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Interpreting Morsi's Maneuvers in Egypt

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There are a host of competing interpretations of key senior military personnel changes announced by Egyptian President Morsi on Sunday. After offering some policy context and solutions for U.S. decision-makers, this brief will run through the three main perspectives on “what happened” and then close with some of my own analysis. In short, no matter what views one holds of President Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian military, and civil-military relations more generally, the concentration of so much executive and legislative power in the hands of one man – President Morsi – is a cause for concern. This is not a “transition” to democracy.

Policy Context

What can the United States do? We must be careful not to overestimate America's influence on internal political developments in Egypt. The U.S. military aid relationship with Egypt falling out of the Camp David Accords only commits Egypt to peace with Israel. [U.S. interests in the Middle East](#) would not be served by government officials or Members of Congress to openly call for military aid to be reviewed or withdrawn based on concerns over democracy. Military-to-military ties are the most important pillar of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship.

This does not mean, however, that there aren't other “carrots” and “sticks” available to the Obama Administration and Congress. Most U.S. official statements about Egypt are curiously rosy and positive. The Administration should reconsider this public diplomacy strategy. More importantly, [the Egyptian economy is in shambles](#). Subsidies and social benefits - particularly energy subsidies - are set to be cut dramatically. Egypt will soon resume talks with the International Monetary Fund for a loan. If Morsi fails to stop this economic free-fall, the people of Egypt may take to the streets again. America can leverage this situation to ensure a surer transition to something resembling democracy.

What Happened?

Just days after he fired Egypt's intelligence chief, the head of the Republican Guard, and the commander of military police, President Mohamed Morsi – a senior Muslim Brotherhood figure and Egypt's head of state – fired the defense minister, Field Marshal Mohammad Hussein Tantawi along with the heads of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Air Defense branches of the Egyptian military as well as the Chief of Staff of the Army. The

first round of firings were a reaction to the recent attack on Egyptian troops in the Sinai, but they seem to have set the stage for Sunday's announcement.

For the most part, their deputies were promoted to take their places. [General Abdel Fattah el-Sissi](#), the head of Egyptian military intelligence, was appointed defense minister and commander of the Army. At 57, El-Sissi is the youngest member of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

Morsi also issued a new addendum to Egypt's governing March 2011 interim constitution that reversed addendums issued by SCAF. The new addendum places SCAF, which has essentially been governing Egypt, back under civilian oversight, revoking its legislative role and right to convene a new constituent assembly.

At the end of all this, Morsi seems to have subordinated SCAF, removed key opponents, and given himself legislative authority as well as authority to appoint a new constituent assembly if the current one fails to come up with a constitution.

See this [excellent primer](#) by Nathan Brown for a more comprehensive account and a look to the future, as well as [Marc Lynch's take](#). I also recommend [this more pessimistic interpretation](#) by Hamza Hendawi. And for more on civil-military relations in Egypt, see [this piece](#) from earlier in the year by Rabab ElMahdi of the American University in Cairo.

So why did this happen? Here are the different interpretations:

A Counter-Coup or Re-Assertion of Civilian Control Over the Military

"Military rule is now over and Egypt will become a civil state in which everyone will be entitled to their rights."

[So said one Cairo resident](#), agreeing with some analysts, such as my friend [Omar Ashour](#) of the University of Exeter. Omar [told Voice of America](#) that this was a "positive step...which brings a balance to military-civilian relations."

General Dempsey, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, knows Sedky Sobhy, the new Chief of Staff of the Egyptian Armed Forces because Sobhy went to the US Army War College. Dempsey [said](#):

"[Sobhy] is another Army War College graduate, so he's a man with a longstanding relationship with the United States military. ***And I sense a positive trend towards civil control of a professional and a respected military***" [emphasis mine].

Perhaps, but – as my CNP colleague Greg Aftandilian has [observed](#) in his insightful post on CNP's *Security Center* blog – the Defense Minister is still *not* a civilian. But this move did demonstrate that the new President of Egypt can make the highest level personnel decisions for SCAF.

Regardless, those who find this explanation convincing have argued that, at the end of the day, the subordination of the military to civilian power is what is best for a liberal, democratic Egypt.

An Islamist “Soft Coup”

According to this line of argument, Sunday’s events were not just about President Morsi’s sacking of the top tier of defense and military officials.

After Morsi announced these firings, he then proceeded into lengthy remarks about the importance of Shariah for Egypt. And he claimed a broad range of legal powers previously held by SCAF that in the absence of a sitting parliament leave him in a position of “imperial power” in the words of Mohamed ElBaradei.

In one move he removed the top rung of military leadership, the keepers of a non-Islamist order, claimed broader powers [than Mubarak arguably enjoyed](#), and lectured the entire Egyptian nation about Shariah.

[Eric Trager](#) of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy characterized it this way in an email:

By seizing complete executive, legislative, and constitutional powers, Morsi has established himself as Egypt's new dictator. Those who take solace in the fact that military rule has ended mistakenly believe that civilian rule is democratic. As the recent censorship of anti-Brotherhood articles and prosecution of an anti-Brotherhood editor suggests, that is hardly the case.

The suspended parliament [cannot hold sessions](#). So until a new constitution is approved (which may or may not happen before the next parliamentary elections), Morsi is the man.

