



Egypt's First Civilian President to Take Helm of Divided Country

Jun 25, 2012 6:34 PM EDT

Read the Full Transcript

JEFFREY BROWN:

In fact, as Morsi met today with Egypt's ruling military council, the way forward was ambiguous, at best. And it was unclear just how much power he will have.

In recent days, Egypt's highest court ordered the new parliament, dominated by Islamists, to be dissolved. And the generals imposed constitutional changes that give themselves sweeping powers.

For more, I'm joined by Samer Shehata, assistant professor at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University, and Hisham Melhem, the Washington bureau chief of Al-Arabiya news.

Welcome to both of you.

Samer, there was a lot of uncertainty even in the last few days. It looked as though Morsi had won and there was a delay. What was going on behind the scenes? Do we know?

SAMER SHEHATA, Professor of Politics, Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies: We don't know.

Morsi had won. The results that the Brotherhood put forward a week ago, only six hours after the polls closed, were very similar to the final results that Farouk Sultan announced. There were probably a great deal of negotiations taking place. And Egypt is a place without real, working, legitimate institutions.

And so informal politics takes place in Tahrir Square as a form of pressure against the military council to keep them honest. And they held out to probably try to get some concessions or put pressure on the Brotherhood candidate in Mohammed Morsi.

JEFFREY BROWN:

The military, you mean, held out to get some pressure.

SAMER SHEHATA:

That's right.

JEFFREY BROWN:

Hisham, before we look at all the problems ahead — and there are plenty to look, right? It's still a stunning moment, isn't it? The guy from the — as said, the Muslim Brotherhood, which was outlawed.

HISHAM MELHEM, Washington Bureau Chief, Al-Arabiya Television:

Absolutely.

This is the first civilian president in the history of the Egyptian republic. For the last 60 years, Egypt was ruled by four military officers. The last one, Hosni Mubarak, ruled for 30 years and really ended by marginalizing Egypt as a regional power and emasculating Egyptian institutions.

Here, you have a representative of an 84-year-old political movement that struggled underground, above ground, clandestinely, violently, politically. And now they find themselves at the presidential palace.

But he finds himself at the presidential palace in a presidency that has been already hollowed out by the military, which hijacked — hijacked the goals of the revolution.

(CROSSTALK)

HISHAM MELHEM:

He's presiding over a country that lacks a constitution, a dissolved parliament, an economic — a huge economic crisis — the country is almost on the verge of bankruptcy — and very divided country, and against — and he has to deal with the unrealistic probably expectation of those who led the revolution early on, but those who also voted for him.

They want to see — to reap the economic and political fruits of the revolution. And they are impatient.

JEFFREY BROWN:

Tell us a little bit more about Morsi himself, about the him involved at the center of this now. You have met him.

SAMER SHEHATA:

Yes, I have. I know Morsi.

Well, as your piece mentioned, he's 60 years old. He's an engineering professor. He finished a Ph.D. at the University of Southern California, actually, in 1982. He came to this country in '78. He taught at Cal State Northridge for a couple of years after that.

He has five children. Longtime Muslim Brotherhood leader and, in fact, at the highest levels of the organization, in the guidance bureau — he also was a parliamentarian and headed the Muslim Brotherhood parliamentary bloc between 2000 and 2005, ran for reelection in 2005 and won, but because of the fraudulent elections, it was stolen from him.

But the thing I think to know about Mohammed Morsi is that he's really not the person who you would expect to hold this post. I mean, he's not someone who likes the limelight, who is good at public speaking, who is good at glad-handing. He's not a political figure in that sense. He's not a politician.

He's a political organizer and a strategist within the Brotherhood. And he's not even the most influential individual in the Brotherhood. He was the Brotherhood's second or backup choice. As they say jokingly in Egypt, he was the spare tire, because their first candidate, Khairat al-Shater, the deputy guide of the Brotherhood, was disqualified for technical reasons by the presidential election commission.

JEFFREY BROWN:

Well, and so you're suggesting he comes in as the second or third choice, and he comes up against a lot of power.

