

How Morsi Came Undone

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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A closer look at how Egypt's president lost his power and moral authority.

When historians review Mohamed Morsi's brief presidency, the now-deposed Egyptian leader's most iconic moment will likely have come one day before he was formally inaugurated.

Addressing a raucous Tahrir Square crowd, Morsi unbuttoned his blazer to reveal that he was not wearing a bulletproof vest and declared, "I have nothing to fear, I only fear God, I'm here among you."

For many Egyptians, the gesture reflected the new era of more representative, post-Hosni Mubarak politics, in which the president's popular legitimacy served as his first line of physical protection.

But it will now go down as Morsi's "Mission Accomplished" moment, because his insular, often autocratic governing style earned him so many enemies that even his basic electoral legitimacy couldn't save him.

So how did Morsi go from the face of Egypt's democratic future to the target of a mass uprising within barely 12 months?

Part of the reason has to do with the way in which Morsi won the presidency.

Until April 2012, when Morsi became the Muslim Brotherhood's presidential candidate following the disqualification of the organization's initial nominee, Morsi was a political unknown: he was member of Egypt's barely-followed parliament under Hosni Mubarak, and kept a low profile as chairman of the Brotherhood's political party following the 2011 revolution.

His campaign trail appearances didn't boost his image either. His speeches often ran for two hours, and he exuded gruffness in television interviews.

The Muslim Brotherhood's unparalleled mobilizing capabilities, however, enabled Morsi to overcome these otherwise fatal shortcomings.

This made Morsi's unpopularity irrelevant, since the Brotherhood's vast, nationwide network of members could get

out the vote with unmatched efficiency.

Morsi thus won the presidency without having to be liked -- thereby making it easy for people to start hating him as soon as his many flaws became apparent.

Morsi's total reliance on the Brotherhood for his political success had another damaging effect: it made pleasing his Brotherhood colleagues a top priority, even though he campaigned promising to govern inclusively.

Morsi thus continually expanded the number of Brotherhood ministers and governors with each round of appointments, further alienating non-Islamists.

His most damaging move in this regard, however, came on Nov. 22, when he issued a constitutional declaration asserting total executive authority, and then used this as a pretext for ramming an Islamist constitution through to ratification.

As the Brotherhood successfully mobilized to pass the constitution by referendum, a once disparate coalition of non-Islamist forces took to the streets by the hundreds of thousands, and a wave of smaller, increasingly violent demonstrations simmered for months.

Meanwhile, as critics accused Morsi of "Brotherhoodizing" the government, state institutions became unresponsive to his administration.

By the time of Wednesday's coup, Egypt was on the verge of state failure -- and it still is.

In other words, the source of Morsi's initial political strength -- the Brotherhood's unique organizational prowess -- was also the source of his downfall, because it obviated his need for working with others.

And by the end, they refused to work with him, too.

Eric Trager is a Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute and was in Egypt when the Morsi government fell. ❖

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