El-Sissi, the new defense minister, even has Brotherhood leanings, or so some say. [According to](#) Zeinab Abul Magd, a professor at the American University in Cairo who studies Egypt's military, “Sissi is known inside the military for being a Muslim Brother in the closet.” But it does seem unlikely that an officer could rise to the top of the Egyptian military while secretly harboring a Brotherhood affinity.

As Trager noted, just a day before this announcement, an Egyptian Christian newspaper was shut down for “insulting the President.” And just four days before, Morsi's government [announced](#) the new editors-in-chief of state-owned publications. Many of these have “Islamist leanings.”

Taken together, those who see an Islamist “soft coup” think the outlook is dim for a liberal, democratic Egypt.

A Pre-emptive Coup by Morsi and the Military to stop a Coup...by the Military

Wael Eskander, an Egyptian journalist, [believes](#) the incident was a pre-emptive coup against a coup being planned by Tantawi. He hypothesizes that El-Sissi, and his allies within SCAF saw Tantawi planning a coup against Morsi that may have put the military in an untenable situation. *The Wall Street Journal*, among others, [noted](#) “Egypt's senior generals offered no public comments and made no obvious countermoves, which several observers took as a tacit concession.”

“In other words,” Eskander states, “there are indications that this is a coup from within the military’s own ranks, seemingly aimed at securing its privileges away from uncertain political battles that primarily pertain to Tantawi and Anan’s prestige and not to the army establishment’s autonomy and its own interests.”

Maher Hamoud, writing in the *Daily News* (Egypt), [makes a similar argument](#). He asks: “Why wouldn’t the Muslim Brotherhood and the military devise a means of coexistence to ensure their mutual survival?” He continues:

Morsy considered bringing to the scene new and fresh military leaders to support. And those leaders read the signals and made the necessary changes to save the army from a series of very dangerous confrontations: with the Brotherhood; with the revolutionaries; and another potential confrontation within the military itself.

Despite alleged Brotherhood ties, El-Sissi also has strong relations with the U.S. military and even some constructive ties with Israeli military officials. *WSJ* [was told the following](#) by an unnamed senior Obama Administration official: “[Sissi] is someone who we've worked with for a long time, who has shown himself to be eager to work with the United States, who sees the value of peace with [Egypt's] neighbors. What I think this is, frankly, is Morsi looking for a generational change in military leadership.”

My Thoughts

I do not think there is cause for optimism; not even the cautious optimism expressed by Marc Lynch, Omar Ashour, and others. I share Eric Trager’s pessimism, but I am not as pessimistic. So much depends on what happens next: Will the current constituent assembly succeed in writing a constitution? If not, will the new Morsi-appointed assembly be dominated by Islamists?

The Brotherhood’s political behavior during the post-Mubarak transition has been impatient and biased toward the short- and long-term consolidation of Islamist power in (1) the Parliament (“[We are only going to contest 35% of the seats!](#) Oh, [nevermind](#).”), (2) the Presidency ([that they promised not to run for](#)), and (3) on successive [constituent assemblies](#). Yes, it’s just politics. I get it. But why should Egyptians and Egypt-watchers expect a U-turn in Brotherhood intentions and behavior?

The difference is now Morsi seems to have full legal justification for the concentration of power the Brotherhood has sought at every turn, despite sunny statements about democracy and inclusiveness. In this interim period, with a parliament that cannot meet and no new constitution, Morsi in effect has the powers of SCAF under Article 56 of the [current constitution](#). These include:

- Legislation
- Issuing public policy and the public budget and ensuring its implementation.
- Appointing the appointed members of the People’s Assembly
- Calling the People’s Assembly and the Shura Council to enter into normal session, adjourn, or hold an extraordinary session, and adjourn said session.
- The right to promulgate laws or object to them.
- Represent the state domestically and abroad, sign international treaties and agreements, and be considered a part of the legal system of the state.
- Appoint the head of the cabinet and his/her deputies and ministers and their deputies, as well as relieve them of their duties.
- Appoint civilian and military employees and political representatives, as well as dismiss them according to the law; accredit foreign political representatives.
- Pardon or reduce punishment, though blanket amnesty is granted only by law.

[Some observers](#) are stating that regardless of what actually was behind all this, a civilian head of state asserting control over the military is **never** a bad thing. So, it follows that no matter what caused this (and where it might head), this is a positive development.

I challenge this view. A strong military that intervenes in politics may be “bad” for procedural democracy in Egypt, but the fact is that many Egyptians still view the military as a bulwark against Islamism. And as Eric Trager pointed out, civilian control of the military does not equal democracy. In fact, civilian control of the military without real democracy is just another form of autocracy – a type that the Middle East is very familiar with. Moreover, there are a few historical examples of military forces saving a country through maintaining some political control and/or launching a coup. **Some** of the four military coups in Turkey have been good for the survival of the Turkish state and the future of Turkish democracy (while still being brutal and anti-democratic in the short term).

Just to be clear: I am not calling for a coup in Egypt. That would be a negative development.

But no matter what one thinks about the Brotherhood and SCAF, the legal concentration of such broad powers in Morsi’s hands is not a positive development for democracy.