

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/NL15Ak02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/NL15Ak02.html)

## Egypt faces a 'dark tunnel'

By Victor Kotsev

12/15/2012

Egypt goes to the polls on Saturday in the first round of a referendum that will shape the future of the regime there and perhaps even the course of the Arab Spring in general.

Amid continuing clashes and extraordinarily high tensions - including allegations of fraud in early voting of expatriates in embassies across the world - Egyptians are set to approve or reject a controversial new constitution that draws heavily on Islamic law. The instability could have wide-ranging consequences, and even scenarios such as an army coup or an Islamist dictatorship are not out of question.

Three weeks after President Mohammed Morsi, the democratically elected former leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, assumed powers that would make most Middle Eastern dictators blush, Egypt is aflame. Rival demonstrations of his supporters and opponents are taking place daily, the army has been deployed on the streets, and several people have been killed while untold numbers wounded in the violence.

When 90% of judges, who normally supervise polls, refused to have anything to do with the referendum, the president was forced to split the voting over two consecutive Saturdays. Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund delayed a vital loan of US\$4.8 billion, the country's stock market plunged, and the largest industrial city in Egypt, El-Mahalla El-Kubra, symbolically declared itself an "Independent Republic" free of Brotherhood rule.

The secular opposition, led by figures such as the former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, accused Morsi of "pharaonic" dictatorship and charged that the new constitution would essentially usher in an Islamic regime. It would trample the country's diversity - between 10 and 20% of Egypt's population consists of Christian Copts - and would give Islamic judges an extraordinary influence over the legal system. News that an outspoken atheist from a Coptic family had been sentenced to three years in jail for "blasphemy" this week further fueled these fears.

Ironically, when Morsi laid hands on various judiciary prerogatives last month, ostensibly in order to push through the new constitution, he loosely mirrored a move made in June by the Brotherhood's arch-enemy, the high military command. [1]

The president engineered a soft coup in August, at least temporarily ending the bitter rivalry and forcing into retirement the heads of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the body that had ruled the country for over a year after the ouster of former president Hosni Mubarak. Now, it seems, he appropriated their methods, seeking to cement firmly the Brotherhood's hold on power.

The military, headed by younger officers who are ostensibly Morsi's allies, so far has not taken a side and has called for national unity in order to prevent the country from slipping into "a dark tunnel". Its efforts appear to have had a constructive effect - in a surprise move days ago, the main opposition parties announced that they would campaign for a "no" vote rather than boycott the referendum altogether and thus call into question its legitimacy.

However, the Egyptian military is an extraordinarily complex and influential organization, the enmity between it and the Muslim Brotherhood has run deep for over half a century, and the situation is explosive enough to raise fears that further instability could lead to an army coup. The metaphor of a "dark tunnel" may prove as accurate as it is ominous.

Even more-scary possibilities exist. If the referendum succeeds and Morsi manages to shake off the protests, this would leave him with unprecedented powers and could inspire the Islamists to pursue an even more radical social and political agenda. While it is too early to claim that Egypt is following in the footsteps of the Iranian revolution in 1979, such a scenario is not altogether out of question.

The Muslim Brotherhood has made some conciliatory moves in the past, but it is unclear how sincere these are, and besides, the Brotherhood is not the only Islamist movement on the Egyptian scene. It is difficult to overlook the fact that its extremist rival, the Salafi al-Nour party, commanded 20% of the vote in the previous parliamentary elections.

A more optimistic outcome would involve a compromise between the rivals, but the tensions are unlikely to disappear. The rivalry between the Brotherhood and the military - arguably the two strongest camps on the Nile - would resurface in the months and years to come, and transient alliances would be formed as the country struggles to ameliorate its political, economic and social climate. With the whole region in flux, it is very difficult to forecast the course of the developments or their repercussions.

Several patterns, however, are worth noting. One is the behavior of the administration of United States President Barack Obama, which strangely failed to condemn Morsi's power grab. As the Washington Post's senior analyst David Ignatius put it, "How did Washington become the best friend of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, even as President Mohamed Morsi was asserting dictatorial powers and his followers were beating up secular liberals in the streets of Cairo?"

Ignatius explains: "The administration's rejoinder is that this isn't about America. Egyptians and other Arabs are writing their history now, and they will have to live with the consequences. Moreover, the last thing secular protesters need is an American embrace. That's surely true, but it's crazy for Washington to appear to take sides against those who want a liberal, tolerant Egypt and for those who favor sharia [Islamic law]. Somehow, that's where the administration has ended up." [2]

In a symbolic move that signals American support for Morsi, the US announced this week that it will begin delivery of 20 fighter jets to Egypt next year, fulfilling a deal signed in 2010. The F-16s will augment more than 200 advanced jets in Cairo's inventory, and according to a Pentagon spokesman will "enhance Egypt's capacity to contribute to regional mission sets".

Moreover, it is worth noting that both of Morsi's recent power grabs came on the heels of important military and foreign policy developments. In August, the president sacked the army chiefs after a bloody cross-border terrorist attack into Israel, which the Israelis parried but which cost the lives of 17 Egyptian soldiers. Last month, Morsi was credited with brokering the ceasefire between Israel and Gaza militants, and several influential analysts have argued that he relied on the boost to his prestige in order to make his domestic move.

The Israeli connection in both cases may be purely coincidental, but it would appear that in Morsi's mind foreign and domestic policy are inextricably linked. It could be that Obama, too, sees things this way - perhaps even grooming Egypt for a greater role in conflicts such as the Syrian civil war.

If so, it is an extraordinarily risky bet on a country whose economy is in ruins and which is on the verge of political chaos. Egypt was once, nearly two years ago, a source of inspiration for the Arab Spring. Now it could become its nightmare metaphor.

*Notes:*

1. See A coup by law: SCAF consolidates power, Egypt Independent, June 18, 2012.
2. Our man in Cairo, Washington Post, December 8, 2012.