

The Rumors of Another Egyptian Revolution Are Greatly Exaggerated

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On Wednesday night, thousands of demonstrators descended onto Tahrir Square to demand an end to military rule. It was the twentieth straight night of these protests, and the Muslim Brotherhood marked the occasion by calling on its hundreds of thousands of members nationwide to join an open-ended Tahrir Square sit-in and "complete the revolution."

But from my apartment in Mohandessin, a neighborhood just three miles northwest of downtown Cairo, I couldn't hear a thing. The streets were calm, the cafes were open, and there was nothing in sight that resembled a revolution. It is a stark contrast from a year-and-a-half ago, when Mohandessin was one of the epicenters of Egypt's January 2011 uprising and its aftermath. Indeed, by the fifth day of the anti-Mubarak revolt, the neighborhood's residents organized civil defense units to guard against armed thugs, who left few storefronts, and virtually no ATMs, untouched.

Last year, political unrest and fervor had spread throughout the country. That's what happens during a revolution. And it's precisely not what's happening in Egypt right now.

That isn't to say that Egypt is calm -- it isn't. In the past two weeks, a court order dissolved the parliament; a new law empowered the military police to arrest civilians; the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) issued a constitutional declaration to enshrine its control of the country; both presidential candidates declared victory; and the official results of the presidential elections were postponed indefinitely. Taken together, these events are being interpreted as a military coup, and many Egyptians are now talking of a "second revolution" against the SCAF -- especially if former prime minister Ahmed Shafik, who is viewed as the junta's preferred candidate, is determined to have won the presidential elections. This "second revolution" would draw critical support from pivotal political blocs, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists, and revolutionary youth -- all of whom view the SCAF as public enemy number one. And especially around Tahrir Square, revolutionary fervor abounds. "We trusted the SCAF, and they didn't achieve our demands," said one protester, while addressing a group of his comrades earlier yesterday afternoon. "So we're staying in the Square."

But beyond downtown Cairo, many Egyptians have no interest in a new revolution. Though acknowledging the

SCAF's poor management of the country and its undemocratic depredations, many Egyptians fear that a new round of demonstrations will catalyze even greater unrest, worsen Egypt's declining domestic security situation, and further damage its sinking economy. These concerns led approximately half of Egyptians to vote for Shafik in last weekend's presidential elections. "We need a strong man who knows how to manage a big country," Sherif Tourki, an engineer volunteering for the Shafik campaign, told me during a "victory" party at the Shafik headquarters on Tuesday evening. Other Shafik supporters expressed similar concerns, saying that, if elected, the Muslim Brotherhood's presidential candidate would crush Egypt's already-struggling tourism industry and upset relations with the United States.

Yet even many of those who voted for Morsi seem wary of the instability that a "second revolution" might bring. "We want security, stability, and to live a good and quiet life," Sayyid Murgan, a retired railway worker who voted for Morsi, told me. Murgan participated along with millions of other Egyptians during last year's anti-Mubarak revolt, but said he would stay home if a "second revolution" emerged. "We want to work and get food," he said. "We don't want disruption." Mohamed Ali Mohamed, a mechanic who also voted for Morsi, agreed. "If Shafik wins, it's no problem," he said. "We want him to work for the people and the country, because we want security and stability." Even a Tahrir Square vendor, hawking an impressive array of pro-Brotherhood paraphernalia, preferred restraint. "We hope [a second revolution] won't happen," Shawiya Omran, 55, told me. "We want stability and peace."

As usual, Egypt's youth revolutionaries will hear none of it. Egyptians, they say, are unified behind their demands, and those that aren't are part of a conspiracy against them. "Tahrir has been infiltrated by Ahmed Shafik, and he spreads rumors," activist Haitham Khamees told me while guarding a Tahrir podium. For this reason, the youth activists are likely to overreach: They will overstate their public support, make their demands too high, push for them too hard, and -- sadly -- be targeted for the most violent response.

The Brotherhood, on the other hand, may already be hedging its bets: It is reportedly negotiating with the SCAF. So despite the Brotherhood's talk about "completing the revolution," it could back down at any moment -- presumably, as long as it's given the share of power it has long sought. As Egypt expert Josh Stacher smartly tweeted, the Brotherhood always has "one foot in Tahrir and one in the formal political arena."

In other words, although new mass demonstrations are already underway, a new revolution is not. The protests are not affecting anything beyond Tahrir Square, and there is a large segment of the Egyptian public that opposes them -- at least in form, if not in substance. The next stage of Egypt's post-Mubarak transition will thus likely be a sustained confrontation between the SCAF on one hand and an uncomfortable coalition of revolutionary youth activists and Islamists on the other. There may be moments of intense violence, and others of negotiated calm. But unless these demonstrations are capable of capturing the broader public, they will likely be a much more contained affair than last year's revolution. They may still have an impact -- just not in Mohandessin.

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

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