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EGYPT

Morsi's Moment

Egypt's Mohamed Morsi: Peacemaker, savior, tyrant?

By [Bobby Ghosh](#) / [Cairo](#) @ghoshworld | Nov. 28, 2012 | [59 Comments](#)

The most important man in the [Middle East](#) started 2012 as much a stranger to the people he now rules as he was to the rest of the world. Although Mohamed Morsi had long been part of the core leadership of Egypt's [Muslim Brotherhood](#), he was viewed as a back-room operator, largely unnoticed among the Islamic party's more charismatic political and religious figures. Not many outside of a handful of State Department Arabists in Washington had even heard his name.

And yet the year's end finds Morsi instantly identifiable worldwide, even as his intentions in Egypt and the region remain very much unclear. In recent weeks, he has been hailed as a peacemaker by the U.S. and Israel, a savior by the Palestinians, a statesman by much of the Arab world—and branded a tyrant by the tens of thousands who have jammed Cairo's iconic Tahrir Square since Nov. 22 to denounce him. Whether you think him a hero or a villain, the short, stocky Islamist with the professional air is navigating some of the world's trickiest political waters.

(MORE: An Interview with Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi: 'We're Learning How to Be Free')

Morsi doesn't pretend his tenure has been perfect and argues it can't be. Speaking with *TIME* in his first interview with the international media since the Gaza crisis, he points out that his government is Egypt's first experience of real democracy. "So what do you expect. Things to go very smooth? No. It has to be rough, at least," he says. But he also gives the impression of a man having a year to remember. "2012 is the best year for the Egyptians in their lives, in their history," he says. "We're suffering, but always a new birth is not easy, especially if it's the birth of a nation."



NADAV KANDER FOR TIME



When the interview was scheduled, Morsi was riding high. His successful brokering of a cease-fire between Israel and [Hamas](#) had given him widening international and domestic support, a feat unmatched by any other Arab leader in the modern era, and offered the prospect that Egypt might again lead the region as it did under Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s. Morsi had already displayed unexpectedly nimble political skills to pry executive power away from the Egyptian military. For a moment, there was even the possibility that Morsi had amassed just the right proportion of international credibility and domestic political capital to start delivering on the promise of the Arab Spring. But then he overreached. Instead of consolidating the power he had amassed in service of his country's emerging democracy, he grabbed for more.

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As Morsi spoke with TIME at the presidential palace in Cairo's Heliopolis suburb, most of Egypt's major cities were again ringing with the chant that had been the Arab Spring's rallying cry: "The people want the fall of the regime." The slogan that helped bring down Hosni Mubarak is now being hurled at the country's first democratically elected civilian President by both cronies of Mubarak and the revolutionaries who toppled him. In Tahrir Square, judges appointed by the old dictator, many of whom enabled his

decades-long repression of political dissent, joined their voices with liberal and secular activists. The most popular joke in Egypt these days is that Morsi has done the impossible: he has united the opposition.

Morsi achieved that by issuing an emergency decree on Nov. 22 appropriating for himself sweeping new powers, including immunity for his decisions from judicial challenge. The President insists his decree is a temporary measure designed to prevent politically motivated judges from undermining the process of creating a new constitution. But to critics, one particular provision, giving him "power to take all necessary measures" against threats to national security and to last year's revolution, smells of dictatorship. Mohamed ElBaradei, the Nobel Peace laureate and liberal politician, dubbed Morsi the new pharaoh.

For the rest of the world, however, and especially the U.S., the stakes are even higher. Whether Morsi proves to be a reformer or an autocrat will play an outsize role in the prospects for continued peace with Israel, the fate of democracy in the Middle East and the balance of power in the world's most unstable region. "We will soon learn what kind of leader he is," says a White House official, "because this current episode is very much a test of his capacity to work effectively with all the various interests in Egypt."

