

Tired of the Brotherhood, Egyptians Want the Military Back - - But Only Temporarily

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A new military takeover would not provide any more of a path to stability than the increasingly autocratic Muslim Brotherhood, yet this may be where Egypt is heading.

During a recent trip I took to Egypt, non-Islamists openly admitted that their increasingly violent protests against the government of President Mohammed Morsi, including a string of arsons targeting Brotherhood headquarters nationwide, are intended to force the military to reclaim control. "There will be bloody action in the street, and the army will come," Heba, an Alexandria-based leader of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, told me. "I don't want this, but the people will be happy."

This weekend's anti-Christian violence in Egypt, which left six people dead, has amplified calls within the country for the Egyptian military to reclaim power. Those calls aren't new. Ever since Morsi's November 22 constitutional declaration, through which the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated leader declared virtually unchecked executive authority, non-Islamist activists have demanded the end of the Brotherhood's rule. Public support for a new military takeover then grew tremendously after December 5, when the Brotherhood used organized violence against protesters outside the presidential palace. According to one poll, 82 percent of Egyptians now want the military back in power.

None of the non-Islamists I interviewed -- most of whom were demonstrating against the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces only nine months earlier -- viewed a military takeover as ideal. But they seemed oddly confident that a second military junta would be short-lived and benevolent. "We just want the military to protect us during the intermediate period, not rule," said Islam, a member of the revolutionary Suez Youth Union, who later admitted to staging a provocation that he and his colleagues used as a pretext for burning a local Brotherhood office.

Yet despite this pro-military mood swing, the generals are staying away from direct political involvement for the

time being. Rather than ruling, the military is focusing squarely on managing its narrow, mostly economic interests. In some cases, it is even using its vast resources to boost its image while the Brotherhood's falters. This will help the military justify its return to power if Egypt's current political chaos threatens its assets.

Even as violence has become a constant feature of Egyptian politics, with clash-inducing protests destabilizing sections of major cities, the Egyptian military has largely stayed to the sidelines. In the three major Suez Canal cities over which the military technically assumed control in late January, military police are barely visible on the streets, and military personnel largely keep to protecting state assets, such as the canal itself. And despite occasional military statements warning that its "patience" with the Brotherhood is wearing thin, a top military leader told me that the military isn't eager to run the country. It's trained to fight wars and protect borders, he said, not to police cities or operate government services.

The Egyptian military, however, hasn't fought a major war since 1973, and its meager performance preventing weapons from being smuggled into Gaza suggests that its border-protection skills leave much to be desired. Instead, it has spent the past four decades building a vast financial empire, including extensive land-holdings and control of major industries, which is believed to comprise between 15 and 40 percent of Egypt's economy. And it's expanding those assets through the establishment of new development projects that seem geared toward improving its public standing.

In late February, I visited one of these new development projects in Suez, where the military is building a shopping and community-center facility. At the center of this project is the Badr Hypermarket -- an uncommonly pristine grocery store, at least by Egypt's standards, selling western and local products at significantly discounted prices. (I played a brief game of "The Price Is Right" with the military officer who oversees the supermarket; a toothbrush that normally sells for 6 Egyptian pounds sells for a mere 75 piasters here -- an 87.5 percent discount!) The military is able to provide these discounts because virtually every employee -- from the cashiers to the stock-boys to the janitors -- is an enlisted soldier. Right next-door, camouflage-uniformed cadets were hard at work constructing a building that would house a refrigeration unit, and there are additional plans to build a clothing store, a food court, and soccer fields.

In providing discounted goods to the broader population, the military is adopting an outreach model that the Muslim Brotherhood perfected long ago. But Colonel Yasser Wady, who oversees the entire facility along with his enlisted, iPad-toting subordinates, dismissed any notion of using the development project to compete with the Brotherhood. "The idea [for the facility] came from the people. They always communicate with the army of Suez," he said.

Well, I asked, had President Morsi, as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces under the new constitution, signed off on the use of public funds for building this military-run shopping complex? "He should!" the colonel responded. "If you're the president, and there's something in the people's interest, should you sign off on it? If he's smart, he'll agree. If he doesn't sign, he's not smart." (Other officers told me, off-the-record, that Morsi had not been notified of the facility's construction, and expressed their view that the military had no obligation to alert him of this fact.)

No matter what the military's intentions are, however, the Suez project is boosting its image just as the Brotherhood's is plummeting, and it's feeding hopes for a military coup. "The chants of 'down with military rule' have ended," Sayyid Noon, a Suez-based journalist, told me, adding that many youth revolutionaries now consider Brotherhood-rule worse. "The military has a good place here," he said. "[It] is selling food at half-price...People appreciate the army."

Col. Wady was coy about whether the military would consider retaking power to restore order if the current chaos continued. "The army will serve the needs of the people," he said. And yet when I asked him whether those caught shoplifting from the military-owned supermarket would be tried before military courts, as is permissible for "crimes

that harm the Armed Forces" under the new constitution, the colonel was much more direct. "It depends on how much they steal," he said wryly.

It was a small, but perhaps telling, indication that the Egyptian military won't provide the path towards stability any more than the increasingly autocratic Muslim Brotherhood. The teargas-covered protests against the Brotherhood domination, after all, were teargas-covered protests against military trials only a year ago. And yet this may be where Egypt is heading.

Eric Trager is the Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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