HISHAM MELHEM:

Absolutely. And he doesn't have I think the leadership qualities that could allow him not only to challenge SCAF, which is the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, but also those influential members in his movement, Khairat al-Shater and the supreme guide.

So the question is, will he follow the teachings and the urgings and the influence of his superiors in the — or previous superiors in the Muslim Brotherhood, or he will seek to challenge the military by forging the kind of coalition with the liberals and those people who voted for Ahmed Shafiq in order to challenge the military and at the same time tell they Egyptians, I'm willing to compromise, to create the coalition that will end up allowing us to create a modern, inclusive Egyptian state with functioning institutions that would guarantee the civil, as well as the political rights of every Egyptian, including the Christian Egyptians and women in particular?

There are a lot of people who are apprehensive, and somber mood in Egypt, not — those who are demonstrating in Tahrir obviously are his supporters. But there are many Egyptians. And let's not forget a simple fact; 50 percent of the Egyptian electorate stayed home. And the other 50 were divided almost right smack in the middle between Shafiq, who represented the military and represented all those who were for afraid of the Islamists.

And so in the end, we're talking about a man who was elected by 25 percent of the Egyptian electorate. That's it. And the challenge now for him is how to manage to grab as much power from the military as possible and to allay the concerns of those who did not vote for him.

JEFFREY BROWN:

What about Egypt in the world now? We heard him, we heard Morsi say he would abide by all international agreements, of course, notably with Israel. What do you expect to see happen? What can happen?

SAMER SHEHATA:

He said that — he said that twice actually. He repeated it in his address.

I think, for the short term, very little is going to happen in terms of change with regard to Egypt's regional or international outlook. The Egyptian-Israeli peace accord isn't going anywhere. He said in the past that he wants to — and many Egyptians have said that they want to renegotiate the specifics of the treaty, how many armed forces or security forces can be in zones A, B and C in Sinai and so on.

At the same time, he's critical of the United States, although he realizes American power. He wants to have relations with the United States and other countries based on mutual interests and mutual respect. It wouldn't be so surprising if, in the medium term, if he's allowed to stay, that there are some developments.

JEFFREY BROWN:

If he's allowed to stay. And you say that as a real potential or...

SAMER SHEHATA:

Well, there is a potential. The head of the military council's advisory board has already said that, when a new constitution is written, it might be the case that they will have to be new presidential elections, because the stipulations on the president, the qualifications might not apply to Mohammed Morsi and so on.

And this is again a strategy on the part of the military council to put a land mine in the road of civilian power and a democratic transition, because they don't want a democratic transition.

JEFFREY BROWN:

Last 30 seconds.

HISHAM MELHEM:

The lever of real power in Egypt is still with the military. The problem is that we have two forces, competing forces, the military on the one hand and the Islamists on the other hand.

I would argue that both of them are undemocratic. At the same time, both of them claim that they have almost an entitlement to rule Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood, as an old political movement, they say that we are the — we should be in power to lead Egypt. The Egyptian military traditionally projects themselves and think of themselves as the guardian of the Egyptian state, and we are the first nationalists in the country, and we're going to rule.

And I think my fear is that the Egyptian military will turn Egypt into another Algeria, which not necessarily is going to happen, but that would be one scenario. The other scenario is that, although they act as if they want to be like the Turkish military, to be the power behind the civilian leadership, they might do to Egypt what the Pakistani military did to Pakistan. And that would be a real tragedy.

JEFFREY BROWN:

All right, you're shaking your head against some of that, right?

You're more hopeful, but...

SAMER SHEHATA:

A couple of the things.

The Brotherhood isn't necessarily liberal, but they are democrats, number one. Algeria is not a possibility for Egypt in terms of that kind of violence. So I'm a little bit more optimistic than my friend Hisham.

JEFFREY BROWN:

All right. All right.

Samer Shehata, Hisham Melhem, thank you both very much.

HISHAM MELHEM:

Thank you.
