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Whose Egypt?

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After a tantalizing delay, Egypt's military authorities accepted the inevitable. Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was declared elected as president a week ago and took the oath of office on Saturday (June 30, 2012). A development of such magnitude was unthinkable before Hosni Mubarak surrendered power to the military in February 2011 amid a massive popular uprising against his regime. For nearly 60 years since the 1952 Egyptian revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood had been the main source of opposition to the ruling establishment. The prospect of the Brotherhood's candidate being allowed to stand, let alone freely campaign, for the presidency had looked remote.

That the Islamist movement has survived despite long state repression, and its own internal conflicts, will be seen as a remarkable feat. Since the Brotherhood's founding by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, when Egypt was under British rule, the movement's anti-Western ideology and commitment to an Islamist order as the remedy to the "ills" of colonialism and imperialism have made it an object of admiration as well as fear in much of the Muslim world. The organization has transformed itself many a time and promises to work by peaceful means. Even so, its activities, and those of its breakaway factions, have generated profound distrust among many secular and Western-oriented people in the Arab world and beyond.

Morsi's victory comes in controversial circumstances. Sections of Egypt's educated middle classes are far from happy. Leading secular and liberal candidates were eliminated, even though together they had gained more than forty percent of the vote in the first round. It meant that Morsi and Ahmed Shafiq, a prominent figure from the Mubarak era, entered the final round representing opposite poles. Shafiq was initially disqualified as a candidate, but was quickly reinstated. The Egyptian armed forces apparently did not want to let go after the fall of Mubarak from the presidency.

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Although a member of the ruling elite despised by many, Shafiq came close to being elected as Egypt's president. But it was not to be. Displaying their influence in society, Muslim Brotherhood volunteers collected unofficial counts from precincts around the country. The overall tally showed Morsi getting fifty-two percent of the vote. The delay in making the formal announcement of Morsi's victory, which caused anxiety and tension in Egyptian society, is a topic of speculation. It appears that ultimately the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces reconciled itself with the new reality. However, before it happened the military council granted itself sweeping powers in all important areas, including defense and foreign policies and internal security.

For now, the elected president is Mohamed Morsi, but real power remains with the military. American aid of 1.3 billion dollars a year since Egypt signed the 1978 Camp David accords, and made peace with Israel, enabled Washington to exercise enormous power over the Egyptian armed forces. Those developments following President Anwar Sadat's defection from the Soviet camp neutralized Egypt's official backing for Palestinians and isolated Egypt in the Arab world. Sadat also enraged many in his own country. His assassination in 1981 led to Mubarak's rise to the presidency and the rest is history.

Despite the recent political upheaval, it is difficult to see how Egypt's conduct on the international stage can alter. For unless the country has a constitution defining the powers of the president, the parliament and the judiciary, the chairman of the Supreme Military Council, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, remains the most powerful man and President Morsi his deputy.

There is another possible explanation of what was a soft military coup prior to Morsi's victory. It suggests that military's move was not so much against the Egyptian people, but was to prevent Hosni Mubarak handing over power to his son, Gamal. In that scenario, Egypt would have turned into a country ruled by a single family like most other states in the region. So, it is said, the military moved against Mubarak, one from its own ranks, to maintain its control in the country. If Gamal Mubarak had succeeded his father, Egypt would be on the road to becoming a family dynasty such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait or Qatar, where institutions are more frail and the rule of law has corroded.

Questions about Egypt's constitutional future persist. A multi-layered battle is set to continue between the military and civilians, Islamists and secularists, conservatives and liberals. Many eyes will be on parliamentary elections if and when they take place. For now, those firmly entrenched in power and those in the population yearning to see a new Egypt confront each other. The most important country in the Arab world is going to be looking inward rather than outward. And it is what happens in Egyptian society that is going to affect the rest of the Middle East.

Can President Morsi possibly order permanent twenty-four hour opening of the Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza? The answer is: "Not likely."

Post-scriptum :

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