POLL: [Should Mohamed Morsi Be TIME's Person of the Year 2012?](#)

To the Top via Los Angeles

Morsi's path to the presidency is unique, not only for Egypt but also for a region where leaders tend to come from royalty or the military. Born into modest means in a village north of Cairo, Morsi escaped the dreary fate of millions of his impoverished countrymen by excelling at academics. An engineering degree in Cairo was followed by a seven-year stint in the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s, when he got a Ph.D. in materials science at the University of Southern California and then worked as an assistant professor at California State University at Northridge. His California years left Morsi with an abiding fondness for the Trojans, USC's football team, and the nickname Mo, an old friend said. Two of his five children were born in the U.S. and are American citizens; he laughs at the suggestion that they will one day be qualified to run for the U.S. presidency.

When he returned to Egypt in 1985, he became active in the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group known for its strong anti-American positions. But Morsi retains a warm nostalgia for his former home. "I don't like it when people in my country say, 'America is against us,' because I know [the situation] is different," he says, citing the friendliness he encountered in California.

Back in Egypt, while teaching at an Egyptian university, Morsi rose swiftly in the ranks of the Brotherhood: he would serve in parliament, then become something of a political enforcer within the group. After Mubarak's fall last year made the prospect of a President from the Brotherhood almost inevitable, Morsi's name was rarely mentioned. When he emerged this year as the candidate of the Freedom and Justice Party, the Muslim Brotherhood's political arm, Morsi was mocked by rivals as "the spare tire," an unobvious allusion to the fact that he was not his party's preferred standard bearer. But the party's first choice, Khairat al-Shater, a millionaire businessman and Morsi's mentor, was disqualified because of a criminal record stemming from charges, likely fabricated, during the Mubarak years. When attempts to reinstate al-Shater failed, Morsi filed his nomination papers on the last possible day.

(PHOTOS: [Thousands in Cairo Protest Morsi's Decree](#))

Although he is avuncular up close, Morsi proved a colorless campaigner: his stump speeches were dull, he skipped the sole televised debate, and even his own commercials seemed designed to hide him from view. He won less than a quarter of the vote in May's first round of balloting, and it was only the Brotherhood's disciplined political organization that allowed him to squeak through the runoff election on June 16 and 17 with 51.7%.

Lacking a ringing mandate, much discernible charisma or experience in political combat, Morsi seemed poorly equipped to take on

either the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the cabal of generals that had run the country since Mubarak's ouster, or the judiciary made up mostly of judges appointed by the former dictator. After the runoff vote but before the results were announced, the Constitutional Court declared Egypt's first free parliamentary elections illegal, empowering SCAF to dissolve the body where Morsi's party had a plurality of seats. The generals also announced an interim decree that insulated the military from civilian control and effectively gave the generals veto rights over any new constitution. If SCAF was determined to undermine Morsi's authority, he was unlikely to get any help from liberal and secular parties, which have long feared the Brotherhood's Islamist agenda. Morsi looked like a lame duck even before he had been sworn in. "My expectations from him could not have been lower," says Heba Morayef, Egypt director of Human Rights Watch. "His hands seemed completely tied."

But they were not. On assuming the presidency, he displayed a previously hidden talent for deft public stagecraft: during his inaugural speech in Tahrir Square, he opened his jacket to reveal that he, unlike Mubarak, didn't need a bulletproof vest, suggesting he was a man of the people. Then, less than two months after his swearing-in, he astonished both his allies and his critics by replacing several top generals and making himself SCAF's chairman. How he pulled this off remains something of a mystery: some Egyptians suspect Morsi made a Faustian pact with the top brass. Others speculate he found some incriminating evidence against them. It's more likely he did an end run around the old guard and appealed to the second-tier officers who were weary of waiting for their turn to rule.

