



Cohabitation, Egyptian-style

IT IS NOW OFFICIAL: THE NEW president of Egypt is Mohammed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate who squeaked into office with 51.73 percent of the vote. President Morsi won 13.2 million votes out of a total of just over 26 million in the June 16-17 runoff against Hosni Mubarak's last prime minister and former air force commander, Ahmed Shafiq. It was the first democratic election in Egyptian history.

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With the result, the specter of a stolen election, which the Islamists would have surely decried had Shafiq been declared the winner, receded, and with it the possibility that the Algerian scenario of 1991-92 would repeat itself, plunging Egypt into chaos and violence.

Had Morsi achieved his victory just a few weeks earlier, it would have marked a triumphant culmination of the Brotherhood's year-long drive for hegemony over post-Mubarak Egypt. Sustained pressure would have been applied on the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to fulfill its pledge to hand power over to civilian rule and return to the barracks after 60 years of military-led rule. Instead, and on the very eve of the election, the SCAF intervened forcefully to reassert its authority and clip the wings of the Brotherhood.

Throughout much of the post-Mubarak era, the Brotherhood and SCAF, its two leading actors, had engaged in a delicate dance, as each sought to shape Egypt's political evolution according to its preferences while avoiding all-out confrontation. The Brotherhood appeared at times to be overly acquiescent to the SCAF, opening itself up



EGYPTIAN PRESIDENT: Mohammed Morsi

MOHAMED ABD EL-GHANY / REUTERS

to charges from the newly emboldened extremist Salafi movement and liberals alike that the Brotherhood has abandoned its commitment to civilian rule in return for a share in the perks of power. But on the whole, it was the SCAF which was on the defensive and in retreat, as it struggled to maintain its control over the levers of political and economic power in a highly fluid and increasingly contested public space.

All this changed radically on the eve of the presidential run-off. Parliament was dissolved on June 14 on technical grounds, in line with a judgment of the Mubarak-era High Constitutional Court. The decision called into question the ability, and even legitimacy, of the parliament-appointed constitutional commission charged with drafting a new constitution. Three days later, the SCAF amended the post-Mubarak interim constitution to appropriate full legislative and most executive power until such time as a new parliament could be elected

and a constitution adopted.

Had Shafiq been declared the winner of the election, the SCAF's counter-revolution would have been complete, although the resulting liabilities might have outweighed the benefits. Instead, the SCAF and the Brotherhood apparently agreed on a *modus vivendi*, enabling Morsi to be declared the winner and avoiding a descent into confrontation.

Both sides have, in essence, lived to fight another day. The Brotherhood's actions confirm the observation by Eric Traeger, a prescient Egypt-watcher, that the Brotherhood is "only willing to embrace political gradualism when pressured by stronger authorities." At the same time, given its electoral successes over the past year, and the legitimizing effect that these successes have had on Western, and particularly US Administration attitudes towards it, Egyptian Islamists have reason to believe that the wind is still at their backs. As for the SCAF, they can, at least for now, deal with their opponents with enhanced tools of authority, and avoid an irreversible devolution of power.

Meanwhile, the Egyptian pound hit a seven-year low against the dollar this week and investors fear that Egypt is heading towards a balance of payments crisis and a currency collapse. Recognition of Egypt's economic plight, along with the desire for the restoration of some semblance of normalcy helps explain why Shafiq, the candidate of the old order, nearly won the election. It also helps explain why the SCAF and the Brotherhood have agreed to cohabit for the time being.

But Egypt remains deeply divided over the desired nature of the state and the institutions that should underpin it, and is lacking viable remedies for its economic plight. ●

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