Egypt's Military Learns Its Lesson: How the Ruling Council in Cairo Contained a Second Revolution

by **Eric Trager (/experts/eric-trager)**

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The second revolution has, supposedly, come to Egypt. Over the past twelve days, tens of thousands of Egyptians have gathered in Tahrir Square to demand that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) cede power to a civilian-led National Salvation Government. Egyptian security forces responded by killing at least 40 people, wounding more than 1,000, and blanketing parts of downtown Cairo with weapons-grade tear gas. The ugly scenes recall the earliest days of the mass uprising in January and February, the first revolution, which ended Hosni Mubarak's reign. But this second revolution has one major problem: so long as Egyptians avoid Tahrir Square, it is somewhat easy to ignore.

The sit-in began on November 18, when an Islamist-led mass demonstration withdrew from Tahrir Square, leaving behind a handful of protesters, including family members of people killed during the first revolution. When Central Security Forces violently dispersed this small sit-in, thousands of youth activists quickly mobilized, battling police for control of the square. As the violence surged, thousands more poured into Tahrir, and the deadly tumult forced the SCAF to make some concessions, such as vowing to cede power by July 2012 and accepting the resignation of Egypt's unpopular interim government. But this second revolution has failed to achieve its biggest goal -- namely, forcing the SCAF to hand executive authority over to a civilian-led National Salvation Government, headed by Mohamed El Baradei.

The second revolution has failed because, since a ceasefire went into effect on November 24, it has been remarkably contained. Indeed, beyond Tahrir Square, Cairo is moving as normally as ever. Just a few feet from the Tahrir entry points, where overeager youth activists pat down everyone who passes through, shops are open and pedestrian traffic is swift. Right across the Nile, in the swanky island neighborhood of Zamalek, the cafes are crammed until 2 AM. The markets are full in lower-income Imbaba; the ATMs are working in middle-class Dokki; and the restaurants

are serving in wealthy Mohandessin. And in recent days, throngs of Cairenes have lined up to vote with an orderliness that far exceeded expectations. The most recent demonstrations in Tahrir Square aren't remaking the city; they have increasingly become a sideshow, complete with vendors selling Pharaonic kitsch. And the sideshow is quickly dwindling.

Such was hardly the case earlier this year. In January and February, as hundreds of thousands of protesters flooded city streets, screamed from their balconies, and merged onto Tahrir Square, Central Security police forces fired tear gas throughout much of the city, and a nationwide Internet shutdown and mid-afternoon curfew brought the metropolis of seventeen million to a screeching halt. And then things really deteriorated. Thugs -- many of whom were plainclothes police officers allegedly sent by the Interior Ministry -- went on a tear, shooting up Cairo's communities, looting shops, and robbing banks. Mubarak apparently believed that this lawlessness would lead his countrymen to clamor for his strong hand, but they unified against him instead, forming watch groups to protect their neighborhoods, and turning out in Tahrir Square in ever growing numbers.

It has become fashionable among Cairo's chattering class to claim that the SCAF has learned nothing from Mubarak. But the stark contrast between the January revolution and today's confined protests suggests that the generals have taken at least one lesson from the former dictator's downfall: the first step to ending a revolt is preventing it from disrupting the lives of ordinary people. In this vein, they have made Tahrir's perimeter a firm border between the revolutionary action and regular life. The second step, however, is a bit more complicated: the SCAF must appeal to the broader Egyptian public. It must convince the people that their everyday comforts are preferable to chaos.

