

THE MORSI TRIAL: A GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

*By Edoardo Camilli
Independent consultant*

On Monday, November 4, 2013, Egypt's former president Mohamed Morsi rejected the authority of the court due to try him and 14 other officials for their alleged involvement in the death of protesters demonstrating outside Cairo's presidential palace last December. Morsi's move was widely expected following months of statements in which he defined the upcoming trial as illegal. Morsi has also chosen not to be represented by a lawyer, as it would automatically imply the legitimacy of the trial.

Monday's hearing begun with a two-hour delay and was interrupted soon after its beginning due to the chants from the defendants. Therefore, the trial has been set to resume on January 8, 2014.

The beginning of the trial was accompanied by increasing tensions in the country. Consequently, a state of alert was announced in previous days by the police, as nationwide protests were called by Muslim Brotherhood activists. The tension sparked by the trial was so high that court officials preferred not to broadcast it on public television; still on Sunday the very presence of ex-president Morsi at the court was not confirmed due to security reasons. Indeed, deadly protests begun right after Morsi was ousted from power on July 3. More than 1,000 pro-Morsi supporters have died since then and terrorist and sectarian attacks have risen exponentially.

However, contrary to the case of Hosni Mubarak the Morsi trial has provoked mixed emotions till the point to split the country in two separate blocks: Morsi's supporters on the one side, Army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's supporters on the other side. The split, however, is not only domestic but it reflects a geopolitical divide between the supporters of the Army (the United States) and those of the Muslim Brotherhood (Qatar).

In his Sunday visit to Egypt, US Secretary of State John Kerry stated that "*The road map is being carried out to the best of our perception*" referring to the plans for the new Constitution. The sentence, though cryptic, might signify a u-turn in the US policy toward Cairo. After months in which Washington suspended military and financial aids to Egypt, the US seems willing to restore the relationship at the *status quo ante* no matter what steps are taken by the military junta to reinstall democracy. Too many interests links in fact the two countries (Israel, the fight against terrorism, maritime transports through the Suez Canal) to depend on improvements on democratic standards (which Egypt is unlikely to fulfill, at least in the short term).

Conversely, Qatar has been sponsoring Morsi's regime since he came to power. In this regard, Qatar financed the regime with \$7.5 billion till last July. For this reason, the relations between Qatar and Egypt have become tens since the military took over. A series of "small crisis" have marked such deterioration in bilateral relations. In September Egypt decided to return a \$2 billion fund that Qatar deposited in Cairo's central bank. Moreover, Egypt has refused to increase flights between the two countries arguing that Qatari airliners have benefited the most during the increase registered during Morsi's government, at detriment of Egyptian ones. Furthermore, negotiations for the purchase of Qatari natural gas by Egypt are currently on hold. Last but not least, Egypt has closed Al Jazeera's offices in Cairo, accusing the news channel of backing Morsi.

Nevertheless, although Qatar has been using the Muslim Brotherhood to extend its influence on the Arabian Peninsula and beyond, Doha could decide to reduce its support to the Brotherhood in order to preserve its long-term interests in Egypt. The Qatari recognition of Adly Mahmoud Mansour interim government could be

interpreted under this perspective. However, such policy change will require sometime to enter into full regime and contradictory moves could still be taken in the near future.

This policy change is also necessary if Qatar wants to balance Saudi Arabia's influence in Egypt, which has increased since Morsi's disposal. Given the US threat to curb military aid last summer, as a consequence of the violent crackdown against Islamists, Saudi Arabia along with Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates offered a \$12 billion aid to Egypt to fill the vacuum. This prompt support reflects the Kingdom's fear of religious movements and the instability affecting Egypt that could "contaminate" the Kingdom as well. Keeping the Muslim Brotherhood away from power is one of the top priorities in King Abdullah's agenda.

Given all this, acting President Mansour's task is not an easy one. Despite calls for a real change, the interim government is called to balance promises of democracy with stability. This means also countering both Islamists movements (Muslim Brotherhood and Nour Party), while at the same time easing the relations with their respective sponsors (Qatar and Saudi Arabia). In all this, the changing policy of Obama's administration toward the Middle East is further complicating Mansour's work, with a political and financial support always depending on a day-to-day judgment.

In conclusion, the military-backed interim government is called to balance competing interests, both domestics and internationals, in order to preserve Egypt from radical Islamist movements. At present, the military are the only actor in the country able to keep this balance. However, to keep this balance steady "everything needs to change...so everything can stay the same".