author: Ben Smith

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A brief survey of the Egyptian military's removal of President Mohamed Mursi.

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1 Collapsing support

In November 2012, President Mursi's declaration awarding himself sweeping powers, including immunity from judicial intervention, caused a dramatic surge in resistance to his rule. It came just after the President had successfully negotiated a ceasefire in Gaza and the timing seemed opportunistic: to seize control of the situation in Egypt on the strength of political capital gained in Gaza.

The declaration protected the Upper House of the Parliament and the Constituent Assembly from being dissolved (the Supreme Constitutional Court was due to rule a month later on the constitutionality of the Constituent Assembly). Not only did the move provoke big protests, the Mursi government reacted to them by backing down on some of its key provisions a few days later, perhaps giving the protesters encouragement.

Far from reconsidering the constitution creation process, Mursi then had the Islamist-dominated (especially after almost all the non-Islamist members walked out) Constituent Assembly finish its deliberations quickly and brought forward the referendum on the finished document. The constitution was approved by about 57 percent of the votes on a turnout of perhaps one-third of the electorate,¹ a figure which starkly underlined the growing disillusionment with the democratic process as offered by the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Government had offered some concessions to the Army in the final draft of the constitution and authorised the military to protect national institutions until the referendum had taken place. The troops returned to the barracks after the vote, but soon afterwards violence broke out along the Suez Canal between supporters and opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood leading to scores of deaths. The head of the Armed Forces, General al-Sisi, warned in January 2013 of the potential collapse of the state.

2 Massive demonstrations

Sporadic unrest continued to plague the country. In June, commemorating the first anniversary of the swearing-in of the new President, enormous demonstrations were organised by the Tamarud movement. Millions of people took to the streets, especially in Cairo.

It was on 1 July that the Armed Forces issued an ultimatum for the Government to end the political crisis or have the Armed Forces intervene with its own 'road map'. The statement said:

- The national security of the state is exposed to extreme danger by the developments the nation is witnessing...
- The armed forces repeat their call for the people's demands to be met and give everyone 48 hours as a last chance to shoulder the burden of the historic moment that is happening in the nation, which will not forgive or tolerate any party that is lax in shouldering its responsibility...
- The armed forces put everyone on notice that if the demands of the people are not realised in the given time period, it will be obliged by its patriotic and historic responsibilities and by its respect for the demands of the great Egyptian people to

¹ 'Egypt's constitutional referendum, A dubious yes', *Economist*, 22 December 2012

announce a road map for the future and the steps for overseeing its implementation, with participation of all patriotic and sincere parties and movements - including the youth, who set off the glorious revolution and continue to do so - without excluding anyone.²

On 2 July, Mursi made a defiant statement, in which he rejected any challenge to his constitutional legitimacy and said that he was willing to die to defend it. He warned that there might be violence if any attempt were made to remove him. He said "I will not accept any measures that would shake legitimacy. This is rejected, it is rejected, it is rejected."³

Three hours after Mursi's televised speech, a message appeared on the Facebook page of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces making clear that the military was in no mood to back down either: "We swear to God that we will sacrifice even our blood for Egypt and its people, to defend them against any terrorist, radical or fool."⁴

3 Mursi is removed

At 9pm on 3 July, the military finally made its announcement. Al-Sisi said in a short televised address that Mursi's response to the Army ultimatum "did not meet the demands of the people". The Egyptian Armed Forces would act on its patriotic responsibility "without sidelining, marginalising any party"⁵ and implement the following plan, he said:

- suspend the constitution provisionally
- organise early presidential elections
- give the Chief Justice presidential powers
- set up a technocratic and capable national government
- secure and guarantee freedom of expression, freedom of media
- stand up firmly and strictly to any act deviating from peacefulness.⁶

The defence minister was flanked by the three armed services chiefs, opposition leaders including former presidential candidate and former head of the IAEA Mohammed ElBaradei, the sheikh of most important Islamic institution in the region, the al-Azhar Mosque, and the Coptic Pope, Tawadros II. Al-Sisi also took pains to eulogise the popular demonstrations, in further attempts to cloak the Army's move in some sort of popular legitimacy.

Adli Mansour, who had been Chief Justice and head of the Supreme Constitutional Court for two days, was sworn in as the interim President on 4 July. He had been deputy head of the Supreme Court since 1992 and is reported to be a low-profile figure.