The SCAF has two key advantages in the struggle for public opinion. The first is the widespread support the military enjoys due to universal conscription, which allows its leaders to tout it as a "people's army." Egypt's military is widely celebrated for having achieved the country's proudest "victories," such as the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, which Egyptians believe (incorrectly, by most standards of victory) that they won. In his speech to the nation last Tuesday, SCAF chairman Mohamed Hussein Tantawi appealed to this pro-military sentiment, saying, "We in the armed forces -- the school of patriotism -- are used to confronting hardships, and we are trained how to be patient until we reach our goal by thorough planning and determination to succeed." This is the kind of message that resonates in Egypt -- where an October poll conducted by the Al-Ahram Center for Strategic Studies noted that 90 percent of Egyptians support the SCAF. (Even as tensions have grown between the SCAF and Egypt's political parties, recent polls still show that more than 60 percent of Egyptians support the military rulers.)

The second tool is the SCAF's control over the state-run media, which it has used to blame the protesters for Egypt's ongoing unrest. On Friday, the state-run *Al-Ahram*'s top headline ominously blared, "The Final Opportunity: Stability or Chaos," and Saturday's top headline warned of the "Danger of Division" after a pro-SCAF "coalition of the silent majority" emerged to confront the anti-SCAF protesters of Tahrir Square. Previously, state-run media has blamed the demonstrations for everything from the rise of radical Islamists to Egypt's ongoing economic woes. And given the deep reach of Egypt's government-run media, it is widely believed by the SCAF's detractors that this campaign is working. "Nobody hears the people in Tahrir because nobody knows anything about politics," Fathi Abdullah, a food stand owner in Imbaba who sympathizes with the protesters, told me. "Hosni Mubarak corrupted all political life in Egypt and killed our rights."

Indeed, while it is difficult to gauge the success of the SCAF's anti-protester campaign, a number of Egyptians expressed their frustration with the ongoing protests. "We don't want them to be there at all, because they are holding the country back," Ahmed Refai, 55, a shopkeeper in Imbaba, said. At a nearby coffee parlor, Mohamed Mahmoud, a 40-year-old teacher, agreed. "I'm against them," he told me. "Because every party in Tahrir has personal demands and is afraid to fail in the elections. They talk about democracy, but democracy is at the polls and voting." Others said that they appreciated the demonstrators' efforts, but approved of the SCAF's recently announced plan to

hand over power to an elected civilian authority by July 1, 2012. "The people are demanding the end of the SCAF, and most of the people are rushing things, and that's not right," dissenting Tahrir protester Baghat al-Shair, 38, said, drawing stern rebukes from his comrades.

All of this is not to say that the SCAF can rest easy. While Egypt's best-organized political forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood and various Salafist groups, have mostly steered clear of this round of demonstrations, it is hardly because they support military rule. To the contrary, these organizations view a SCAF-led transition as essential to ensuring that elections take place -- but, once elected, they anticipate translating their popular legitimacy into instant power. This is why these organizations, in contrast to many of their secularist counterparts, roundly opposed the SCAF's attempt to institute "supraconstitutional principles" that would preserve the military's autonomy over its own affairs, and why Brotherhood spokesman Kamal al-Helbawy called for the military's role to shrink after the elections. Thus, if the SCAF intends to hold power beyond the current transition, it might confront a popularly elected parliament seated with mass-mobilizing parties that could push a new round of demonstrations well beyond the perimeter of Tahrir Square.

For now, however, the SCAF is playing its cards right. The parliamentary elections, which began on Monday, have generated positive feelings even within Tahrir Square, where the number of demonstrators has plummeted. But if the elections suddenly lead to violence, or if the SCAF fails to deliver on its promises to cede power by July 2012, the risk of Islamist-led mass demonstrations is great. That "third revolution" would almost certainly be felt in Zamalek, and beyond.

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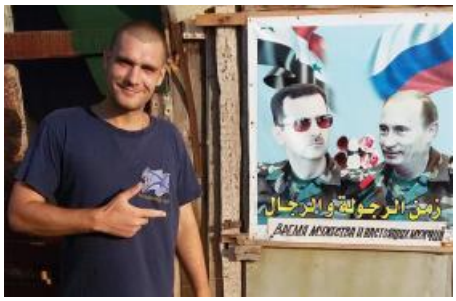

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