Egypt's Multiple Power Centers

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Given the limitations and internal divisions of Egypt's various power centers, neither the military nor any other single institution is solely in charge at the moment.

The overwhelming "yes" vote in Egypt's army-backed constitutional referendum this week, based on a respectable reported turnout of around 40 percent, has led some observers to conclude that the military alone now runs Egyptian politics. True, the military remains the central pillar of all state institutions amid the ongoing turmoil, but it is not the sole decisionmaker. For example, since the June 30 revolution that ousted President Muhammad Morsi, other actors besides the military have made major political decisions such as cabinet appointments, formation of the fifty-member constitutional committee, and the drafting of the constitution itself. In fact, the post-Mubarak era has been defined by the emergence of multiple power centers that continue to influence the country's political trajectory.

BACKGROUND

Former president Hosni Mubarak led a tightly knit, centralized decisionmaking process driven almost entirely by the executive branch. Until around 2005, he was Egypt's strongman -- he trusted few, and he always had the final word about what would transpire in the domestic political scene. To be sure, he lost some control to his family members during the last five years of his presidency, a time when institutional and personal tensions were building within the executive amid wide disapproval of the plan to have his son Gamal succeed him as president. Nevertheless, Mubarak was still "the man" in Egypt, and if anyone convinced him of a policy, he had the resources and power structure to implement it. But all this abruptly changed after his February 2011 ouster.

One of the challenges for the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which took over after Mubarak stepped down, was adapting to a new political reality without proper preparation. With millions of Egyptians empowered by the revolution, the executive branch could not have full control over the political system. Throughout its rocky

eighteen-month rule, the SCAF struggled to operate in an environment where new power centers -- the street, nonstate actors, media, new political parties, the business community, and so forth -- had significant influence on political developments. Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi and Army Chief of Staff Sami Anan spearheaded a transition that drew much criticism and even made some senior military officials wary. Since last summer, however, the military -- under the leadership of Defense Minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi -- has absorbed and accepted the new reality of other power centers exercising influence.

WHAT ARE EGYPT'S POWER CENTERS?

Among Egypt's handful of current power centers, some actors are more important than others, but they all affect Cairo's decisionmaking and the overall political situation. These power centers can be divided into three categories: state institutions, the executive branch, and nonstate societal actors. The complex interactions between these blocs are key to understanding the power dynamics in post-Mubarak Egypt.

In the first category, the main players are the state institutions that deal with security, economics, rule of law, and foreign affairs. The executive category includes the president and his cabinet. The nonstate category includes the street, NGOs, media, the business community, various political parties or organizations, and religious institutions. These power centers have been shifting continuously over the past three years, at times aligning themselves with strange bedfellows.

POWER CENTERS ON JUNE 30

On the eve of last June's revolution, most of Egypt's power centers were aligned against the Muslim Brotherhood government, and Morsi had lost complete control. All state institutions and most nonstate actors had turned against him. The police, intelligence, and military were frustrated with what they regarded as an incompetent presidency; in their view, Morsi was jeopardizing national security by ignoring serious domestic grievances, allowing jihadists to establish a stronghold in Sinai, and pursuing a foreign policy that alienated Persian Gulf governments. Similarly, the judiciary believed it was under attack, with Morsi issuing a constitutional declaration in November 2012 that put himself above the rule of law and appointing a prosecutor-general whom many viewed as illegitimate. Civilian state institutions felt completely sidelined as well; for example, Morsi advisor Essam al-Haddad served as the de facto foreign minister, much to the chagrin of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Yet the main catalysts for the June 30 revolution were the nonstate actors who had turned against the Brotherhood-led government months earlier. Millions of Egyptians joined the "Tamarod" (rebellion) movement to demand Morsi's removal, and a broad spectrum of political forces, NGOs, business leaders, and private media outlets encouraged people to take to the streets on June 30. Even major religious institutions such as the Coptic Church and al-Azhar endorsed the post-Morsi roadmap following his July 3 ouster. Of course, the security apparatus indirectly encouraged the Tamarod movement as well based on its own suspicions about the Brotherhood's intentions and actions. Nevertheless, the fact is that most power centers had genuinely turned against the government, making it practically impossible for Morsi to continue governing.

POWER CENTERS AFTER JUNE 30

Egypt's power configuration has shifted dramatically since last summer's revolution. The key power centers remain anti-Brotherhood, but two ideological camps have been battling each other as well: a nationalist camp and a "liberal" camp. The former prefers a strong state represented by a strong security establishment and military, while the latter opposes the idea of an assertive security and military establishment playing a major role in governance. Both camps are well represented in the current power structure. Prime Minister Hazem Beblawi, his deputy Ziad Bahaa Eldin, and Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy are all considered part of the "liberal" camp, while the nationalist faction includes officials such as Housing Minister Ibrahim Mehleb, Interior Minister Muhammad

Ibrahim, Minister of Local Development Adel Labib, and Aviation Minister Abdel Aziz Fadel.

The media are divided along similar lines, with Abdel Rahim Ali, Adel Hammouda, Tawfik Okasha, and Ahmed Moussa considered part of the nationalist camp and Lamis al-Hadidi, Bassem Youssef, Mona Elshazly, and Mahmoud Saad placed in the liberal camp. Among nonstate actors, the Tamarod movement is considered nationalist, while the "April 6" movement and some socialist factions are in the liberal camp.

Strong tensions and frustrations have been building up between these two camps in all of Egypt's power centers, as reflected in the decisionmaking process. For example, during a November cabinet meeting**,** an intense rift erupted between Deputy Prime Minister Bahaa Eldin and Interior Minister Ibrahim over the proposed protest law, which led to a delay in its issuance. The nationalist camp was fully supportive of the law, while the liberal camp was more hesitant about it. Another point of contention has been the idea of reconciliation with the Brotherhood, which the nationalist camp completely refuses, in sharp contrast to the liberal camp. The prime minister has failed to bridge the gap between these two camps, rendering his cabinet ineffective in governing.

In policy terms, the government is focused on three main portfolios at the moment: security, the economy, and the transitional roadmap. Although the security apparatus is handling the first portfolio, the cabinet and the president's office are still involved in all major security decisions to one degree or another, including the dispersal of pro-Morsi protestors at Rabaa al-Adawiyya Square and al-Nahda Square. The economic portfolio and transitional roadmap are being handled by the cabinet and President Adly Mansour himself. And while Defense Minister Sisi serves as the first among three deputy prime ministers, he has not used that position to interfere in non-security issues in Beblawi's cabinet. Thus, "full military control" is not an accurate way to describe Egypt's current political or decisionmaking process.

CONCLUSION

Since Mubarak's fall, a paradigm shift has taken place inside Egypt's complex power structure, with many key players now influencing each other. The military is of course a major pillar in this structure, but many other important forces surround it and help shape the country's political decisions. Understanding the limitations of these internally divided power centers indicates that neither the military nor any other single institution is solely in charge.

Adel El-Adawy is a Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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