Despite the assurances that freedom of expression would be guaranteed, there were reports that the Army had closed three Islamist television stations. Mohammed Mursi was placed under house arrest and some of his close colleagues from the Freedom and Justice party were also arrested. It is also reported that warrants were issued for the arrest of the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood itself, Mohammed Badie and his deputy Khairat el-

² 'Egypt army statement in full', *Al-Jazeera*, 1 July 2013

³ 'Morsi rebuffs calls to step down', *Financial Times*, 3 July 2013

⁴ 'Morsi on collision course with Egypt's military', *Financial Times*, 3 July 2013

⁵ 'Transcript: Egypt's army statement', *Al-Jazeera*, 3 July 2013

⁶ 'Transcript: Egypt's army statement', *Al-Jazeera*, 3 July 2013

Shater, in connection with the deaths of protesters in disturbances outside a Muslim Brotherhood building. According to al-Ahram, an Egyptian newspaper, the police have received orders to arrest more than 200 members of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷ It was also reported that leaders of religious parties had been banned from leaving the country.

Many analysts have said that the Mursi government failed to establish any national consensus and acted in a 'winner takes all' manner, ignoring the majority of the electorate which did not vote for the President or the Constitution. Right from the start, when the Brotherhood promised not to dominate the parliament and not to contest the presidency, and then went ahead and did exactly those two things, the opposition has complained of a 'democratic coup' on the part of the Brotherhood. On the other hand, the opposition has not been much better at cooperating with the Government and has seemed to write off entirely the significance of the Brotherhood's electoral success. Consensual politics may take more than one year to establish in Egypt.

4 Economic and financial problems

One of the main drivers of the 2011 revolution was the full-blown economic crisis that was besetting the country. With a rapidly growing population and growing inequality, growth (even though the headline figures had been relatively strong) was insufficient to provide jobs for the young, and the standard of living of the poorest was threatened, especially with the rising prices of imported commodities, on which Egypt depends.

With the revolution of 2011, Egypt's economic situation worsened dramatically and economic problems quickly became a financial crisis. Tourism receipts were severely hit and foreign investment declined, leaving the country's foreign reserves to fall to dangerously low levels: they fell to \$13.5 billion at the end of February 2013 from \$36 billion just before the uprising in 2011.⁸ The external trade deficit and the government's budget deficit also grew very quickly, while the Egyptian pound dropped more than 10% against the dollar in the first four months of 2013. The official unemployment rate was below 10% before the 2011 revolution. The latest figures put it at over 13% and the US Ambassador recently said that the difficulties associated with unemployment are the most fundamental currently facing the Egyptian government.⁹

The Mursi Government has negotiated with the International Monetary Fund to receive a loan but political unrest along with disagreement over economic reforms have delayed an conclusion. The Government may have been on the brink of agreeing terms for the \$4.8 billion loan with the IMF when the Army moved to remove Mursi. Meanwhile, Egypt has received loans from other Muslim countries, including particularly Qatar, which has a policy of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood.

With such mountainous economic problems to deal with, it is difficult to imagine that any new government could have fared a lot better than the Mursi Government after just one year.

5 Did the Army ever really go away?

Ever since the coup that brought Gamal Nasser to power in 1952, deposing King Farouk, the Egyptian Army has been close to the centre of power. Nasser's successor Sadat was also a military officer while Hosni Mubarak, who ruled for almost 30 years, was a former Air Chief

⁷ 'Prosecutors Order Arrest Of Muslim Brotherhood Leaders', *Associated Press*, 4 July 2013

⁸ '[Egypt tries to attract foreign investment in state debt](#)' *Reuters*, 17 March 2013

⁹ 'US ambassador warns against unemployment crisis in Egypt', *Al-Ahram*, 13 June 2013

Marshal. However, particularly since the arrival of Sadat, Egyptian presidents took pains to give the government the appearance of a civilian democracy as far as possible.

Despite the attempt to minimise its public role, the military had huge economic interests to protect and always occupied a central position in the Egypt's power relationships. Disagreements between the military and the President over the succession to Mubarak are widely reported to have been coming to a head in 2011 and to have been a major factor in the military's failure to protect Mubarak, who was ultimately their man.

