



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**  
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

# RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: [RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg) or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 127/2013 dated 11 July 2013

## **Egypt on the Brink: The Military's Dilemma**

By James M. Dorsey

### **Synopsis**

*Egypt's deep state has reasserted itself with the removal of President Mohammed Morsi from office. Questions of legitimacy are likely to plague attempts to return stability to Egypt with some form of military-guided democracy.*

### **Commentary**

EVENTS IN Cairo presage a return to the situation under ousted President Hosni Mubarak that prompted millions of Egyptians to camp out on Cairo's Tahrir Square two years ago until the military forced him to step down after 30 years in office. However little in the drama currently unfolding harks back to the demands put forward by the protesters in 2011: an end to the police state, greater political freedom, respect for human rights, an end to corruption, and justice and dignity.

Egypt was seemingly united when Mubarak was ousted and the mass demonstrations were singularly directed at an autocratic president who hailed from the military. This time round, the Muslim Brotherhood's mass protests against the removal of Mubarak's successor, President Mohamed Morsi, complicates things for the military that sees itself as the guarantor of the state. The military has in recent days demonstrated that it has learnt lessons from its bungling of Egypt's transition from autocracy to democracy in the 17 months that it ruled the country following Mubarak's departure.

### **Return of the deep state**

This time the generals are seeking to pull the strings from behind a military-appointed interim president, Adly Mahmoud Mansour, rather than taking the reins themselves. That effort is however already faltering with the rejection of Mansour's candidate for interim prime minister, the liberal opposition leader Mohammed el Baradei, by the Salafist Nour Party, which initially supported the military in its putsch against Morsi's presidency. Whatever ruling group emerges from the current crisis will govern a deeply divided country in which one substantial segment – comprising the millions of supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood - believes that the disruption of the democratic process was designed to exclude its participation.

That perception as well as the reaffirmation of the role of what Egyptians call the deep state - the military, the security forces, the judiciary and parts of the media – is likely to make a smooth consensual return to a democratic process difficult at best. It is reinforced by the military's return to Mubarak-era repression with the

arrest of hundreds of Muslim Brothers, the closing down of Islamist media and possible charges being levied against Morsi.

This week's death of 51 Muslim Brothers, demonstrating in front of the Republican Guards headquarters where Morsi is allegedly being held, creates a situation similar to the crisis last year after 74 soccer fans died in a politically-loaded brawl in the Suez Canal city of Port Said. In contrast to the current crisis, Egyptians then rallied in support of the militant soccer fans. Nevertheless, the Brotherhood's call for an uprising against the military promises to escalate violence and a crackdown on the group.

The military so far has shied away from symbolising the reinstatement of Mubarak-era practices by declaring martial law. The Brotherhood may however leave it with little choice. It sees the peaceful protests against the military intervention as a provocation of violence against the Muslim Brotherhood - as a way to garner international sympathy and convince Egyptians that their country is returning to autocracy rather than moving towards democratic transition.

Succeeding in forcing the military to openly take control is unlikely to make the Brotherhood's opponents more sympathetic to its cause. But it may convince parts of the fragile anti-Morsi coalition, united on little else than wanting the Brotherhood out of office, that by relying on the military, they simply jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

Whatever way it takes, the military is likely to see its image tarnished - much like it did after ruling the country during the transition from Mubarak to Morsi. The military has already suffered two setbacks in recent days: the thwarting of El Baradei's appointment and the escalation caused by the deaths of the Muslim Brotherhood protesters.

### **Getting legitimacy right**

At the heart of Egypt's crisis is a mis-interpretation of what constitutes democratic legitimacy by both Morsi and his opponents as well as a military that is determined, whatever the cost, to protect its perks and privileges. Morsi failed to recognise that legitimacy is defined not only by electoral victory but also by recognition of that legitimacy by those who voted against him. The mass protests on Tahrir Square against him demonstrated that Morsi had lost that recognition. By the same token, legitimacy is hardly restored by military intervention and the suppression of a political grouping that enjoys the support of up to 25 percent of the population.

The issue of legitimacy is likely to plague Egypt for some time to come. Even if the military and Mansour were able to steer Egypt towards speedy free and fair elections in which the Muslim Brotherhood is allowed - and agrees - to participate and a constitution that is more universally accepted than the one Morsi unilaterally adopted, the government that emerges from that poll will be perceived as one constrained by the military's political priorities.

Restoring legitimacy and stability in Egypt will ultimately depend on Egyptians insisting that their differences are managed through dialogue rather than intervention, an abandonment of majoritarian concepts of democracy in favour of pluralism and inclusiveness, and a democratically-elected government that is capable of imposing its will on the military and the other components of Egypt's omnipresent deep state.

*James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg, and the author of the blog, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer.*