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Egypt's Civilian Leader Facing a New Revolution

By Omar Ashour

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With massive anti-government protests across Egypt — a year to the day after Egyptians elected their first-ever civilian president — a diverse and decentralized movement has challenged President Mohammad Morsi's hold on power as never before. Hundreds of thousands were mobilized to take to the streets, with many storming and burning down the Cairo headquarters of the ruling Muslim Brotherhood.

At the end of the day, the president was given an ultimatum. The first "revolutionary" statement of Egypt's new grassroots tamarod (rebel) movement demanded that Morsi leave within two days or face a march on the presidential palace. "In the name of 22 million citizens, we declare that Morsi is no longer the legitimate president of Egypt." The protesters then appealed to "the institutions of the state, the army, the police and the judiciary to side with the popular will."

Egypt's turmoil

could result
in the army's
return,
nullifying many
of Morsi's gains.

The army has spoken, issuing an ultimatum of its own to Morsi: Address the protesters' demands or face a military solution to the crisis. Morsi's office said it had not been consulted prior to the army's statement, and tens of thousands of the president's supporters demonstrated in several cities.

So what will happen next? And what impact will the Tamarod movement and the army intervention have on Egypt's precarious democratization process?

The path to today's crisis was predictable. Morsi won the presidential election with only 51.7 percent of the vote, while the other 48.3 percent included very powerful forces, including figures from the Mubarak regime and their supporters. Opposition to Morsi hardened following the annulled November 2012 constitutional declaration, by which he had sought sweeping powers, allegedly to protect the country's infant elected institutions against a politicized judiciary.

The lack of tangible material gains for ordinary Egyptians also fueled public anger. All of the presidential candidates had made wild promises, but the absence of significant achievement, such as resolving the country's chronic shortages of gas and electricity, helped to fuel the massive anti-Morsi mobilization. Incompetence during a political transition has a high price.

But Morsi is not entirely without accomplishments or supporters. Last August, he culled the leaders of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. On the economic front, the Egyptian Central Bank's report for the period of July 2012 to March 2013 indicates that the balance-of-payments deficit fell from $11.2 billion to $2.1 billion, owing to rising tourism revenues and debt forgiveness.

This improvement did not trickle down to ordinary citizens, and there was no effective media and communication strategy to capitalize on it. But Morsi's core supporters remain committed. Whereas only a few hundred showed up to support the fraudulently elected Mubarak during the revolution, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians rallied for two consecutive weeks in a square near the presidential palace to express their solidarity with Morsi.

If Morsi survives in office, he will have to rely on the army to guarantee his government's safety. He will also need a massive show of strength from his supporters. But this would mean returning the army to the center of politics, and thus sacrificing the gains from Morsi's imposition last August of greater civilian control. And the army's ultimatum indicates that the military is moving in the direction of a coup.

Mobilization of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist supporters is also risky. Indeed, the revolutionary step of steering once-armed Islamists toward electoral

and constitutional politics could be reversed in the ongoing power struggle.

If Morsi does not remain in power, much will depend on how he is removed. Reliance on street mobilization and army intervention to bring down an elected leader who has support on the ground is unlikely to lead to a positive outcome. On the contrary, that pattern — seen in Spain in 1936, Iran in 1953, Chile in 1973, Turkey in 1980, Sudan in 1989 and Algeria and Tajikistan in 1992 — usually leads to military dictatorships, civil wars or both.

But there is also Charles de Gaulle's precedent of a peaceful exit by an elected president. The massive protests in France in 1968 led to an early parliamentary election, which de Gaulle's supporters won decisively. But de Gaulle later resigned of his own volition over an issue of minor importance.

The problem with this precedent is that Morsi does not have de Gaulle's background, and Egypt's chaotic political transition of 2013 is far from France's consolidated democracy of 1968. French Gaullists did not face persecution; several Egyptian opposition figures have already vowed that Morsi and the Muslim Brothers will. That raises the stakes of political survival considerably, especially given the absence of any credible guarantor of constitutional norms and behavior.

Moreover, a possible replacement for Morsi is not very clear. Parts of the opposition speak of a transitional "presidential council." But that idea failed once already, during the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' rule from February 2011 to June 2012, owing partly to the lack of popular mobilization behind a uniting figure, but mostly because of the egos — or, rather, megalomania — of the politicians involved.

Morsi will almost certainly not be removed without the involvement of the army and the security establishment. And the winners will probably try their best to block the Islamist forces from a comeback, implying another cycle of no-holds-barred political — and perhaps physical — combat in which democracy serves as a mask to legitimize the exclusion, and possibly the destruction, of one's political opponents.

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