

Egypt Will Be Unstable until Morsi Delivers on Domestic Promises

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Washington should remind Morsi that his current mode of governance is stoking perpetual unrest and impeding financial assistance.

The violent protests that have seized Egypt since Friday represent the most significant test of Muhammad Morsi's seven-month presidency. Although the demonstrators are motivated by various grievances, the breakdown of order in cities across the country indicates a general failure of governance that threatens indefinite instability -- a situation that would make Egypt an uncertain U.S. partner.

UNPRECEDENTED VIOLENCE

Protests have plagued Egypt for much of the past two years, but the current round is more violent and more widespread than previous ones. It began on Friday, when tens of thousands of mostly non-Islamist protestors commemorated the second anniversary of the 2011 revolution. Violent groups such as the anarchist "Black Bloc" joined in, and demonstrators battled security forces and attacked Muslim Brotherhood offices throughout the country. On Saturday, deadly fighting erupted between demonstrators and police in Port Said after a court sentenced twenty-one people to death for their alleged role in a February 2012 soccer massacre.

Government attempts to restore order -- including military intervention in three Suez Canal cities and Morsi's declaration of extensive "emergency" powers -- have only exacerbated the unrest. At least fifty people have died, hundreds have been injured, and property has been destroyed nationwide.

BROAD FRUSTRATION

The extent of the violence reflects the public's frustration with mounting economic woes and Cairo's failure to meet many of the revolution's demands, such as reforming the notoriously repressive Interior Ministry and reducing economic inequalities. None of these grievances are likely to dissipate overnight. Retraining the police to fight crime rather than repress political activities might take years, and the government has no apparent plan for

preventing economic calamity other than requesting foreign loans as short-term stopgaps.

These grievances are largely a consequence of the ruling Muslim Brotherhood's failed leadership during its first year in power, with the group focusing on power consolidation rather than delivering on its promises. In this vein, Morsi's major acts have included issuing two constitutional declarations that expanded his authority, ramming an Islamist constitution through the Brotherhood-dominated Constituent Assembly, and increasing the number of Brotherhood-affiliated cabinet ministers and governors with each new round of appointments. Meanwhile, rather than reforming the Interior Ministry, he has appeared content to use it for insulating his regime. And on the economic front, his Brotherhood colleagues have forced him to backtrack from various attempts at raising new revenue and cutting expenditures.

U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

To date, the Obama administration has been hesitant to question Morsi's domestic behavior for fear of jeopardizing Egyptian cooperation on key U.S. regional interests such as the peace treaty with Israel. But now that Morsi's failed leadership threatens indefinite instability, Washington must pivot from its near-exclusive focus on Cairo's foreign policy obligations. This means sending a stern message to Morsi and the Brotherhood that their continued failure to deliver on their promises to the people in the short run, and their refusal to rule more inclusively in the long run, could turn Egypt into a failed state -- a scenario that is not in Washington or Cairo's interests.

Specifically, Washington should tell Morsi that he cannot realistically prevent violent, destabilizing protests without a serious policy for resuscitating the failing economy, attracting investments, and spurring job creation. It should also tell him that continuing his practice of noninclusive rule and power consolidation will leave the masses feeling disenfranchised, making more -- and more violent -- episodes likely. Finally, it should remind him that the international loans he is seeking to boost the economy, including \$4.8 billion from the International Monetary Fund, are expensive investments that his current mode of governing makes difficult to justify.

Eric Trager is the Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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