

After Meeting With Clinton, Egypt's Military Chief Steps Up Political Feud
The New York Times
July 15, 2012
By Kareem Fahim

CAIRO — Egypt's top military official stepped up his feud with the Muslim Brotherhood on Sunday, saying the army would prevent Egypt from falling to a "certain group," according to the state news agency.

The remarks by the official, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, did not mention the Brotherhood by name but were widely seen as a reference to the group and to Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's newly elected president and a former Brotherhood leader. And they came just hours after Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton met with the field marshal in Cairo in an effort to prod Egypt's military to hand its power to civilians.

The accelerating dispute between the military and the Brotherhood marked the latest unpredictable turn in Egypt's chaotic transition, and underscored the challenges Mrs. Clinton faced on her two-day visit to Egypt.

Constrained by an almost complete mistrust of the United States' motives, Mrs. Clinton was forced to avoid strong calls for a quick end to military rule, favoring language instead that called for Egyptian solutions along with respect for minority rights.

And with little leverage except a promise of economic assistance, she struggled to coax the military and Mr. Morsi to resolve their rift.

She also faced anger from Christian leaders, including some who boycotted a meeting with her on Sunday, objecting to what they said was interference by the United States in Egypt's politics in order to aid an Islamist rise to power.

Though there is little evidence that the Islamists needed American help in gaining power — or indeed, received it — the complaints reflected the country's anxious politics and growing concerns among many Christians and secular-minded Egyptians about Islamist rule.

After meeting Mr. Morsi on Saturday, Mrs. Clinton sat down on Sunday morning with Field Marshal Tantawi, whose military council took power after President Hosni Mubarak was deposed last year. The military still retains broad legislative and executive authority, having seized further powers before the presidential election in June.

After the meeting, which lasted a little over an hour, a senior State Department official said Field Marshal Tantawi and Mrs. Clinton had discussed the economy, regional security, "the political transition" and the military's "ongoing dialogue with President Morsi."

Field Marshal Tantawi emphasized that Egyptians needed "help getting the economy back on track," the official said. "The secretary stressed the importance of protecting the rights of all Egyptians, including women and minorities."

But just hours after the meeting, Mrs. Clinton appeared to have achieved little reconciliation between the two sides. "Egypt will not fall," Field Marshal Tantawi said at a military ceremony. "It is for all Egyptians, not for a certain group — the armed forces will not allow that."

Mrs. Clinton's afternoon meeting with leaders of Egypt's Christian minority touched on one of the transition's rawest nerves: the fear that Mr. Morsi and his allies would move swiftly to lay the foundations of a pious, Muslim state.

Those anxieties have caused some liberals and Coptic leaders to support the military in its feud with the Brotherhood, and even to call on the generals to keep power until new elections for Parliament can be held.

In trying to ease the Islamists' grip on government, liberals have also been accused of being content to subvert the will of Egyptians, who voted a majority of Islamists into Parliament. And despite the Brotherhood's repeated successes at the ballot box, some have continued to implicate the United States.

Youssef Sidhom, who attended the round-table afternoon meeting with Mrs. Clinton at the American Embassy here, said some of the discomfort was rooted in the timing of American statements on Egypt, which seemed to "bless democracy" just as Islamists were winning.

"She kept repeating and assuring us that she has no intention to take sides," said Mr. Sidhom, who edits a newspaper that deals with Coptic concerns. He said that Mrs. Clinton, noting the Brotherhood's political skills, spoke to the Christian leaders about becoming a more organized political force.

A senior State Department official, speaking of meetings on Sunday with entrepreneurs, women's groups and Christian leaders, said Mrs. Clinton was trying "to make absolutely clear where we stand on this political transition, which is that we support a full transition to civilian democratic rule and a constitution that protects the human rights and freedoms of all Egyptians."

In Egypt's current muddled politics, though, those goals are hard to reconcile. Revolutionary groups and human rights activists have warned that continued involvement by the military, which many people here accuse of staging a de facto coup, would undermine the Constitution's legitimacy. But others, including Christian leaders Mrs. Clinton met with on Sunday, see the military as the only guarantor of a constitution that protects minority rights.

"She can say what she wants concerning the issue," said Emad Gad, a former member of Parliament who said he had refused to attend the meeting with Mrs. Clinton.

"We are living in an unstable period. If the SCAF goes back to its barracks," he said, referring to the military council by its initials, "the Brotherhood will control everything."

Mr. Gad added: "It's an Egyptian issue. It's not for the secretary of state."

Mai Ayyad contributed reporting.

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