MORE: [Egypt's Morsi: Has He Started Something He Can't Finish?](#)

Still, the worst fears of Egyptian liberals and some American observers seemed to have come to pass: an Islamist now had practically absolute legislative power in the most populous Arab nation. There was a chorus of "told you so"s when an American-made anti-Islam video on YouTube led to an angry mob bursting into the grounds of the U.S. embassy in Cairo—and Morsi took two days to condemn the attack. His first few foreign trips, to China and Iran, were quickly interpreted as an effort to pull Egypt out of the American orbit.

But Morsi has shown restraint. He has so far declined to adopt the harshest interpretations of Shari'a law, has not imposed dress codes on women and tourists, and whatever his rhetoric has not torn up Egypt's peace treaty with Israel or flung open the border with Gaza to take pressure off Hamas. His trip to China was not, it turned out, about finding an alternative patron to the U.S., and the Obama Administration was delighted when Morsi gave a speech in Tehran condemning Iran's ally, Syrian dictator Bashar Assad. (The Iranians struggled to control their embarrassment.) Although Morsi failed in his effort, with Turkey and Qatar, to broker an end to the Assad regime's slaughter of civilians, the attempt showed that Egypt's goal in Syria was complementary, not contradictory, to that of other nations. Then came Gaza.

Peace—and Then Protests

Maybe it was inevitable that Morsi's presidential credentials would be tested in the tiny enclave on the Egyptian border that is home to 1.6 million Palestinians. The Muslim Brotherhood has deep ties to Hamas, the Islamist group that controls Gaza, and Morsi has a history of anti-Israel rhetoric. Although he had preserved the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty, he was never going to look the other way, as Mubarak was wont to do, when Israel battled Hamas.

(MORE: [How the Gaza Truce Makes Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood a Peace Player](#))

When Israel launched its military campaign against Hamas on Nov. 14, Morsi condemned the attack in robust terms, but didn't go nearly as far as Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who described Israel as a "terrorist state." He withdrew Egypt's ambassador to Israel but kept open channels of communication between Egyptian and Israeli intelligence agencies. To show solidarity with Hamas, he sent his Prime Minister to Gaza during the thick of the bombardment but didn't unseal the border to allow the militants an escape route—or an open resupply line.

Meanwhile, Morsi spoke six times over several days with President Obama. Events in Gaza moved the two men closer: when they had spoken on the phone in the wake of the attack on the U.S. embassy in October, Obama had been reproachful of Morsi's inaction. Now their conversations grew more personal: Morsi called Obama at 2:30 a.m. on Nov. 20, apologizing for the lateness of the hour. Obama responded by encouraging Morsi to call whenever he needed, regardless of the time. A few hours later, when Morsi called again, Obama offered his condolences to Morsi, whose sister had died the day before, after a long battle with cancer. Obama told Morsi he knew firsthand the difficulty of dealing with personal setbacks under the public glare. "Obama," Morsi says, "has been very helpful, very helpful."

Although the cease-fire negotiations between Israel and Hamas were moderated by Egyptian intelligence officials, Morsi was the whip hand. He spent 75 minutes with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton going over the terms of the proposed cease-fire, reading it out loud in English and offering his opinion on each issue, where he agreed and where he felt edits were needed, a U.S. official reported. His national security adviser took notes as Morsi and Clinton worked out the details. "Our intelligence people were talking to Israel and Hamas during the Mubarak years, but that didn't help," says Amr Darrag, who heads the Freedom and Justice Party's foreign-relations committee. "What was different this time is that you had Morsi, who has genuine legitimacy as an elected leader and real credibility with Hamas." If there was some grumbling from Islamists at home that Morsi hadn't helped Hamas enough—by opening the border, for one—it was silenced when Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal declared, "Egypt did not sell out the resistance."

The applause hadn't died down when Egypt announced another big win: a preliminary deal with the International Monetary Fund for a \$4.8 billion loan, a crucial shot in the arm for an economy that was already slowing when Mubarak was ousted and has only gone downhill since. Analysts said the IMF deal, predicated on Egypt's commitment to reduce its budget deficit, would reassure private interests that the nation was a safe bet for investors. That, in turn, would help to start paring down unemployment, the root of so much of the discontent displayed in Tahrir Square over the past two years.

