

# Egyptian President Mursi claims military junta's dictatorial powers

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13 August 2012

On Sunday, Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi moved to concentrate in his own hands the dictatorial powers of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) junta that has ruled Egypt since mass working class protests forced President Hosni Mubarak to resign last year.

He sent Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the junta's leader, into retirement and issued a new constitutional declaration modifying the declaration under which the junta has ruled Egypt since March 30, 2011.

Mursi's document abrogates the "addendum" promulgated by SCAF on June 17, 2012, which assigned control of the legislature, the budget and the drafting of the constitution to the junta. It also rewrites Article 25 of the constitution, removing the executive and legislative powers outlined in Article 56 of the constitution from the junta and reassigning them to the presidency.

A third provision gives Mursi effective control over the drafting of a new constitution. It states: "If the current constituent assembly is prevented from doing its duties, the president can draw up a new assembly representing the full spectrum of Egyptian society mandated with drafting a new national charter within three months of the assembly's formation."

In addition to sending Field Marshal Tantawi into retirement, Mursi announced the retirement of Army Chief of Staff Sami Anan. He awarded both men "Order of the Nile" decorations and gave them positions as presidential advisors.

The commanders of the other branches of the armed forces were also replaced. Navy Commander Mohab Memish became head of the Suez Canal authority and Air Force Commander Reda Hafez was appointed minister of military production.

Former military intelligence chief Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi is to replace Tantawi as defense minister. Al-Sisi has run Egyptian intelligence, which works closely with the CIA, since the junta took power on February 11, 2011.

Al-Sisi came to prominence last year when he embarrassed the junta by confirming reports that Egyptian soldiers had carried out "virginity tests" on female demonstrators detained during street protests. There were also reports that he has Islamist sympathies and that his wife wears a niqab.

If his power grab should prove successful, Mursi's move would signal a significant shift inside the Egyptian ruling elite. The army has been the backbone of the Egyptian state since Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power in 1952, leading a coup against the pro-British King Farouk. Before last year's mass protests, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)—Egypt's traditional right-wing opposition party, of which Mursi is a member—was a semi-legal organization.

Mursi's attempt to assert what is effectively a presidential dictatorship to replace the military dictatorship exercised by SCAF comes amid rising popular opposition to his administration, which came to power on June 30. Since then, there have been waves of strikes in key industries, including textiles and services, as economic conditions worsened after Mursi's inauguration. The central concern of the Egyptian bourgeoisie, as well as its US and European imperialist backers, is to avoid renewed revolutionary struggles like those of last year.

There are also rising criticisms of both the army and Mursi after a group of armed men in the Sinai Peninsula mounted a raid on posts at the Egypt-Israel border. Mursi responded with a heavy-handed security crackdown in the Sinai (See: "Egypt launches Sinai

crackdown in collusion with Israel”).

One woman whose husband was detained by Egyptian forces during security sweeps in the Sinai asked *Al Ahram* to relay a message to the president: “Mursi, we had great hopes for you... But we are now back to the same old ways. Nothing has changed, only the names.”

The crackdown in the Sinai has apparently increased US officials’ confidence in the reliability of Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta had both pressed Mursi to work with Washington in the Sinai in the weeks before the attack. Mursi took the attack as an opportunity to line up with US policy.

The *New York Times* wrote: “After the attack, Egypt appears to have overcome its sensitivities about sovereignty and accelerated talks over the details of new American assistance, which would include military equipment, police training, and electronic and aerial surveillance... American and Israeli officials see Egypt’s response to the attack as an important test of Mr. Morsi’s nascent presidency and, more broadly, the country’s commitment to security after the uprising in 2011 that toppled President Hosni Mubarak.”

Neither the Egyptian Army nor Washington made an official statement on Mursi’s attempt to take over the junta’s powers. US officials told the *Wall Street Journal* they were “monitoring” the situation.

There were indications of concern from the Egyptian Islamists that they might face internal opposition. Essam Al-Arian, the vice-president of the MB’s Freedom and Justice Party, said Mursi’s move aimed to “thwart the plans of the counter-revolution and expose the third party that wants to obstruct the path of Egypt’s democratic transition.”

Television presenter Hamdi Qandil called the event a “civilian coup,” speculating that it could have been staged to head off a “military coup against Morsi planned for August 24.”

However, General Mohamed Al-Assar, who was named deputy defense minister after serving as chief of military armaments under Tantawi, said the junta had approved Mursi’s action. “The decision was taken,” he stated, “based on consultations with the field marshal [Tantawi] and the rest of the military council.”

Significantly, large sections of Egypt’s liberal and petty-bourgeois “left” have echoed Al-Arian’s

reactionary claim that Mursi’s action—effectively, his attempt to claim for himself the dictatorial powers held by SCAF—was a step towards greater democracy in Egypt.

Ahmed Maher, the co-founder of the April 6 youth movement, said he supported Mursi’s annulment of the constitutional referendum. “These decisions demand our support,” he declared. “I believe this was what we asked for.”

Television presenter Qandil said that now that Mursi controlled the government, he could fulfill his promises, “at the top of which is the reformation of the constituent assembly.”



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