

# The Next Egyptian President: Likely Scenarios

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

Jun 15, 2012

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



Brief Analysis

---

**Policymakers must prepare for the likelihood that Egyptian instability will continue for some time, rendering Cairo unable to continue its historic role as a major U.S. strategic partner.**

**E**gyptians head to the polls tomorrow to elect either Muslim Brotherhood (MB) leader Muhammad Morsi or former prime minister Ahmed Shafiq as their next president. But no matter who wins, continuing tension between the MB and Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) makes further political instability highly likely.

## IF MORSI WINS

**A**lthough many analysts believe that this week's events make a Shafiq victory inevitable, Morsi could still win. The Brotherhood remains Egypt's only well-organized political force, and its unmatched mobilizing potential secured its uncharismatic candidate's first-place finish during round one of the election in late May. For this reason, if Morsi is elected, he could plausibly claim a popular mandate.

But such a mandate would not translate into any actual power: in the absence of a constitution, Morsi's presidential authority would remain undefined. And to prevent him from challenging the military's autonomy over its internal affairs, including budgetary matters, the SCAF would likely continue maneuvering to prevent the drafting of a new constitution. One possibility being floated is that the SCAF will unilaterally issue a constitutional declaration -- which the MB and other parties would immediately reject, perhaps sparking mass protests. Alternatively, the SCAF could take steps to ensure that the current constitutional committee, which the now-dissolved parliament elected on Tuesday, is also dissolved, leaving the next parliament to name a new committee.

In that scenario, the next legislative elections would become the key MB-SCAF battleground. For example, the military might delay the voting or rig it against MB candidates, and the Brotherhood might respond by launching mass protests. Alternatively, the MB might resort to its own underhanded tactics, such as expanding the small-scale vote buying it reportedly engaged in during the first round of the presidential election. Either way, the confrontation

would likely persist for a while.

## IF SHAFIQ WINS

**D**espite the Brotherhood's mobilization advantage, polls indicate that the group's popularity has declined sharply. Given the country's deteriorating security and ongoing economic crisis, many Egyptians reportedly desire the return to law and order that Shafiq's candidacy represents.

But even if Shafiq wins legitimately -- and there would be no way to know for sure -- a critical mass of Egyptians would still conclude that the SCAF had rigged the elections to ensure his victory, and protests would be inevitable. The key question, then, is whether these protests would resemble the low-grade demonstrations that have been a constant feature of Egyptian political life since Mubarak's ouster last February, or the sort of massive gatherings that could catalyze a second revolution and seriously challenge the SCAF's authority. The Brotherhood's response to a Shafiq victory would thus be especially pivotal, given the group's unparalleled ability to mobilize supporters nationwide.

On one hand, it is easy to imagine the MB launching mass protests in pursuit of Shafiq's ouster. After all, Brotherhood members have been saying since April that they will not tolerate the election of a former Mubarak official, and until Thursday's court decision confirming Shafiq's eligibility to run, they repeatedly demanded that he be disqualified under the Political Disenfranchisement Law. Moreover, if it fails to win the presidency so soon after losing its parliamentary plurality, the MB may decide that it has little to lose by taking to the streets. In that case, it would find eager partners in the youth protest movements, which remain primarily focused on opposing the SCAF and regime "remnants" such as Shafiq. But this course of action might not end well for the Brotherhood. On Wednesday, the SCAF-appointed Justice Ministry announced that military police and intelligence officers could arrest civilians, and these repressive powers might be used against the MB in the event of mass protests. Violent confrontations would no doubt ensue, and Egypt would become severely unstable.

On the other hand, the MB might respond to a Shafiq victory by pursuing a new deal with the SCAF. Brotherhood leaders have already reportedly met with top SCAF generals to insist that the MB be granted cabinet positions if Shafiq is elected. Although this would prevent a major crisis in the short run, youth protestors would likely continue demonstrating against Shafiq's presidency and the SCAF. And since Brotherhood cabinet ministers would still find themselves beholden to the military council, a new MB-SCAF confrontation would be inevitable. In particular, the two sides would likely still hold divergent interests regarding the next parliamentary elections and the composition of a new constitutional committee, creating additional sources of tension.

## U.S. POLICY CHALLENGES

**E**ven if the outcome of this weekend's elections does not spark immediate upheaval, prolonged MB-SCAF strife would have a number of near-term policy consequences. First, it would complicate efforts to negotiate an International Monetary Fund loan to help Egypt's struggling economy. Despite characterizing its recent talks with Cairo as "constructive," the IMF halted the loan process due to concerns about social and political discord. And the Brotherhood has consistently opposed such loans until a government with electoral legitimacy takes office.

Second, prolonged internal tensions would keep the military squarely focused on the domestic political sphere rather than on its primary responsibility of keeping Egypt safe. Indeed, the military has seemingly conceded defeat in Sinai: although Israel agreed to allow the deployment of six Egyptian battalions to fight growing terrorist penetration of the peninsula, Cairo has only sent two, and militant attacks on Egyptian security forces are on the rise. If this situation continues spiraling out of control, it could spark a major crisis between Israel and Egypt.

Third, U.S. interests may increasingly become political footballs for the MB and SCAF. This is precisely what happened during the February-March crisis regarding pro-democratic NGOs: the SCAF-appointed government used

its prosecution of the NGOs to increase its domestic support, while the Brotherhood lambasted the council when travel bans on American NGO workers were suddenly lifted. U.S. security interests might similarly become wedge issues that the two parties use against each other.

Unfortunately, there is little Washington can do to end Egypt's political infighting. But it can work with its allies on measures to prevent some of the worst short-term consequences, such as putting together a credible aid package to save Egypt from disaster if ongoing political instability catalyzes economic calamity. It can also use its communications with the SCAF and MB to encourage calm during particularly tense moments. Most important, policymakers must prepare for the likelihood that Egyptian instability will continue for quite some time, rendering Cairo unable to continue its historic role as a major U.S. strategic partner.

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

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



## BRIEF ANALYSIS

# Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

## TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-analysis/egypt)

North Africa (/policy-analysis/north-africa)