

# Egypt's Revolution Continues

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**As a new round of violence erupts in Egypt, Washington must prepare for the possibility that chaos and uncertainty will dominate the political scene for months to come.**

New clashes between "youth protestors" and Ministry of Interior riot police in Egypt's Tahrir Square have resulted in thirty-five dead and several hundred wounded over the past three days, jeopardizing the country's November 28 parliamentary elections. Even before this weekend's mayhem, the voting promised to be chaotic and, in all likelihood, marred by violence. But now, with growing public anger aimed at the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) for its undemocratic mismanagement of the transition, several secular political parties may boycott the polls. Should the elections proceed, the new crisis will benefit the Islamists, possibly widening their projected margin of victory

## Background

During the February uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak, a popular Egyptian saying was "the army and the people are one hand." Nine months on, the military's public approval rating has dropped from an impressive 90 percent to the mid-60s. Initially, the facade of national unity was stripped away in large part because of the military's continuance of the hated Mubarak-era emergency law and ongoing heavy-handed reliance on military courts to try civilians. Yet popular anger with the SCAF has spiked of late because the military has sought to mitigate a likely Islamist victory at the polls -- and preserve its traditional status of being unaccountable to civilian authority -- by

changing the presumed rules of the transition.

In particular, the SCAF has sought to enshrine its status in a set of "supraconstitutional principles" that would set the military beyond the reach of legislators. And to limit the Islamists' ability to significantly change the political system, the SCAF likewise announced that it would essentially ignore the results of the March 2011 referendum -- which stipulated that whoever controlled parliament would appoint the new constitutional drafting committee -- and instead select the lion's share of the committee itself. The Islamists cried foul and threatened a mass protest on November 18 if the SCAF didn't back down. True to their threat, they filled Tahrir Square on Friday, along with secularist protestors. At the end of the day, the Islamists departed, but the secular opposition remained.

## **Electoral Credibility in Question**

**T**he military is taking steps to ensure -- and reassure the public -- that "citizens will feel an unprecedented state of security" during next week's scheduled elections. And the SCAF will no doubt attempt to provide tight security for the various stages of balloting slated to last until January 10. Yet between disgruntled secular protestors, former regime thugs, and routine sectarian conflicts, authorities face an uphill battle. Today, in an effort to placate the street, the military promulgated a "lustration" law banning members of the former ruling National Democratic Party from participating in the elections. In another development, the entire cabinet resigned, though the SCAF must accept the resignations in order for them to take effect.

The bloodshed and general disorder could combine to undermine the credibility of any newly elected legislature. Already, the electoral law -- which combines multicandidate districts and both party-list and individual-candidate elections, with the latter divided among "farmers, laborers, and professionals" -- is confusing and voter-unfriendly. Making matters worse, if non-Islamists boycott the election, a significant segment of society may view the parliament as illegitimate. Likewise, voters could stay home if security is insufficient, further eroding support for the People's Assembly. Conversely, a heavy military presence spurred by the Tahrir clashes might also intimidate voters.

## **Despite Violence, Elections the Only Way Forward**

**E**gypt's key political players have denounced the latest violence. Secularist presidential candidate Mohamed ElBaradei laid the blame at the feet of the SCAF, whom he said had already "admitted they cannot run the country." The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) likewise held the SCAF "primarily responsible," accusing it of provoking the violence as a pretext for postponing the elections. Meanwhile, a number of key secularist political figures -- including Amr Hamzawy, George Ishak, and blogger Mahmoud "Sandmonkey" Salem -- have suspended their parliamentary campaigns in solidarity with the protestors.

At the same time, many of the key political parties -- including those who may boycott -- have echoed the SCAF's insistence that the elections go forward. The MB's Freedom and Justice Party, the Wafd Party, the Free Egyptians Party led by Naguib Sawiris, and the Salafist Nour Party, among others, have all released statements calling for voting to proceed as scheduled. Most important, both the MB and Free Egyptians Party have indicated that they will not participate in new Tahrir demonstrations as long as the elections are not postponed. Delaying the vote would remove their incentive to back an orderly transition and escalate a costly standoff that is already spreading to other governorates.

Both the major political parties and the Tahrir protestors appear to want the same thing: ending the SCAF's direct involvement in politics as soon as possible and devolving power to a civilian-led executive body. Several political groups, including the Wafd, the Social Democratic Party, and the Revolutionary Youth Coalition, are now calling for the establishment of a "national salvation government" after elections. The SCAF could try to end the violence by embracing this idea and delegating responsibility for political transition to an executive body elected by the forthcoming legislature. This would require the council to relinquish its authority over the transition in April 2012,

according to current proposals. Although it is difficult to imagine the SCAF agreeing to this option, the alternative -- an increasingly unpopular military junta without any clear process for installing a more legitimate government -- threatens further violence and severe instability.

## Implications for U.S. Policy

For Washington, the current situation in Egypt is a nightmare. Contrary to popular impressions, the Obama administration did not embrace the anti-Mubarak protestors last February but rather supported the Egyptian army in facilitating a change from Mubarak's rule to an uncertain military-led transition. Since then, Washington has vacillated on who its allies in Egypt really are. Is it the military, with whom the administration shares certain strategic understandings on key national security issues? Or the Muslim Brotherhood, which many in Washington view as both the authentic voice of the people and, given its "inevitable" electoral victory, a faction America should court? Or the secular liberals, who -- despite being the most ideologically congenial to America's democratic spirit -- have shown themselves to be poor political organizers often too willing to cooperate with illiberal forces (e.g., Salafists) for short-term gain? The absence of clarity on this issue has paralyzed U.S. policymaking, and as a result, the administration now has little sway with any of these key constituencies.

In fairness, Washington's policy options would be limited even in the best of diplomatic circumstances. The administration may feel compelled to prioritize national security issues, urging delayed elections so as to limit the likelihood of an Islamist landslide. Yet postponement may only catalyze further violence that jeopardizes the SCAF's standing entirely, thereby threatening the very equities the administration seeks to protect. Alternatively, prioritizing the democratization process might spur the SCAF to proceed with its current election schedule despite the violence, which could increase the chances of an all-out Islamist political victory. Perhaps a wiser third option would be to urge the SCAF to speed up the presidential election process, producing a new focal point of legitimate executive leadership that would be more likely than parliament to respect the military's prerogatives and preserve key national security interests.

Of course, none of this may work -- the forces at play throughout Egypt may still be in such a revolutionary fervor that even Washington's best ideas wind up having little impact. Therefore, although the administration should encourage the SCAF to lay out a credible path to civilian government, and in so doing protect only a limited set of the military's interests and perquisites, it must also prepare for the possibility that chaos and uncertainty will dominate the Egyptian political scene for months to come.

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