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Egypt

Morsi's new manoeuvre for power

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Lee Sustar looks at the latest effort by Egypt's president to roll back the revolution.

Having overplayed his hand in a bid for dictatorial power, Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi is attempting to split the opposition with a snap referendum on a constitution that would give him much of the power he wants and consolidate Islamism as the dominant political force in the country.

A test of strength will come on Tuesday, December 4, when anti-Morsi groups plan to march on the presidential palace—by far the most direct demonstration against the president in his six months in office.

Morsi's announcement of a snap referendum came during a weekend of competing protests that saw democratic and secular forces once again mobilize in Tahrir Square—the symbol of the revolution in early 2011 that ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak. For their part, pro-Morsi forces gathered at Cairo University and held a protest outside the High Constitutional Court, which was expected to issue a ruling December 2 to disband the Constituent Assembly. This body, dominated by Islamists, is charged with writing a new constitution.

Crucially the draft constitution—which Morsi wants to put to a referendum vote on December 15—not only enshrines Islamist Sharia law, but also guarantees the Egyptian military the essential power and privileges it enjoyed during the 30 years of Mubarak's rule, including control over its own budget and even Egypt's foreign policy [1].

A new generation of top military officers assumed their positions earlier this year when the new Egyptian president pushed out dozens of associated with the old regime. Thus, the draft constitution represents Morsi's promise that while the old top brass may be gone, the institutional and economic power of the military will remain.

The consequences of this would be continuation of Egypt's peace deal with Israel and an uninterrupted flow of aid from the U.S. That's a powerful incentive for both the leaders of Egypt's armed forces and the Obama administration in the U.S. to look the other way while Morsi grabs political power for the Muslim Brotherhood.

The constitution would give Morsi a chance to claim credentials as a democratic leader following his November 22 decree that centralized power in his hands [2]. In that document, Morsi gave himself sole legislative authority and barred judges from striking down any of his laws or the actions of the Constituent Assembly. The move apparently rattled many in Morsi's inner circle, who were surprised by the aggressive move [3].

The resulting disarray among top officials of the Brotherhood and its political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), gave confidence to the opposition, which on November 30 mobilized a protest in Tahrir Square that was on par with those of last year's revolution. Supporters of Morsi, wary of a violent showdown between the president's backers and the opposition, called their own mass rally for the following day.

At the same time, however, the ultraconservative Salafist Islamists made a point of organizing the far more confrontational protest at the High Constitutional Court, which had been expected to issue a ruling that would have disbanded the Constituent Assembly.

As commentator Juan Cole summed up the competing protests:

"The toll from fighting in Egypt between pro- and anti-Morsi activists all over Egypt was two dead, 451 wounded (160 or so police) and about 250 people were arrested on Sunday. (Most of the arrestees were from Muhammad Mahmoud Street off Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo.)...Clashes and back-and-forth fighting continued all day Sunday in the Tahrir area, and the number of people camping out in tents increased." [4]

The referendum "which will come with no time for debate" is the latest controversy in the effort to write a new constitution following Mubarak's ouster. Already, out of an original 100 members of the Constituent Assembly, 22 have resigned and another seven reserve members have stepped down "mostly leftists and Coptic Christians. They quit after charging that the process was rigged to give the Muslim Brotherhood the dominant role in writing the constitution.

Now, by putting the constitution to a vote, Morsi hopes to win back FJP voters who were shocked by his attempt to gain Mubarak-like political power. The Muslim Brotherhood and its allies, the Salafists, believe they can portray the vote as a contest between Islamist values and those of secularists "people who either don't acknowledge the role of Islam in Egyptian society, or who are Western-oriented and decadent.

At the same time, Morsi continues to claim that the Muslim Brotherhood and the FJP are the real guardians of the revolution. Thus, he's fired the hated top prosecutor, a Mubarak holdover; neutralized the judiciary that's also identified with the Mubarak era; and pledged to prosecute those involved in the killing and torture of revolutionaries. That way Morsi can try to portray the democratic opposition as a vehicle for former regime elements known in Egypt as feloul.

Egypt's revolutionaries need to protest Morsi's attempts to establish the Brotherhood as the dominant political force, while not aligning themselves with the feloul, argues Hossam el-Hamalawy, a journalist and member of the Revolutionary Socialists. As he put it in an interview:

"We have to put into consideration that there is a section of the feloul, the remnants of the previous regime, that also wants Morsi to go. And they are part of the current mobilization...[W]hen the polarization gets into Islamist versus secular, then this means that [Mubarak's former foreign minister] Amr Moussa can suddenly become a champion of the civil state, can suddenly mean that [pro-Mubarak talk show host] Tawfiq Okasha becomes a symbol of freedom of expression, can suddenly mean that [counterrevolutionary blogger] Ahmed Spider can march in the streets in order to retrieve the [mantle] of the martyrs. This is ridiculous and is opening the door for the real counterrevolutionary forces to get in.

Revolutionaries have to be very careful about this. The sons of Hosni Mubarak, the orphans of Omar Suleiman and the loyalists of [former Mubarak interior minister and recent presidential candidate Ahmed] Shafiq can never be our allies."

Tamer Wagih, editor of the Egypt Independent website, made a similar point:

"Due to the absence of a major coherent revolutionary bloc, Morsi's opposition is a mishmash of powers that belong to the corrupt former Mubarak regime and other centrist-liberal-reformist-populist powers "which can be collectively termed as "civilian powers," regardless of the exact meaning of that term.

Regrettably, since those civilian powers are not revolutionary and have an indistinguishable centrist character, they tend to reconcile, and even ally, with former regime supporters in their battle against Morsi, believing he is their archrival.

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To my mind, this tendency will have catastrophic repercussions for the future of the revolution. It will allow feloul to be reproduced as acceptable actors in the political realm, and the possibility of the Mubarak regime making a comeback in a worse form.

Comparisons with the situation during the January 25 uprising do not hold. Then, millions in the streets were revolting against the regime and an alliance existed between revolutionaries and conservative reformist powers that hesitantly opposed the regime. Today, though, we are faced with forming an alliance with the worst and most extreme right-wing powers, and are outside the context of a revolution.

The revolutionaries' mission is tough, but inevitable. They should engage in a battle against the non-revolutionary and confused Brotherhood's dictatorship without falling into the trap of allying with other enemies of the revolution." [5]

The next two weeks will see a series of competing mobilizations and protests that could determine the direction of Egypt's revolutionary movement.

[Socialist Worker.org](http://socialistworker.org)

[1] <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/12/02/egypt-unrest-military-role/1738339/>

[2] <http://socialistworker.org/2012/11/28/will-morsi-hijack-the-revolution>

[3] http://www.ft.com/cms/s/b90f4dd6-3a1d-11e2-baac-00144feabdc0.Authorised=false.html?_i_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2Fb90f4dd6-3a1d-11e2-baac-00144feabdc0.html&_i_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fsocialistworker.org%2F2012%2F12%2F04%2Fmorsis-new-bid-for-power#axzz2Eoz4V4cr

[4] <http://www.juancole.com/2012/11/egypt-constitutional-crisis-morsi-to-meet-judges-as-weekend-clashes-leave-two-dead-hundreds-wounded.html>

[5] <http://www.egyptindependent.com/opinion/revolutionaries-must-resist-morsy-also-feloul>