The events of July 2013 may share most of the characteristics of a coup d'état, but the military is keen not only to minimise that appearance but also not to take too much responsibility for the day-to-day running of the country. After the difficulties of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and Field Marshall Mohamed Tantawi, its leader, in ruling the country for more than a year between the fall of Mubarak and the installation of Mursi, the military is keen to remain at arm's length from the business of governing Egypt.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that the Armed Forces were not entirely unhappy about the recent demonstrations and the opportunity they gave for cutting the Muslim Brotherhood down to size. It is possible that the military genuinely wanted the problem to be solved by dialogue and the establishment of some sort of government of national unity that would include Mursi and the Freedom and Justice Party in a leading role. Given the country's recent history of sharp polarisation, though, they must have realised that this would be very difficult to achieve and, when Mursi made his defiant response to the Army's ultimatum, they lost little time in removing him from power.

Mursi's reaction to the Army's ultimatum was to blame the 2013 uprising on forces involved in corruption and elements of the old regime. While to deny the outpouring of genuine feeling in the last few days is foolish, it is very likely that there are those who have been waiting for an opportunity to oust the Muslim Brotherhood.

6 Likelihood of violence

The main concern on many people's minds following the removal of Mursi is whether Egypt will descend in a spiral of violence. Many people have drawn attention to parallels with the civil war in Algeria in the 1990s, after the second round of an election was cancelled on the expectation that the Islamists would win. The ensuing violence cost at least tens of thousands of lives and maybe as many as 200,000.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has a relatively strong tradition of non-violence in recent years. But analysts are worried that younger activists may not respect that tradition. More worrying, perhaps, are the more radical groups such as the Nour party, the Salafist or fundamentalist Islamic party that did surprisingly well in elections.

Some 16 people were killed in clashes on the Wednesday night and early Thursday after the dismissal of Mursi, and all sides seem to raise the spectre of violence if the crisis is not resolved to their satisfaction.

7 Reaction

On 3 July, Prime Minister assured the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament that the Government is taking all necessary steps to assure the safety of UK nationals:

I can certainly give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance—and also to safeguard our embassy in Cairo. I should add that we are advising British nationals against all but

essential travel to Egypt, except for the Red sea resorts, as set out on the Foreign Office website.

The right hon. Gentleman is right that these are deeply disturbing scenes. The level of violence is appalling. We should appeal to all sides for calm and to stop the levels of violence and particularly the sexual assaults. It is not for this country to support any single group or party; what we should support are proper democratic processes and proper government by consent.¹⁰

Foreign Secretary William Hague told BBC Radio 4 on 4 July that the UK recognised states rather than governments "and we have to work with whoever is in authority in Egypt". He said that for "the safety of British nationals, we have to do that because there are so many British companies there".

Mr Hague went on:

I always condemn military intervention in a democratic system. This is a military intervention in a democratic system. We have to understand it's a popular intervention, there's no doubt about that in the current state of opinion in Egypt. So while warning about the precedent that it sets for the future, of course we have to work with the Egyptians, with the majority will in Egypt, and that's what we will do.¹¹

Hague said that "in practice this will now move on very quickly" and "we have to recognise the enormous dissatisfaction in Egypt with what the president had done, with the conduct of government over the last year".

In a statement on the evening of 3 July, Barack Obama was somewhat more critical, speaking of deep concern:

The United States is monitoring the very fluid situation in Egypt, and we believe that ultimately the future of Egypt can only be determined by the Egyptian people.

Nevertheless, we are deeply concerned by the decision of the Egyptian Armed Forces to remove President Morsi and suspend the Egyptian constitution.

I now call on the Egyptian military to move quickly and responsibly to return full authority back to a democratically elected civilian government as soon as possible through an inclusive and transparent process, and to avoid any arbitrary arrests of President Morsi and his supporters.¹²

In countries of the region, Turkey condemned the events (unsurprisingly, since Turkey is ruled by an Islamist government that has campaigned hard against any political role for the military at home). The foreign minister said: "It is unacceptable for a government that has come to power through democratic elections to be toppled through illicit means and, even more, a military coup."¹³

The Tunisian government likewise condemned the coup: "We view what the leadership of the army has done as a setback on the path of the Egyptian revolution and an attempt to reinstall the old regime." The African Union said that Egypt would probably be suspended.

Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were supportive of the move.

¹⁰ [HC Deb 3 July 2013, c911](#)

¹¹ 'What next for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood?', *Channel 4 News online*, 4 July 2013

¹² 'Statement by President Barack Obama on Egypt', White House press release, 3 July 2013

¹³ 'What next for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood?', *Channel 4 News online*, 4 July 2013