

Is Egypt's President Morsy Really Challenging the Ruling Junta?

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To immediate appearances, Egypt's newly elected President looks like he has started his first serious confrontation with the ruling military junta. Mohamed Morsy, the first elected leader in the country's history, issued a bold presidential decree on Sunday. According to the state news agency, Morsy ordered the reinstatement of the country's Islamist-dominated parliament — a body that the generals had dissolved last month — and called for a new parliamentary election within two months of the ratification of a new constitution. The junta quickly held an "emergency" meeting to discuss Morsy's decree.

According to Hala Mustafa, a political analyst at the state-run al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, it's just the latest manifestation of a largely opaque but inevitable power struggle. "I think it will be like this for the coming period of time," she says. "Each side — the SCAF [Supreme Council of the Armed Forces] on one side, and the Muslim Brotherhood and the President on the other — will be trying to consolidate their power on the ground."

The military had appeared ready to pre-empt this sort of conflict last month. Days ahead of Egypt's runoff presidential vote, the country's Supreme Court — packed with judges appointed by ousted President Hosni Mubarak — ruled that the law governing the parliament's elections was unconstitutional. In a move widely deemed political, SCAF then ordered parliament's dissolution and seized full legislative — and partial executive — control for itself, effectively manipulating power out of the Islamists' hands before the latter won the presidency as well.

If Morsy is indeed sticking it to the generals now, Egypt could be in for a new round of conflict. But some analysts say that Morsy and the junta likely worked out a power-sharing deal well before the Islamist President, representing the most reliably pragmatic political organization in the country, took his presidential oath on June 24. A closer examination of the decree suggests a deal may be in the works this time too. To start, Morsy's declared reinstatement of parliament isn't absolute — it's only valid until a new constitution is ratified.

After that, Morsy has called for a new parliamentary election. That's something that may be necessary under a new constitution, but it's also a plan that the generals had already laid out when they seized legislative power for themselves. If the generals had known of Morsy's plan ahead of time — a possibility made more likely by the fact that the decree reached the public by way of the state news agency — it may be because the move signifies a win-win situation for both parties. Morsy saves face by keeping his promise to keep parliament functioning, while ultimately conceding an election do-over to SCAF several months down the road. Mustafa believes SCAF is unlikely to challenge Morsy's decree "because the other option would be an open clash," although she dismisses any suggestion of a deal.

Of course, that's assuming the decree actually holds. If the military was indeed caught off guard by Morsy's challenge, it can count on the constitutional court to stand in his way. The court will most likely declare Morsy's decree invalid. How the drama unfolds in that scenario is anybody's guess.

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