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Weeks After an Ouster, Egypt's Military and Islamists Are Far From a Deal

By KAREEM FAHIM and MAYY EL SHEIKH

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More than two weeks after the military removed President Mohamed Morsi from power, intense efforts to bring the generals and the ex-president's Islamist supporters to an agreement have so far come up empty, deepening Egypt's political crisis.

The efforts, according to intermediaries, have been stymied by the military's refusal so far to release Mr. Morsi and several aides, who are held incommunicado and have not been charged with crimes. In Mr. Morsi's absence, members of his movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, have continued to demand that the military's intervention be reversed as a precondition for any settlement.

"It's bleak," said one mediator, adding that the Brotherhood so far does not seem to grasp that Mr. Morsi will not be reinstated. "The military is only willing to talk about the future, not about yesterday or the day before," he said. "They turned the page on Morsi."

The impasse comes amid fears by the Islamists that the authorities are preparing to break up their sit-in at a Cairo square, which has lasted three weeks. Concerns are also growing that prosecutors who are investigating various allegations against Mr. Morsi could decide to formally file criminal charges against him, a move that is all but certain to lead to another wave of unrest.

Such charges would probably “signal the end of a potential political deal,” said [Heba Morayef](#), the Egypt director for Human Rights Watch. “The decision will have been made to exclude them from the political system. I think it will lead to protests that are likely to turn violent and mass arrests of members of the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Despite persistent rumors of direct talks, Brotherhood leaders strongly deny they are negotiating face to face with the military, absent any discussions between their imprisoned leader and his military captors. The lack of contact with Mr. Morsi has complicated matters for his colleagues on the outside.

In the months before his ouster, some of the movement’s leaders encouraged Mr. Morsi to reach a compromise with the military but said that he resisted. For now, Egyptian political figures and diplomats say they are passing messages between the two camps, and trying to warn Egypt’s new leaders that any effort to suppress the Brotherhood would be doomed to failure.

“We did the unimaginable to them: we hanged them, tortured them, rounded them up in prisons, shipped them to detention centers,” said the mediator, who requested anonymity because efforts at dialogue were continuing. “Did they die? Are they extinct? Have they disappeared? No.”

Egypt’s military-backed leaders have moved quickly to assert their legitimacy, naming a 34-member government and announcing plans to start amending the Constitution passed by Egyptians just seven months ago. Neighboring countries that cheered the Brotherhood’s demise have rushed to provide Egypt with financial help. On Thursday, the Central Bank announced that it had received \$3 billion in aid from the United Arab Emirates.

The mediator, who is close to senior military officials, said he believed the only concessions the generals were willing to offer were the release of senior leaders, the reopening of Islamist television stations and the possibility that the Brotherhood would not be banned. A military spokesman did not immediately return a call seeking comment on its position.

“This is not a negotiation,” said Amr Darrag, a senior leader of the Brotherhood’s political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party. “This is putting a gun to your head.”

Mr. Darrag and other Brotherhood leaders expressed a growing sense of isolation, and a bottomless mistrust of the military and its motives. They say diplomats privately express sympathy and even call Mr. Morsi’s ouster a military coup, but have repeatedly pressed the Islamists to move on.

“The Italian ambassador was talking to me the other night,” said Mohammed Ali Beshr, a senior Brotherhood leader who has been meeting with diplomats. “He told me that quick elections were the solution, and that we can be part of that.”

“I’m telling you, there will be no elections soon,” Mr. Beshr said. “He doesn’t understand. Nobody does.”

The mistrust stems from a feeling of being betrayed by Gen. Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi, who deposed Mr. Morsi after millions of people marched against the president’s rule.

“Sisi said to Morsi two days before the coup, ‘My neck before yours, Mr. President,’ ” said one senior Brotherhood leader, who requested anonymity. “He sent us messages that were like tranquilizers and fooled us.”

Now, the official said, “even if he promises us everything face to face and directly swore to us in person that he will do this and that, we still won’t believe him.”

Looming over the crisis is the absence of Mr. Morsi, whom the military is holding in an undisclosed location, with no hint of when he might be released. Egypt’s new leaders assert his detention is for his own safety.

At the protests for Mr. Morsi’s supporters, the ousted president’s stature has only grown. Once the Brotherhood’s second choice for president — and to many Egyptians, an incompetent leader — his portrait is everywhere, as a symbol of the movement’s resistance.

His son, Osama Morsi, said the family had had no contact whatsoever.

“The last time we saw him was the morning of the bloody coup,” the younger Mr. Morsi said. “I am his personal lawyer. I cannot reach out for any kind of legal procedure. No charges have been filed.”

“There’s no way of knowing where he’s being held,” the son went on. “No one has tried to contact us.”

There are signs that a few Brotherhood leaders are softening their positions, but no sign of retreat on the core demand of restoring Mr. Morsi, even if only for a moment before he steps down. Too many of its members have been killed, the leaders said, and their supporters have stuck with them in the streets.

“We will lose all credibility in front of a lot of the people,” Mr. Darrag said. “Now it’s a deadlock.”