

Egypt's New President Is Being Undercut by State-Run Media
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By David D. Kirkpatrick and Mayy El Sheikh

CAIRO — Egypt's state news media, the traditionally admiring chronicler of Egypt's head of state, are at war with the new president.

To be sure, state broadcasters and newspapers here still appear to celebrate President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood as Egypt's first democratically elected leader. That is also the official position of Egypt's top generals who took power at the ouster of Hosni Mubarak and now insist that Mr. Morsi's swearing-in fulfilled their promise of a civilian democracy.

But as Mr. Morsi moved this week to challenge the generals, the state media have quickly allied with the generals, persistently undercutting the new president while still ostensibly honoring his position.

That apparently contradictory result has made it clear who still holds the real power over the Egyptian bureaucracy. On Tuesday, for example, Mr. Morsi summoned back into session the democratically elected Parliament that the generals had dissolved after a hurried court ruling. But the headline in the newspaper Al Ahram reported only the statement of the ruling generals: "The armed forces belong to the people and will remain on the side of the constitution and legitimacy."

The only front-page article to focus on Mr. Morsi's decision to recall the Parliament blamed it for causing the Egyptian stock market to tank. A front-page photograph depicted the president shoulder to shoulder — and notably shorter — next to the top military officer, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi.

While private news channels interviewed defiant lawmakers leaving the Parliament, the main state network switched to documentaries, including an anniversary tribute to Egypt's secret police.

The state media campaign against Mr. Morsi is part of a bewildering power struggle in the streets, the courts and back rooms that has all but paralyzed Egypt's government. With its economy sputtering and its currency at risk of collapse, Egypt badly needs a stable government that can make credible commitments to the lenders, beginning with the International Monetary Fund. But in the continuing standoff between Mr. Morsi and the generals, almost no one can say for sure who is in charge.

"It is like a psychological war in our midst, and no one knows what is going on," said Mohamed Salem, 26, selling cigarettes in the street because he could not find a job.

The military council had seemed to be "out of the game" but still seized Parliament, Mr. Salem continued, growing agitated. And then Mr. Morsi had taken his oath before the constitutional court but immediately defied its authority. "Who can understand this?" he complained.

The war within the Egyptian state media offensive against the president has extended to coverage of a planned visit by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton this weekend as well. Al Ahram has emphasized all week that Washington is divided and wary about the first president from the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group long critical of Israel and the West.

But the front page of its English-language weekly took an opposite tack to undercut the president by portraying him as the pawn of Washington. Although wildly counterintuitive, that conspiracy theory has tapped into the deep popular distrust here of the United States.

Mr. Morsi's decree restoring Parliament "was intended to send a message to the military and other authorities, warning them that the Americans want him to assume full powers and that they are ready to protect him to achieve this objective," Al Ahrām Weekly quoted Diaa Rashwan of Al Ahrām Center for Political and Strategic Studies as saying. The report noted that Mr. Morsi issued the order not long after meeting with Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns.

The paper even quoted a former leftist presidential candidate, Abul-Ezz El-Hariri, suggesting that the United States hoped to use the establishment of a religious state as a pretext for invasion. Emad Shahin, a political scientist at the American University in Cairo, said the state media's attacks on the head of state made the situation perfectly clear: Mr. Morsi represented a double threat as the first civilian and the first Islamist to hold the presidency.

"This is a deliberate and well-orchestrated campaign to shake Morsi's image, ensure his failure and frustrate the revolution," Mr. Shahin said.

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