

Clinton Visits Egypt, Carrying a Muted Pledge of Support
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By David D. Kirkpatrick

CAIRO — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton arrived in Egypt on Saturday for meetings with its newly elected Islamist president and the chief of its still-dominant military council, declaring that the United States “supports the full transition to civilian rule with all that entails.”

But after weeks of internal debate across the Obama administration over how to respond to the ongoing struggle between the president and the generals, Mrs. Clinton touched on it only lightly, saying she looked forward to working “to support the military’s return to a purely national security role.”

State Department officials said the meeting itself sent a historic message. Seated in an ornate room in the presidential palace, Mrs. Clinton smiled for cameras and traded pleasantries with President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist jailed more than once by the American-backed autocracy overthrown 18 months ago. She became the highest ranking United States official to meet Mr. Morsi since he was sworn in two weeks ago as Egypt’s first democratically elected president.

But her outreach to the new president appeared constrained by evident reluctance to address his struggle to pry power from the generals. Her muted tone, State Department officials said, reflected a growing sense that American attempts to intercede may be futile in a contest where the outcome remains uncertain, all the players are deeply suspicious of American motives, and almost any statement could elicit a popular backlash.

Instead of calling for an immediate handover of power as American officials have in the past, Mrs. Clinton instead emphasized only the need for “building consensus across the Egyptian political spectrum.” In brief remarks after the meeting with Mr. Morsi, her sole reference to the military decrees dissolving the Islamist-led Parliament and eviscerating his powers was a call for “consensus” among all sides in order “to work on a new constitution and Parliament, to protect civil society, to draft a new constitution that will be respected by all, and to assert the full authority of the presidency.”

A senior State Department official, speaking on the condition of anonymity in a briefing to reporters, said Mrs. Clinton planned to deliver virtually the same message in a private meeting with Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, Egypt’s top military commander, as she did in public remarks on Saturday.

The goal, the official said, was “to engage in that dialogue and to avoid the kind of confrontation that could potentially lead to the transition veering off track,” while leaving the military’s decree taking over Parliament’s powers as a matter for Egyptians courts and politicians to decide.

Mrs. Clinton’s tone appeared softer than that of State Department comments made only a few weeks ago, when the military council had moved to disband Parliament on the eve of the presidential race. A State Department spokeswoman then publicly urged the generals to meet their “commitments to the Egyptian people” to turn over power and warned of consequences for the broader American alliance if they did not.

Mrs. Clinton's visit appeared to be a triumph of pragmatism over idealism within the Obama administration, and perhaps even within the secretary herself.

As recently as two days ago, State Department officials said, Mrs. Clinton had planned to deliver a what was billed as a major speech about the Egyptian democracy on Monday, in Alexandria. But with Egypt's contest for power in rapidly shifting flux, there were too many questions, too many pitfalls and too little new for Mrs. Clinton to offer, said several people briefed on the process. After rejecting at least three different drafts, Mrs. Clinton called off the speech virtually on the eve of her arrival.

Along with their core strategic concerns about maintaining a stable ally in Cairo and preserving the peace with Israel, State Department officials say they continue to hope that Egypt will move toward a more democratic and fully civilian form of government. But at the moment, American policy is beset from all sides.

The generals, who seized power last year after the ouster of the strongman Hosni Mubarak, have repeatedly rebuffed American pressure. The new president, Mr. Morsi, and the other leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood still harbor deep doubts about Washington's agenda and have repeatedly surprised American officials in Washington with the accelerating pace of their moves to take power.

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