

An Interview with Egypt's President Mohamed Morsi: We're Learning How to Be Free

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Bobby Ghosh, Karl Vick and Richard Stengel interview President Mohamed Morsi at the Egyptian presidential palace on Nov. 28, 2012. On Nov. 28, 2012, Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi sat down for an exclusive interview with TIME managing editor Rick Stengel, editor-at-large Bobby Ghosh and Jerusalem bureau chief Karl Vick. Protocol required President Morsi to answer questions from TIME editors and reporters in his native Arabic, the official language of Egypt. Instead, as a courtesy to his guests, he spoke for most of the hour in English, which he last spoke regularly three decades ago.

He discussed his beginnings with the Muslim Brotherhood, how he sees the world, his dealings with President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton over the Gaza cease-fire and his latest crisis: protests from the judiciary and the secularist opposition over his decree assuming legislative and near autocratic power as Egypt awaits its constitution and the formation of a legislature. He remembered watching U.S. television during his years in California studying for his engineering Ph.D.

And he detailed his love of certain movies, including *Gone with the Wind* and the original *Planet of the Apes*. (Note: in previous stories, TIME had spelled the President's surname as Morsy, based on his Ph.D. dissertation for the University of Southern California; his advisers in Cairo say the preferred spelling is Morsi.) Following are highlights of the interview:

Topic the state of the world

Mohamed Morsi

This is a new period, I think, not only for Egypt or the people of the Arab Spring but, I think, for the whole world. To reconsider what has been done wrong in the past and see how can we make it correct, as much as we can. It takes time. So speed is low, acceleration is high. Somehow we're pushing in all directions, trying to say to the people of the world and convince the governments and the leaders that we should live at peace. Conflict does not lead to stability in the world. Cooperation [does]. How can we do that? It's a struggle. It's a very, very difficult struggle. To have a new culture, international culture, respecting individual countries and people's cultures, their local ones. But can we have an international culture? Can we do that? A culture of cooperation, a culture of stopping war, bloodshed. A culture of real peaceful means of trade, militant actions to defend, not to attack, of using power in civilian applications, more than in militant applications ... We can cooperate, we can integrate as much as we can.

How can we do that? I think leaders in the world have a great responsibility in this. Human beings can live together.

Topic
the lessons of Planet of the Apes

Mohamed Morsi

I remember a movie. Which one? Planet of the Apes. The old version, not the new one. There is a new one. Which is different. Not so good. It [does] not [express] the reality as it was the first one. But at the end, I still remember, this is the conclusion: When the big monkey, he was head of the Supreme Court I think - in the movie! - and there was a big scientist working for him, cleaning things, [who] has been chained there. And it was the planet of the apes after the destructive act of a big war and atomic bombs and whatever in the movie. And the scientist was asking him to do something ... "Don't forget you are a monkey," [the man] tells [the ape]. "Don't ask me about this dirty work." What did the big ape, the monkey, say? He said, "You're human. You did it [to] yourself." That's the conclusion. Can we do something better for ourselves?

Topic
President Obama and the Gaza cease-fire

Mohamed Morsi

President Obama has been very helpful, very helpful. And I can say, really, that his deeds coincide with his intentions. We've been talking together about the cease-fire. That's very important. Then we can talk about differences between Palestinians and Israelis. It's not easy. It's very difficult. Both sides are talking about differences. We want them to talk about similarities ... We are now doing this job as much as we can.

Topic
freedoms in the new Egypt

Mohamed Morsi

I'm very keen on having true freedom of expression. True freedom of faith. And free practice of religious faith. I am keen and I will always be keen on [transfer] of power. I'm an elected President. My chief responsibility is to maintain the national ship to go through this transitional period. This is not easy. Egyptians are determined to [move] forward within the path of freedom and democracy, and this is what I see. Justice and social justice. Development with its comprehensive overall meaning. Human development. Industrial productive development. Scholarly research. Political development. International relations balanced with all different parties, east and west. We are keen in Egypt, and I am personally keen right now, on maintaining freedom, democracy, justice and social justice. The Muslim Brotherhood do not say anything different from that.

Topic**whether, in hindsight, he would have handled his decree differently**

Mohamed Morsi

Oh, no, I don't see the situation this way. What I can see now is, the Egyptians are free. They are raising their voices when they are opposing the President and when they are opposing what's going on. And this is very important. It's their right to express and to raise their voices and express their feelings and attitudes. But it's my responsibility. I see things more than they do. I think you have seen the most recent opinion surveys-I think more than 80%, around 90%, of the people in Egypt are, according to these opinion measures, they are with what I have done. It's not against the people, it's with the people, coincides with the benefits. There is some difference between what's happening now in expressing the opinions of the people and what happened in January 2011 [during the uprising against then President Hosni Mubarak]. There is now some violence that we haven't seen before, which constitutes something bad going on.

This is my responsibility, but in general the expression is O.K. But there is some violence. Also, there is some relation shared between these violent acts and some symbols of the previous regime. I think you and I - I have more information, but you can feel that there is something like this in this matter.

I'm sure Egyptians will pass through this. We're learning. We're learning how to be free.

Topic**accusations that he is a new pharaoh and tyrant**

Mohamed Morsi

New pharaoh? [Laughs] ... I went to prison. [He touches his tie.] And I was the chair of the materials department at university when I went to prison. The reason why I went to prison is that I was defending the judiciary and Egyptian judges. I know perfectly what it means to have separation between the three powers - executive power, legislative power and the judiciary. This is the main concept about a state based on institutions. The people are the original source of power. The President represents the executive power, and the President is elected by the people. And I'm keen that the people would have complete freedom of elections, and I'm keen on [transfer] of power through free elections. I went all over the world, whether in the U.S., in Europe or the East, and I know how things are run. I know about technology, about research, scientific applications, culture, civilization, differences between nations of the world, the nature of history.

Question**Whether Egypt is being pulled apart**

Mohamed Morsi

No, it's not pulling apart. It's not pulling apart. It's a majority and opposition. I can see it very clear. But the opposition is not like it was before. They have the right, they do what they say. If you have 25% or 30% opposition, that's a big number.

Topic

How he has been as President

Mohamed Morsi

How many months [have I] been in the presidential [palace]? It's five months. Not 30 years [the length of Mubarak's rule]. It's five months ... It's five months after a big destruction, corruption, bad deeds. People have always been marginalized. I've been part of the revolution. And from the Muslim Brotherhood, I was in charge of the action in Tahrir Square, representing the Muslim Brotherhood during the revolution. I hope, when we have a constitution, what I have issued [his decree] will stop immediately, and I have others sharing this with you. We'll have a parliament. We'll have elections. [That will happen in] two months.