

## **EGYPT: TWO SEPARATE PROTESTS CHALLENGE PRESIDENT MORSI'S LEADERSHIP**

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Egyptian President Morsi is currently facing one of the worst challenges to his leadership since he has been elected last year: at least 54 people were killed during clashes with police in the last five days, hundreds were injured or arrested, curfews and a state of emergency were declared in three provinces to deal with two separate protests. The riots take place during a political transition characterized by extreme polarization between President Morsi's Islamist and conservative supporters and secularists, liberals, left-wingers and Copts whose outcome is still unclear.

Demonstrations began on January 25th during the second anniversary of the uprising against the former president, Hosni Mubarak, and soon turned into protests against the Muslim Brotherhood government. The demonstrators accused President Morsi of betraying the revolution. Protesters wanted the repeal of the Islamist backed Constitution approved in a referendum in December 2012. There is deep disaffection with the way the new Constitution was approved and with the attempted decree of last November expanding the president's powers.

Other riots were sparked in Port Said on Saturday when it was announced the verdict of a court which sentenced 21 local citizens to death for their role in the violence during a football match in February 2012. After a match between al-Masry club playing at home to Cairo's al-Ahly, the supporters of the two teams killed 74 people, mostly visiting supporters. After the verdict, a mob attacked on Saturday police stations and the prison where the men were held. More than 30 people were killed and other clashes occurred the day after during the funerals. The riots spread to Ismailia and Port Suez.

On Sunday Mr Morsi in a televised speech spoke to the nation declaring the state of emergency, which allows security forces to arrest and detain at will, for 30 days in Port Said, Ismailia and Port Suez. He ordered also a night-time curfew to stay in place in the provinces where the riots took place. It is worth mentioning that during last summer's presidential race he had pledged never to impose this measure because it was a characteristic of the previous Mubarak's regime.

On Monday one man was killed in clashes near Tahrir square in Cairo, police stations were attacked and, according to the state TV, 590 people were injured across the country that day alone. In response to the violence the cabinet approved a draft law

whose text says the army will "support the police in maintaining order and protecting vital installations until the end of parliamentary elections and whenever the National Defence Council requests it". To recall the National Defence Council is headed by the President.

Mr Morsi has also urged the opposition to talks at the presidential palace on Monday evening in an effort to calm the situation but only the Islamists decided to participate. The National Salvation Front (NSF), whose coordinator is the former UN diplomat Mohamed El Baradei and whose leaders are the former head of the Arab League, Amr Moussa and the leftist leader, Hamdeen Sabahi, rejected the invitation dismissing it as "unserious". The NSF asks for a commission to amend the constitution, the formation of a national unity government and the anticipation of the next presidential elections due in 2016. The Front has called for more protests on Friday.

The NSF has depicted the explosion of riots as a backlash against the attempts carried out by the Muslim Brotherhood to monopolize powers and as the proof that the government doesn't have the legitimacy to bring security and achieve reforms. However the liberal and secular opposition will need time to translate the public anger into electoral power. To recall, the Islamists dominated elections for the parliament in late 2011 and early 2012 even if President Morsi won the presidency with less than 52 percent of the vote.

Although the protests are different and originated by separate issues, they underline the widespread loss of confidence in state institutions, particularly the judiciary and the security services. The residents of Port Said are angry about the death sentence inflicted to the prosecuted al-Masry fans because they perceive it as politically motivated, made to appease the violent hooligans of the al-Ahly football team in Cairo. For the city's demonstrators, the football supporters are scapegoats even because the authorities responsible for security at that football match have not been brought to justice.

Political protesters blame President Morsi for having failed to hold former officials accountable for their alleged crimes and for not having carried out reforms in the interior ministry. His supporters accuse the opposition of seeking to overthrow the first ever democratically elected leader through undemocratic means.

The current distrust of state institution is caused by the widespread belief that the justice system is unchanged and the courts are politicized and corrupted, especially after the acquittals of all those accused of killing protesters during the revolution. Of the nearly 170 security officers charged with using violence against civilians in the past two years, only two have been convicted.

The military could be a key player for the solution of the crisis. President Morsi praised the conduct of security forces expressing his trust on them. The Islamist-backed Constitution grants the security establishment a great autonomy within the Egyptian government, certainly for a reciprocal recognition. However it is unclear whether the generals would put at risk their credibility, already weak for their role in the past regime, participating in the crackdown against the current riots.

This crisis shows that Egypt is still struggling to find a balance between a democratic elected government accused of pursuing an Islamist agenda, betraying the goals of

the revolution, and the old establishments, the judiciary and the military, of the past regime. Even the opposition lacks credibility because is accused of incoherence and opportunism.

To make things worse there is the disastrous economic situation because foreign investment and tourism dwindle. Furthermore, there is an alarming increase of militias such as the anarchist Black Block and Salafist affiliates.

Clearly, President Morsi hopes that the hard line can restore calm but the adopted measures could backfire since they are perceived too similar to the most despised weapons of former President Hosni Mubarak. If the government will not be able to make some concessions to the opposition, trying to rebuild the state authority by political solutions instead than by security crackdowns, more widespread violence and even the return to military rule may become possible in the future.

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