

COMMENTARY

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In the Aftermath of Egypt's Elections

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Following the announcement of his victory in the second round of the Egyptian presidential elections, Muhammad al-Mursi's supporters in Tahrir Square and elsewhere were ecstatic. Euphoric crowds of Muslim Brotherhood supporters sang and proudly waved the Egyptian flag and portraits of President-Elect al-Mursi. On the positive side, this was the first democratically-elected civilian president in Egyptian history and for this reason alone, celebration was in order. On the other side, three challenges confront the new president which may well determine the future trajectory of Egypt.

First, Egypt remains a highly divided country. Only 50 percent of those eligible to vote actually voted in the second round of presidential elections. Of these al-Mursi got just over half of the vote. What this means is that President al-Mursi has the support of only a quarter of the Egyptians. He would need to work hard to acquire the respect and support of the other 75 percent of Egyptian society. What is required is for the new president to reach out to the 10 percent Coptic Christians as well as the millions of secular Egyptians who fear Islamist authoritarian rule. Whilst al-Mursi has stated that he intends to rule from the centre and that his cabinet will include a cross-section of Egyptians from different political and religious persuasions, some in his own party have issued contradictory statements talking of strict Islamic Sharia law. The question which needs to be answered is whether the more pragmatic President can override the dictates of his party's rank and file.

The second and related challenge is in the area of foreign policy and more specifically how Egypt positions itself with regards to the Israel and the United States. The Egyptian-Israeli relations lie at the cornerstone of any viable prospect for broader Middle East peace. Key to understanding this relationship is how the Muslim Brotherhood President will interact with Hamas, which is often regarded as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Whilst al-

Mursi had stated that he will respect all Egypt's foreign obligations, which presumably also includes its peace treaty with Israel, his own supporters have spoken of a Middle Eastern caliphate with Jerusalem as the capital. Once again, can the new president stamp his pragmatic stance on his more radical party members?

Egypt's relationship with the United States is also key for geo-strategic reasons as Egypt is increasingly being challenged by a resurgent Iran. Whilst Egypt's military is aware of the threat from Iran and is also very conscious of the military and economic benefits Cairo receives from Washington, would these calculations also resonate with the Muslim Brotherhood?

This, in turn, comes to the final challenge confronting the new president, namely, relationship with the Egyptian military. Last week, the military effectively staged a coup by denuding the president of many of his powers. The president, for instance, is no longer the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and the military controls the budget and can veto legislation it does not like. Whilst some in the West, might well breathe a sigh of relief believing that the military could be playing the role that the Turkish armed forces used to play—as a guarantee of a secular state—thereby holding the Islamists at bay, it certainly undermines civil-military relations and Egyptian “democracy”. More importantly, the Egyptian generals' power-grab might well be motivated by baser considerations given their preponderant role in the Egyptian economy. The monopoly of the armed forces over the Egyptian economy needs to be challenged if the moribund state of the economy needs to take off and provide much needed jobs to Egypt's restive unemployed youth. Here then is the challenge: can the military serve as a guardian of secular values and thereby as a check on the Muslim Brotherhood whilst also retreating from the economic sphere?

If Egyptians can negotiate this triple challenge, the future of the country is assured; if not, we have another failed state in the making with disastrous consequences for the Middle Eastern region.

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