

The Muslim Brotherhood Can't Save Morsi Now

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Jul 3, 2013

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Morsi and his supporters are outnumbered, and the protestors show no sign of wavering.

It seems illogical that mass protests should force an elected president from office, especially only a year into a four-year term. But democracy in Egypt, such that it exists, has not been institutionalized, in large part because President Mohamed Morsi failed to govern via consensus. His November 22 constitutional declaration asserting unchecked executive authority and its subsequent withdrawal, which he used to push an Islamist constitution to ratification, permanently alienated Egypt's non-Islamist masses, and they are now fighting his autocratic tactics not in the ballot box, but in the streets.

Popular mistrust of political institutions, however, would not normally be sufficient reason to remove an elected leader from office. Egypt's recent history suggests as much: Mass protests have erupted here repeatedly since Hosni Mubarak was ousted two-and-a-half years ago, and the result was never regime change. That was largely because the police and military responded to the protests with often deadly crackdowns, sapping the protests of their energy and turning off the non-participating public, which wanted nothing more than a return to stability and thus blamed the protesters for the violence.

But now, for the first time since the start of Egypt's January 2011 uprising, there is virtually no chance that state authorities will intervene to put down the anti-Morsi protests. In fact, security forces appear to be actively encouraging them. The police have participated from day one, with uniformed officers marching in solidarity against the very president to whom they supposedly report, winning cheers from the crowds along the way. Meanwhile, a military helicopter air-dropped Egyptian flags over the anti-Morsi protests. And the generals' announcement on Monday that Morsi had 48 hours to put forth a roadmap for navigating out of the current crisis encouraged the demonstrators, who overwhelmingly believe that the military will side with them against the elected president.

With the military following through on its ultimatum, Morsi's ouster is nearly certain. There are only two things that

could get these jubilant protesters to leave the public squares.

The first is simply protest-fatigue. But for the moment, this seems unlikely. Morsi's opponents have been blessed with weather that is uncommonly comfortable by Egyptian standards -- with highs in the low to mid-90s, rather than regularly breaking 100. And the protesters have typically waited until dusk to really ramp up their major activities. This is why the protests could even continue through Ramadan, the month-long holiday that begins next week: demonstrations could proceed after the ritual sundown break-fasts.

Second, the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies -- particularly the U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Gamaa al-Islamiya -- could respond to the protests with violence, and thereby do what the police have refused to do, only much more brutally. This is a more likely scenario: The Brotherhood, after all, deployed its cadres against anti-Morsi protesters on December 5, killing seven people and also torturing their opponents. And in recent days, the Muslim Brotherhood has suggested it might organize its cadres into formations, and equip them with clubs and helmets. On Tuesday, these makeshift units ran laps around the Brotherhood's main protest site at Rabaa El-Adawiya chanting, "Strength, determination, faith, Morsi's men are everywhere!"

Yet far from projecting strength, the existence of these units only reinforces Morsi's utter powerlessness. Moreover, the fact that some of the would-be combatants are armed with tree branches gives the entire operation a certain Lord of the Flies quality. But more importantly, these units -- and the Brotherhood's protests more broadly -- are completely outnumbered given the massiveness of the opposition's outpouring. So while violence is inevitable given what's at stake for the Brotherhood, it will be hard for Morsi's allies to leverage the kind of violence that ends the protests and thereby saves his presidency.

Which is why Morsi's hours are improbably numbered.

Eric Trager is a Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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