What Morsy Must Do to Avoid Being Egypt's President in Name Only
Time.com
June 26, 2012
By Tony Karon

Mohamed Morsy's election as President marked a watershed moment for Egypt, but unless he can repair the rifts with other opposition groups, the military will be calling the shots.

Egypt marked a milestone on Sunday by announcing the election of Mohamed Morsy as its first civilian President, but it's a very early milestone on what remains a long, perilous journey toward democracy. Morsy was democratically elected and will enjoy the symbolic trappings of the presidency — he began working in the presidential palace on Monday — but he won't have many of the powers typically associated with the office. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) essentially switched the chairs around, stripping Morsy of most of the key prerogatives of executive power enjoyed by his predecessors, leaving him with the title of President but the powers more typically enjoyed by a Prime Minister in a presidential system. The democratically elected President does, however, enjoy unprecedented legitimacy, and it therefore becomes a perch from which Morsy can press for a more thorough democratic transition — but only if he corrects some of the political mistakes made by the Muslim Brotherhood since the ouster of former President Hosni Mubarak.

Once sworn in, possibly next weekend, Morsy will have have no control over the budget and no decisive role in foreign policy, defense or national-security matters. Nor will he have the symbolic status of Commander in Chief of the armed forces. The junta has kept all those functions for itself, as well as claiming de facto control over the constitution-writing process. The SCAF has also dissolved the democratically elected parliament on the basis of a technicality unearthed by its allies in the judiciary, taking the prerogatives of the legislature for itself, and has signaled that it may opt to curtail Morsy's term once a new constitution has been written. Morsy's authority will be largely restricted to domestic matters, such as economic, education and social policies — the sorts of thing a Prime Minister deals with in a presidential system. The powers of Egypt's presidency, as enjoyed by Mubarak, have been largely usurped by the generals.

Still, the junta arguably made a smart decision to pull back from any temptation to manipulate the election results in order to hand the presidency to Mubarak's former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik, in what would have been a symbolic reversal of every democratic gain made since the strongman's ouster in February 2011. Such a move would have been intolerable to both the Islamists and the various secular opposition groups and would have pushed those rival camps together into the streets in a common struggle against military rule. Playing the Islamists and the secular opposition against each other has been a hallmark of the junta's politics over the past 16 months, so giving them an incentive to unite would have been counterintuitive. The generals' divide-and-rule tactics have already had plenty of help from opposition forces, who failed to forge a common outlook and strategy for a democratic transformation in Egypt and ended up perennially at odds with one another, allowing SCAF to take a dominant position.

Morsy and the Muslim Brotherhood — from which he has formally resigned in order, he says, "to be the President of all Egyptians" — are well aware of the limits on the presidency and the need for a protracted struggle for civilian rule. "President-elect Morsy is pushing back already," writes Steven A. Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations. "While paying homage to the Egyptian armed forces, his camp has already declared that they do not recognize the dissolution of the parliament or the legality of the military's

decree." But, he notes, while "the Brotherhood has the symbolic advantage, it does not have the means to impose its will on the officers."

Indeed, the junta has demonstrated how little the Brotherhood's electoral strength matters in the current power arrangement, in which elected bodies can be summarily dissolved by unelected generals. Changing that arrangement will require a broad consensus among opposition groups, which is why Morsy is reaching out, at least rhetorically, to repair the bridges with rival opposition groups the Brotherhood had burned in recent months.

Following Mubarak's fall, the Brothers saw the limited electoral-democratic space opened up by the generals as the key platform from which to press for civilian rule. This view was dismissed by many of the Brotherhood's critics among the more radical revolutionaries in Tahrir Square, who saw the strategy as self-serving use of the Brotherhood's electoral advantages to create a de facto Islamist-military alliance. The Brotherhood's vast organizational infrastructure allowed it to dominate the democratic elections that began last November, garnering 45% of the vote. What was more surprising, however, was the the fact that a further 25% of the vote went to its more extremist Islamist rival, the ideologically Salafist Nour Party.

The election results alarmed both the generals and the secular opposition, and the Brotherhood's performance in parliament — particularly when it came to stacking the assembly with Islamists to draft a new constitution — reinforced those fears, stoking hostility on which the military could capitalize by repositioning itself as the guardians of secularism. When the Brothers reversed an earlier pledge not to seek the presidency, many of its rivals were convinced that the Islamists were seeking a monopoly on power rather than a broad-based democracy. Now the presidency, limited as it is, has given the Brotherhood the opportunity for a political do-over that reverses some of its key mistakes over the past 16 months.

Generals looking to hold onto power would be best served if the Islamists pursue narrow, self-interested policies that alienate and antagonize the rest of the democratic camp, allowing the military to continue playing the two sides against each other. If the Brotherhood fails to curb its instinct to monopolize power, it will be dangerously isolated, held accountable for the socioeconomic mess that is contemporary Egypt but with little means of transforming the situation.

The movement's electoral strength encouraged political overreach by the Brotherhood in the year and a half since Mubarak fell. It may have had little use for liberal, nationalist or leftist allies in achieving voting majorities either in elections or in the legislature, but ongoing military rule meant those institutions themselves were fluid and could be collapsed at will by the generals. The real balance of power in Egyptian society was not going to be determined in elections while the country was effectively ruled by generals who clearly have no inclination to graciously subordinate themselves to democratic civilian rule. And the Brotherhood and the liberals need each other more than either has been ready to acknowledge in order to change that reality.

On the other hand, the parliamentary-election results will have prompted the Brotherhood to look over its right shoulder and, seeing its traditional support base being eroded by the challenge of Salafists, tack towards conservative Islamist positions to shore up its core constituency — at the cost of alienating secular opposition groups. But while it's the largest and strongest electoral force, the Brotherhood's stature is insufficient to best the military in the struggle for power. That alone behooves it to forge a broader democratic front by being more inclusive of those it has been ready to ignore on the basis of electoral calculations.

"The Muslim Brotherhood has appeared to place all its bets on its electoral strength," noted the International Crisis Group in an astute analysis this week, "shunning serious efforts to reassure key constituencies. It has antagonised the military, turned its back on the revolutionary movement, failed to reach out to secular forces, made insufficient gestures toward the Coptic Christian minority, threatened supporters of the old regime and repeatedly reneged on its pledges. In recent days, it has taken some steps to extend a hand to others in the opposition but far more is needed after eighteen months of snubbing them. Overall, although it enjoys formal democratic legitimacy, the Brotherhood has rallied against itself too broad and too determined a section of society for electoral mathematics alone to be decisive."

The Muslim Brotherhood has gained a tenuous but potentially important foothold as a result of Morsy's election, although extending the scope of democratic civilian rule remains a Herculean challenge — not only because of the authority of the generals but also because the vast bureaucracy that remains in place to implement government policy is a fortress of support for Shafik and can be expected to mount fierce resistance to the new President.

Morsy and his movement's only hope of tipping the balance lies in establishing a government that represents a democratic consensus far broader than the Brotherhood has attempted. To the extent that it can re-establish the main political dividing line in Egypt as being between military rule and civilian democracy, rather than between Islamists and secular democrats, it has a fighting chance of making progress in rolling back the authoritarian post-Mubarak state. But given the depth and complexity of political division and mistrust in a society racked by growing socioeconomic stresses, getting the political balance right may require a level of political agility and maturity that the Muslim Brotherhood has yet to evince.

Source: http://world.time.com/2012/06/26/what-morsy-must-do-to-avoid-being-egypts-president-in-name-only/#ixzz2TmIkuacc