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THE CURRENT: What does Mohammed Morsi's death mean for Egypt?

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PITA: You're listening to "The Current," part of the Brookings Podcast Network. With us today is Shadi Hamid, a senior fellow in our Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. On Monday, former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, imprisoned since the mass protests and military coup that ousted him from office in 2013, died in Cairo.

Shadi, what do we know so far about what happened?

HAMID: Yes, so, Morsi died in court, obviously unexpectedly. He was there for an espionage trial. He's been charged with any number of things and he's been in and out of court since the coup in 2013. There have been concerns, repeated concerns from the international community about lack of adequate health care. He's had various health problems, and Egyptian prisons aren't exactly the best place to be if you have health problems, so that had been a concern for a long time. And I think international organizations are calling for investigations into what happened. What was the extent of his health care, or lack thereof? But, he died in court, which is a striking image.

PITA: What has international reaction been so far from regional leaders and such?

HAMID: So, at this point, there have been some interesting reactions from Erdoğan. So, Erdoğan called Mohammed Morsi a martyr. And Erdoğan is of the Justice and Development Party, the AK Party, in Turkey, which shares some similarities with the Muslim Brotherhood. So, for that reason, Erdoğan has always been somewhat more inclined than most of his neighbors towards the Brotherhood. So, that's not necessarily surprising, although it is strong language and Erdoğan has definitely displayed considerable passion when talking about what he considers to be the wrongs committed against the Brotherhood from the 2013 coup onwards.

There was also a very moving television segment with Tunisia's first post-revolution president, Moncef Marzouki, and he was actually crying in this segment. And I just actually watched it. I was really caught off guard by it because it's a very powerful moment. I think it tells us something about a particular moment in time, since he was the first post-revolution president of Tunisia and he's lamenting the loss of the first freely elected president in Egypt.

Qatar also expressed sorrow about Mohammed Morsi's passing, but otherwise, we're probably not going to see much outpouring of grief. Most of the Middle East is led by authoritarian leaders who are happy to see Mohammed Morsi ousted and who see the Muslim Brotherhood as an enemy. So, for them, this is just something that was going to happen and they're not going to say much about it. And then, obviously, people

who are in opposition and ordinary citizens who are sympathetic to Islamist movements, like the Muslim Brotherhood, are going to have a different view. But those views don't really have much expression now in the Middle East.

PITA: Is there likely to be any more substantive pushback, whether from Turkey, or Tunisia, or Qatar, or is it likely to stay at the level of public -- just expressions?

HAMID: I don't think much can actually be done, practically, in terms of pushback. He's dead and that can't be undone. So now, it's just a question of the rhetoric that people offer in response to his death. The most you could expect is maybe some statements about investigating the cause of death and looking, again, as I mentioned, into the issue of what health care was provided to him in prison. But beyond that, I don't see much happening.

I think it's also worth noting that Morsi passed yesterday. I already feel that, a day later, there's a sense of moving on, that Morsi had already been forgotten and he didn't really come up much in the news -- just as I think, in some sense, Egypt was forgotten by the international community. And so, I think that it symbolizes this lack of attention and this lack of international interest in the very intensifying levels of repression that we've seen in Egypt. So, some surprise, some commentary, probably, this week. But I think, like a lot of things in the Middle East, things will go back to normal and people will kind of shrug their shoulders and say, “well, this is the Middle East. This is repression and there's not much any of us can do about it.” So, there is a sense of resignation more than, I think, you'll see any sense of real outrage or anger that can be sustained.

PITA: So, I was going to ask about the public opinion within Egypt. Is that going to be repressed, mostly, do you think?

HAMID: So, the Brotherhood has called for protests and mass gatherings. That said, the Muslim Brotherhood is not really allowed to organize inside of Egypt. So, any kind of significant gathering is likely to be repressed. So, I think it'll be very difficult to imagine a scenario where you can actually see mobilization happening. You may see Egyptians and others in front of Egyptian Embassies elsewhere in the world where there is more freedom to protest. But Egypt is, in some sense, one of the most repressive states in the Middle East right now.

So, this isn't normal repression the way it was, maybe, under Mubarak. So, where under Mubarak, you might have been able to have some space for protest, in Sisi’s Egypt, you don't really have that. So, the Brotherhood is very limited in what it can do. And even if you look at how Morsi was actually buried -- only his family was allowed to be there, very little fanfare, very little public discussion, very little coverage of it in the state media. Certainly not in any positive way. And there was a refusal to have him buried in his hometown and he was buried elsewhere. So, that kind of gives you a sense of the very stark scene that we have here around his passing in Egypt.

PITA: Lastly, Morsi was president for only one year, but he was, as you said, the first freely democratically elected president. What does this mean for his legacy?

HAMID: So, I think it's important to separate Morsi the president and the person from the moment that he was a part of in these 12 months -- a very brief moment in Egyptian history. And by that, I mean Morsi himself didn't govern well and he was a failure in many ways. And he was ultimately ousted. He was incompetent. He didn't govern inclusively. He alienated a lot of Egyptians, including his erstwhile allies. So, he wasn't great in that respect.

The moment that he was president – those 12 months -- we can look back and say they were the freest, relatively speaking, the freest 12 months that Egypt has probably witnessed, and that's not because of Morsi. That's because Egypt was going through a flawed, but a real democratic transition. So many things were going on and there was unprecedented polarization, fear, uncertainty. But at least Egyptians were expressing themselves. They were protesting both for and against Morsi. People were in the streets. There was a sense of free-wheeling intellectual combat and I spent quite a bit of time in Egypt during that year. So, there was something alive about Egyptian politics. So, I think when we're trying to remember Morsi, we should acknowledge the faults, and the failures, and the missteps. But, we shouldn't forget that there was something happening in Egypt and that something was lost. And that's something worth mourning.

PITA: Well, Shadi, thank you so much for being here and explaining this.

HAMID: Thanks for having me.