

Tensions Grow between Egypt's Military Leaders and the Muslim Brotherhood

by [Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Although Washington has no interest in an Islamist-dominated Egyptian parliament, a brittle and indefinite military regime that lacks legitimacy is not a formula for stability either.

As dozens of parties prepare for Egypt's parliamentary elections, scheduled to begin November 28, two primary players are competing for the country's political future: the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which has ruled since Hosni Mubarak's February 11 resignation, and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which is widely expected to win a plurality of votes. Growing tensions between the two are producing an increasingly turbulent political environment, which will complicate the establishment of a stable, democratic Egypt.

Background

Following Mubarak's ouster, the SCAF and MB both sought a swift political transition. The MB, the country's best-organized political force, believed that holding elections sooner -- before emerging parties could compete effectively -- would yield a larger victory. Meanwhile, the SCAF realized that it was ill equipped for domestic policing and seemed eager to cede control over day-to-day governance as soon as possible. For both players, the March 19 national referendum on proposed constitutional amendments legitimized the push for an expedited transition: the measure passed with 77 percent of the vote, paving the way for parliamentary elections to precede the potentially longer process of drafting a new constitution.

Although the SCAF and MB denied collusion on the referendum, they often worked cooperatively in the months that followed. On April 30, the MB's Freedom and Justice Party became the first new party to be legally recognized in the post-Mubarak era, and it used its newfound legal status to open dozens of offices throughout the country. And when youth activists increasingly criticized the SCAF's harsh treatment of dissidents and slowness in prosecuting former

Mubarak regime officials, the MB stood by the military, declining to participate in protests against the SCAF-backed interim government and calling on Egyptians to unify behind the council.

Growing Distrust

Despite such cooperation, the MB and SCAF have distrusted each other throughout the transition. The council feared that, if elected, the Brotherhood would use its authority to target military control over major industries, military budgets, and the Defense Ministry, none of which have been subject to parliamentary oversight in the past. To protect its position, the SCAF -- along with certain segments of the non-Islamist opposition -- called for supraconstitutional principles that would ensure its autonomy and curb Islamist ascendance. Not surprisingly, the MB fought this effort, believing that such principles would limit the influence it hoped to gain over the constitutional drafting process upon winning the parliamentary elections.

Adding to the mistrust, the SCAF sought to curtail the MB's potential victory at the polls by reserving one-third of parliamentary seats for locally elected independents -- a system that benefited former parliamentarians from the now-defunct National Democratic Party (NDP). The MB opposed this move and, with the help of many other factions, successfully pressured the SCAF to allow party candidates to run against former NDP "independents" for these seats.

Recent defections from the National Democratic Alliance for Egypt -- an electoral coalition of more than thirty parties that the MB had assembled with the help of the Wafd Party -- has further fueled MB-SCAF distrust. The Brotherhood believes that SCAF pressure tactics catalyzed the Wafd's defection, which was announced unexpectedly on October 6 and dealt a severe blow to the alliance's viability. The MB had built its electoral strategy around the coalition: by coordinating its candidacies with numerous other parties, it hoped to guarantee itself a primary position in the next government without the appearance of seeking direct control. But the alliance's shakeup -- and the MB's conviction that the SCAF instigated it -- has prompted the Brotherhood to pursue more aggressive tactics.

MB Seeking an Electoral Mandate

On October 25, the MB backtracked from its long-held pledge to run for fewer than half of the seats in the upcoming election -- a ceiling that its internal shura council had set shortly after Mubarak's ouster to reassure Egyptians that it was not pursuing a takeover. The MB is now slated to compete for nearly 77 percent of all parliamentary seats.

The Brotherhood's sudden assertiveness was spurred by two key factors. First, the eleven small parties remaining in the National Democratic Alliance are mostly weak and unable to compensate for the now-departed Wafd, which had planned to field 40 percent of the coalition's candidates. As a result, the MB believed that it had to boost its own number of candidates in order to remain competitive.

Second, the MB sought to confront the unexpectedly strong challenge posed by the Islamic Alliance, a coalition of four extremist Salafi parties that broke away from the Democratic Alliance in early September. The Islamic Alliance will run 693 candidates in the elections, and its leaders have predicted they will win 30 percent of the vote and representation in the next government. The MB is not taking this possibility lightly, having witnessed the Salafists' strong mobilizing capabilities at the July 29 Tahrir Square protests, where they overwhelmed Brotherhood activists.

Now that the MB is running for 77 percent of parliament, however, its leaders are feeling emboldened, apparently believing that their expanded candidate list will enable them to overcome the Wafd withdrawal and Salafist challenge. In late October, for example, senior official Essam al-Erian told a meeting of new MB leaders in Giza that 65 percent of Egypt's silent majority supports the Brotherhood. Subhi Saleh, a senior MB figure and parliamentary candidate, likewise boasted that the Brotherhood would form the next government and rule Egypt. At the same time, the MB has intensified its calls for the SCAF to hand over power following the elections. As Deputy Supreme Guide Khairat al-Shater recently declared, "The people will bear no more tyranny."

A More Assertive SCAF

Notwithstanding the MB pushback, the military council has sought to expand its control over the transition. In early November, the SCAF-appointed interim government met with political leaders to press for the adoption of supraconstitutional principles to perpetuate the military's autonomy over its own affairs. For example, one provision would force legislators to obtain the military's approval before issuing any laws affecting it. Another would make military financial allocations appear as a singly entry on the national budget, thereby preventing detailed parliamentary oversight. The principles would also give the SCAF wide discretion over Egypt's next constitution, including the authority to select 80 percent of the initial drafting committee and, if that body fails to complete its task within six months, to independently select an entirely new constitutional assembly.

While a number of parties, most notably the Wafd and the leftist Tagammu, have agreed to the principles, the MB has rejected them vociferously, releasing a statement cosigned by a wide range of other parties and political figures demanding that the principles be withdrawn. The Brotherhood has also threatened "million-man marches" on November 18 if the SCAF does not release a "timely schedule for handing over power to elected civilian rule."

U.S. Policy Options

The SCAF's pursuit of greater control over the transition is not surprising -- Egypt's military leadership is notoriously conservative and fears that immediately turning power over to a new parliament would result in instability. At the same time, the SCAF finally seems to realize that, absent significant nondemocratic intervention, the Islamists will almost certainly take control of the legislature and make significant and irreversible changes to the Egyptian political system.

Yet the manner in which the council has pursued a more stable transition is likely to catalyze greater instability. By drafting supraconstitutional principles that would permanently insulate it from civilian oversight without meaningfully consulting Egypt's political forces, the SCAF is suggesting that it intends to remain in power -- or at least preserve its privileged position -- indefinitely. This was never likely to win support in the post-Mubarak era, and the SCAF must now deal with the very real prospect that the MB will launch mass demonstrations next week.

For Washington, the Islamist-SCAF clash encapsulates the conundrum of the Arab Spring. Although the United States has no interest in Islamists dominating the Egyptian parliament, a brittle, illegitimate, and indefinite military regime is not a formula for stability either. Washington should therefore encourage the SCAF to establish a pluralistic political framework in close consultation with civilian leaders, reminding the council that a negotiated transition process is far more likely to ensure the military's political legitimacy moving forward. In contrast, the SCAF's current approach appears to be weakening the institution -- a development that is not in Egyptian or U.S. interests. Although opposition parties are unlikely to be satisfied with the transition no matter how it proceeds, the SCAF's heavy-handed strategy thus far is catalyzing confrontations that could drive Egypt toward further chaos.

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