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Mursi's Power Grab: Egypt President Claims Broad New Authority

By Jason Ditz

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Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi's edict yesterday granted him virtually unlimited power, though for a theoretically limited period of time. The move has sparked criticism that he is setting himself up in a position similar to his pre-revolution predecessor, Hosni Mubarak.

The primary point of the edict was an entirely practical one, declaring that the judiciary cannot dissolve parliament or the assembly which is responsible for penning the new constitution. The courts have already ousted the lower house of parliament and there was some talk of them unilaterally ousting the constitution assembly, leaving Egypt in a more or less permanent state of "interim government."

The timing was right for such a move, with Mursi being praised for brokering the Gaza ceasefire earlier in the week. The broader implications of his edict, and the extra powers he sought, add a lot of controversy to what otherwise would have been a straightforward move.

That's because Mursi announced that he can take "any steps" he deems necessary to protect "national unity" and the functioning of the state, and furthermore declared that any decisions he makes are final and can never be challenged by a court. Together those moves position him entirely above the law and in a position to do anything he can get away with, much as Mubarak had.

The upside, if there is one, is that Mursi's declarations only cover the period until a new constitution is finalized, and even though his party dominates parliament it seems extremely unlikely that they will write an all-powerful presidency into the constitution, particularly fresh off the anti-Mubarak revolution.