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Experts: Egypt's military warnings target Islamists and liberals alike



The Egyptian army's strong warnings on Saturday that they would intervene to stop the country "from plunging into a dark tunnel" were seen by political observers as directed towards both the Islamists in power and liberal opposition forces.

Political and activist groups opposed to Islamist President Mohammad Mursi are planning mass protests on June 30 to call for the president's ouster. Last Friday, pro-government rallies were held in Cairo to denounce violence and show support for the president.

But during that "no to violence" rally, a group of Islamists appeared in a circulated video receiving combat training, raising fears of a possible violent showdown on June 30.

Previous statements by Islamist preachers who sanctioned the killing of anti-Mursi protesters and accused them of apostasy have also contributed to those fears.

Egypt's Defense Minister Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi warned of the "state of division in society," saying the "the continuation of it is a danger to the Egyptian state and there must be consensus among all."

He added: "It is the national and moral duty of the army to intervene... to prevent sectarian strife or the collapse of state institutions."

In a message appeared to be addressed to the Muslim Brotherhood, Sissi said: "Those who think that we ignore the dangers facing the Egyptian nation are mistaken. We will not remain silent in the face of the country's plunge into conflict."

But independent political experts do not see the army's warnings as being directed at a particular political faction. The warnings were addressed to parties and groups across the political spectrum to minimize the chances of violence on June 30, said Ihab Yousef, a Cairo-based security risk

“His message might initially seem directed at the Brotherhood, because of their latest protest that had indications of violence...but the message is directed at both the opposition and the Brotherhood,” Yousef added.

About 100 people were injured last week in clashes triggered by President Mursi's decision to appoint a large number of Islamists as provincial governors.

Opposition forces say the president is conducting a “Brotherhoodization” of the country, placing members of his Islamist group and of other Islamist allies in key positions of power. Amani al-Tawil, a political analyst from the Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, described the army's stance as “independent,” and not siding with one group against another.

Tawil said the army cannot take sides because doing this will backfire. “The independence of the Egyptian army from political parties makes it one of the strongest armies in the region.”

She said the army's latest statements were meant to encourage “political consensus” and are “an effective message because the Brotherhood knows what the army is capable of doing.”

In order to stave off violence and even a possible civil war in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood must exercise “rational wisdom,” Tawil said, adding that the president, who she believes lacks political acumen, must step down.

“There are even people within the Muslim Brotherhood who do not see Mursi as a capable leader,” added Yousef.

The army's will and resolve to contain the situation will be tested on June 30, when and if the demonstrations turn into violence, he said.

“The effectiveness of the army's threat will be seen in the first wave of violence. Unfortunately Egypt will be facing violence which could threaten peace,” he added.

Egyptian lawyer Ashraf Abdulhamid, of the Supreme Constitutional Court, said the army will seek to protect “the legitimacy of the country's institutions as well as people's demands.”

Mursi won the presidential elections last year with 51.7 percent of majority vote, ahead of Ahmed Mohamed Shafik , the last prime minister under ousted leader Hosni Mubarak, who received 48.3 percent of votes.