MORE: [After the Power Play in Egypt: Morsi and the Islamists vs. Everyone Else](#)

But the very next day, Morsi gave Egyptians a new reason to protest. He and his aides insist the Nov. 22 emergency decree putting his decisions beyond legal challenge was not a power grab, just a desperate attempt to preserve the democratic process. Their argument: the Mubarak-appointed judges of the Constitutional Court, having already declared the elected parliament illegitimate, were about to do the same with the Constituent Assembly. (The court had dissolved the first Constituent Assembly in April.) Far from seeking absolute power, say Morsi aides, the President is seeking to swiftly empower the legislative branch of government: a new constitution and elections for parliament will allow him to hand off authority. "If he was a new pharaoh, he wouldn't be so keen on a new constitution and parliament," says Darrag, who is also secretary general of the Constituent Assembly. "You can't call a man a dictator when he's trying to give up power."

Darrag allows that the announcement of the emergency decree could have been more skillfully handled. "[Morsi] could have communicated his motivations better," he says. "He made it too easy for his enemies to turn this into a weapon against him." But he maintains that the new powers will be strictly temporary, expiring when the Constituent Assembly produces a constitution and a new parliament is elected.

The trouble with that argument is that the constitution-drafting process Morsi claims to be trying to save is, in the eyes of many liberals and religious minorities, not worth saving. Already more than 20 members of the Constituent Assembly—including those representing the Coptic churches and several liberal, secular parties—have resigned, most citing disagreements over the extent to which Islamic law should guide legislation. Many liberals would rather scrap the process and start again.

(MORE: [The Document That May Define the New Egypt: Why the Constitution Matters](#))

And then there's the darker possibility. Some Western experts believe Morsi's power grab shows that he is playing a longer game with the ultimate goal of a rigid Islamic state no longer open to democratic freedoms or aligned with Western interests. "He's not, and never has been, a moderate," says Eric Trager of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, who interviewed Morsi repeatedly as an academic starting in 2010. "His function inside the Muslim Brotherhood was that of an enforcer [who] would weed out anyone who didn't agree with [its] strict doctrine or tactics."

Even the Cairo street seems a bit unsure of Morsi's ultimate direction. In some pockets of Tahrir Square, it is hard to tell the protesters from the casual pedestrians. Vendors hawk roasted corn and yams, popcorn and Egyptian candy. On one corner, riot police toss tear gas at gangs of young men wearing handkerchiefs over their faces, and spectators look on with no sense of fear. In other sections, the anger at Morsi is palpable. "This is a blatant attempt to get himself the powers of Mubarak, and we won't agree to it," says Shaadi Mohammed, 23, who described himself as a "former fan" of the new President. "We united to kick Mubarak out. If Morsi isn't careful, we will do the same to him."

Which Way Next?

In his conversation with TIME, Morsi didn't seem concerned by the street protests. "Egyptians are free. They are raising their voices when they are opposing the President," he said. "We have a new Egypt now." But do they? After the first spasm of outrage at the decree, some aides hinted that he would announce a compromise. That hasn't happened. Once Tahrir Square filled up, it made a retraction harder: it might make him look weak. The other way out is to be true to his word and use the emergency powers to quickly deliver a new constitution, one that distributes power more evenly among the presidency, legislature and judiciary. This will first require him to bring back to the assembly the members who quit. Not easy, but not impossible for a man who persuaded Egypt's top generals to walk away from power.

Yet with crowds back in the streets and the unpredictable forces of change at work once again, even Morsi may no longer know where he is leading his new country.

—with reporting by *Ashraf Khalil And Karl Vick / Cairo And Jay Newton-Small / Washington*

VIDEO: [Egyptians Gather Together \(but Not United\) in Tahrir Square](#)

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