

Egypt's New President Moves Against Democracy

by [Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](/experts/eric-trager)

Aug 16, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](/experts/eric-trager)

Eric Trager was the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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Mohammed Morsi has given himself complete legislative and executive power, plus the right to select writers of a new constitution.

Egypt's "full transition to civilian rule," long sought by the Obama administration, has finally come to fruition. But it is neither liberal nor democratic.

On Sunday, having purged top military officials, Muslim Brotherhood veteran and new President Mohammed Morsi issued a sweeping constitutional declaration. It grants him complete executive and legislative power, plus the authority to select the writers of Egypt's new constitution. Eighteen months after Hosni Mubarak's ouster, Egypt has a new dictator -- and the way in which Mr. Morsi grabbed power says much about what he will do with it.

These moves follow an attack last week in the notoriously unstable Sinai peninsula, where militants killed 16 Egyptian soldiers, stole a military vehicle, and attempted to breach Israel's borders. The incident gave Mr. Morsi an excuse to sack the security officials who posed the greatest threat to his domestic authority -- particularly the leaders of Egypt's now-defunct military junta, which in June had issued its own constitutional declaration limiting the newly elected president's powers.

More important, Mr. Morsi used the Sinai crisis to assume the powers that the junta had undemocratically asserted for itself in a March 2011 constitutional declaration. He thus claimed unprecedented executive power, including complete authority over legislation, public budgets, foreign affairs, pardons, and political and military appointments.

Mr. Morsi's declaration also gives him the power to select a new assembly for writing Egypt's constitution. And since the new constitution must be approved by popular referendum before new parliamentary elections can be held, Mr. Morsi can intervene in the constitution-writing process to delay legislative elections -- and thereby remain Egypt's sole legislator -- indefinitely.

Based on the evidence to date, Egypt's president will use his expanded power to advance the Muslim Brotherhood's radically intolerant domestic agenda.

Consider the editors he appointed to lead Egypt's two largest state-run newspapers. The new editor of *Al-Ahram* is an old Mubarak regime hack who called last year's uprising "foreign funded" and lost his column in 2010 for writing anti-Christian articles. The new editor of *Gomhoriya* shut down a conference on religious freedoms in 2008 and called for the murder of a well-known Bahai activist in 2009. The new editor of *Al-Akhbar* recently censored an article that criticized the Brotherhood.

Meanwhile, Mr. Morsi's newly appointed defense minister, Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi, admitted that the military had subjected female activists to "virginity tests" in its brutal crackdown on Tahrir Square protests in March 2011. In its first major move against dissenters, the Morsi regime this month began prosecuting the editor of *Al-Dustour*, a private daily, for "harming the president through phrases and wording punishable by law."

While the consequences of Mr. Morsi's power grab are primarily being felt domestically, this is unlikely to last. His recent actions suggest that he will soon turn his attention to Egyptian foreign policy, steering it in a direction decidedly hostile to U.S. interests.

His constitutional declaration empowers him to do just that. His amendments to last year's interim constitution give him the authority to sign -- and presumably abrogate -- treaties. Although many expected that de facto foreign-policy power would remain with the generals, Mr. Morsi's quick reshuffling of the military leadership has brought the armed forces under his command.

Then there are his overtures to adversaries of the West. In a mere six weeks as president, Mr. Morsi has hosted top-level Hamas delegations twice and, despite the flow of militants from Gaza into Sinai, promised to keep open the Rafah border crossing. Last week he welcomed Iran's vice president and was invited to attend the Non-Aligned Movement's upcoming meeting in Tehran.

If he does, he'd be the first Egyptian head of state to visit Iran since the 1979 revolution. Accompanying him could be his new chief of staff, Mohamed Rifaat al-Tahtawi, a former ambassador to Libya and Iran who has declared Israel to be Egypt's "main threat," praised Syria as "a fundamental pillar of the resistance camp [against] Israel," and called for closer relations with Iran and Hamas.

Many Washington analysts believe that Mr. Morsi won't make any major foreign-policy moves, such as revoking Egypt's peace treaty with Israel. They take his verbal assurances at face value and reason that he won't rock the boat at the very moment that he needs international investment to boost Egypt's ailing economy.

But this same logic once dictated that he wouldn't rush to challenge Egypt's generals. After all, he sat smiling next to Egypt's top military officer (now fired) at military events, and Washington observers widely assumed that the Brotherhood would be content to focus on Islamizing domestic policy while leaving national-security matters to the military.

Mr. Morsi's modus operandi, it turns out, isn't accommodating or gradual. And now that he has declared extensive powers for himself, the only way to prevent him from moving swiftly against American interests is by pushing back immediately.

Rather than touting him as a democratically elected leader -- as the Obama administration has frequently done -- Washington should denounce his power grab and insist that he demonstrate his commitment to democratic rule with action or risk losing the international goodwill that followed his election. Failing to do so will enable him to continue building his power domestically without paying a price abroad. And that raises the likelihood of another -- much more damaging -- Sunday surprise.

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

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