Morsi's Potential Counterweight

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In retrospect, Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi's inauguration speech at Cairo University, particularly his oath of allegiance to the military, was misleading. Morsi affirmed: "I pledge to God that I will preserve this institution [the military] and safeguard its members, recruits, and commanders, enhance and elevate its status, and boost it by all means possible to make it stronger than ever before and continue to be steadfast, with the people's support in all it does." Given the speed with which Morsi successfully dismissed the heads of Egypt's armed forces, the sincerity of the oath was highly questionable.

It would be even more misleading, however, to believe that Morsi's "coup d'état" – successfully dismissing Egypt's top generals in one fell swoop – means he no longer has to fear the country's military. In order to ensure that a threat of a military putsch is permanently neutralized, there is a substantial likelihood that Morsi will eventually develop a second military force, one that can serve as a counterweight to the army and prevent it from regaining power in a future coup.

Morsi's predicament is in no way unique. Historically, overly ambitious generals were the single biggest security threat faced by Third World regimes for most of the twentieth century. By 1970, almost all Third World dictators had fended off an attempted coup, witnessed one in a neighboring state, or even gained power themselves via a coup. As a result, these heads of state were forced to devise ways to ensure they did not lose their own seats in a putsch.

Arguably, the central and most prevalent strategy adopted by endangered political leaders is to divide and conquer their own militaries. Armed forces in coup-prone countries are characterized by massive redundancy, with multiple forces created to address the same primary mission. The result is that there are never just one or two intelligence services,

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but rather a dozen. (With intelligence organizations in particular, it appears that the main mission is not to spy on external threats, but to spy on each other and potential domestic opponents.)

The core component of this strategy is to create and develop a second armed force that the regime can use to balance against the main army. The quintessential example of this is the creation of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran Inqilab) in 1979, which consolidated several paramilitary groups in order to counter the influence and power of the regular Iranian military (suspect in the ayatollahs' eyes due to its previous loyalty to the Shah). Today the Pasdaran is estimated to consist of 125,000 personnel, compared to 400,000 in the regular army. The Pasdaran has not only ground forces, but naval, marine, and air forces as well, such that its structure parallels that of the regular military.

Significantly, the Pasdaran need not be of equal size to the military in order to protect the regime. The fact that the regime can call on 125,000 armed and trained loyalists to defend it greatly raises the cost of an attempted coup. In other words, it is sufficient for the regime that it controls a force that undermines the military's monopoly over coercive power. Therefore, the regime did not just disband the regular army and replace it with the Pasdaran. Retaining only the Pasdaran would not solve the core dilemma, and instead would make the regime vulnerable to coup attempts by the Pasdaran instead of the army. Indeed, the strategy of "*divide et impera*" is so effective that although the army may not be as ideologically committed to the regime, it would be quite contrary to its interests to see the rival force take power in a coup. In essence, creating the Pasdaran paradoxically gave the army greater incentive to protect the regime.

Such strategies have, in fact, been so effective for civilian regimes that coups have become increasingly rare since the 1970s.

Which brings us back to Morsi. An analysis of nascent democracies emerging from military dictatorships – precisely like Egypt today – reveals that they were especially likely to fall prey to a military coup d'état. Statistically, these countries were *three times* more likely to experience a coup than the average state. This threat is especially severe for countries making their first attempt at forging a democracy.

Precisely because they are so vulnerable, leaders in Morsi's shoes are also particularly likely to employ this divide and conquer strategy. When military regimes (i.e., juntas) democratize, these states channel an average of 13 percent of their initial force structure toward one or more parallel forces. To put this into context, a country like Egypt with an army of 835,000, average can be expected to balance its army by adding roughly 110,000 troops to a parallel military force.

Should Morsi actually pursue this strategy, it will carry with it both good news and bad news. The good news is that divided armies are also inherently less effective ones. This

means that Egypt would represent a weaker military threat to Israel, and that would reduce the chance of a future regional war. The bad news is that a recent study we conducted[1] suggests that such countries compensate for this self-induced weakness in part by energizing their weapons of mass destruction programs. Given that Egypt already possesses a capacity for producing chemical weapons and a relatively impressive nuclear program, this may one day become a concern the international community will have to address.

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[1] "I Will Survive: Coup-Proofing, Military Effectiveness, and Strategic Substitution," http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1991257.