

Death of Divisive Morsi Could Unite Egypt's Opposition

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His deep unpopularity made it difficult for many actors at home and abroad to criticize the current government, but Washington still stands to lose rather than gain if it comments on the matter.

On June 17, Egyptian state television announced that former president and top Muslim Brotherhood figure Mohamed Morsi had died in court, where he was facing charges of spying for the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas. Perhaps no other president in modern Egyptian history was hated by the citizenry as much as Morsi was during his brief tenure in 2012-2013, in large part due to his undemocratic and confrontational measures. Most damningly, he drafted a constitution that reflected Islamist views without taking other Egyptian political forces into consideration, issued a declaration to immunize his actions from any legal challenge, and sought allegiance with Iran. Given the ill will and political upheaval generated by such actions, his sudden passing could have a number of significant implications.

WHAT HAPPENED?

According to the prosecutor-general's report on the hearing, Morsi asked the judge if he could speak, then addressed the court for five minutes; after the session was adjourned, he fainted and was transported to the hospital. He died before arrival, apparently from sudden heart failure. After the funeral prayer was said in Tora Prison hospital, he was buried quietly in eastern Cairo, with only his family and lawyers present; the ceremony was held at dawn to avoid public participation.

The court case had not been covered heavily by the press because it was not yet in its final stages. A similar media atmosphere followed Morsi's death—state-owned newspapers made only brief mention of the incident without going into further details, and flagship daily *al-Ahram* published word of his passing in the crime section, next to stories about drug dealers and thieves.

HOW WAS THE NEWS RECEIVED?

To counter any allegations that the government was responsible for killing Morsi, pro-government media emphasized that his death happened in court in front of his lawyers and various Muslim Brotherhood families. Television anchors blamed his poor health on his stubborn unwillingness to apply for permission to be treated outside the prison hospital—a decision attributed to the fact that he did not want to legitimize President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's government by accepting help from its institutions. Various outlets also claimed that Israel, Qatar, Turkey, and certain other regional states would be upset about losing Morsi because he was their spy in Egypt. Overall, media commentators agreed that while current events could raise potential security threats down the road, Egypt is still safe enough to host the Africa Cup of Nations soccer tournament, which kicks off this week.

The government itself has not released any formal response to the matter. Yet former foreign minister Amr Mousa stated that Morsi failed to serve as a leader for all Egyptians during his time as president, and that history will judge his rule negatively—perhaps the closest Cairo will get to an official statement on his death.

For their part, Muslim Brotherhood media blamed the death on the medical negligence Morsi experienced during his jail stay. Some even accused the government of killing him, invoking the host of conspiracy theories and disputes surrounding the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. According to these arguments, the government purposefully timed his death for this week because it believed Egyptians would be distracted by the start of the Africa Cup.

Moreover, pro-Brotherhood religious scholars argued that Morsi's death was a blessing to him because he died "in the field of jihad" rather than in bed "like a woman." Apparently, passing away while facing up to charges in court earns him the title and historical legacy of a martyr. Brotherhood media spokesman Talaat Fahmy described the organization's struggle against the Sisi government as "a national liberation battle" that all Egyptians from different political forces should join. The group also criticized the United States, African Union, and UN for not taking effective measures against Sisi.

As for the rest of the region, the most sympathetic responses to Morsi's death came from the Turkey-Qatar axis. Notably, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, and their Hamas allies mourned his loss.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE BROTHERHOOD AND SISI?

Morsi's passing holds three major implications for his organization. First, it removes a sticking point that has divided Sisi's opponents—namely, Morsi's deep unpopularity, which stemmed from his lack of competence and charisma after winning the presidency. Ironically, the biggest winner may be the Brotherhood, since Morsi's flaws were a big part of what prevented the organization from consolidating its power and keeping a lid on the non-Islamist opposition in 2012-2013.

Morsi's death may also solve a major problem the organization has faced since it was kicked out of power: loss of drive among members living in the diaspora. The timing and circumstances of his passing hold symbolic power that could inject them with new energy and legitimacy to continue struggling against the government. And the fact that such a divisive figure has left the stage could give them more sway with international actors, many of whom shied away from association with Morsi but may now be willing to echo the Brotherhood in criticizing Sisi more harshly.

At the same time, the death of Morsi and other Brotherhood figures sends a sobering message to Sisi's opponents: that he is willing to go as far as it takes to stay in power, even if it means letting his rivals perish in prison. This realization will no doubt deter many Egyptians from taking sides against him, and mass protests grieving Morsi's death are unlikely. In the longer term, Sisi will have to confront the challenge of potential unification between the Islamist and non-Islamist opposition; for now, though, he remains secure in his power.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR U.S. POLICY?

The U.S. government should not comment on the matter, since that would risk being misinterpreted as pro-Brotherhood sentiment by the majority of Egyptians who hate Morsi and his organization. Morsi was never a friend of America or a believer in Western values; rather, he was bigoted against Coptic Christians and Jews. It is telling that the only regional actors mourning his loss are pro-Iran terrorist groups (Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad) and supporters of Islamism (Erdogan, Qatar). The Trump administration has never publicly mentioned Morsi's treatment in prison or human rights status before, and staying silent now is its wisest course. Any hint of sympathy toward Morsi would give U.S. opponents in the region more ammunition to discredit American allies, thereby complicating relations with vital Arab states at a time when a unified front against Iranian aggression is crucially needed.

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