

Egypt's Revolution Brought to a Halt?

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Brief Analysis

Washington must find the leverage needed to ensure that Egypt's military-supervised transition does not intentionally strengthen Islamists at the expense of revolutionary forces.

As Egypt prepares to try former president Hosni Mubarak on charges of killing protestors and abusing authority, recent events in Cairo's Tahrir Square indicate a growing accommodation between Islamists and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), both of which aim to marginalize liberal and leftist revolutionary forces.

Failed Drive for "Unity"

Over the past several months, the SCAF's inaction on key popular demands (e.g., instituting a minimum wage and prosecuting former regime members accused of killing demonstrators) has frustrated Egypt's revolutionary forces, catalyzing a new round of protests and sit-ins criticizing the council's rule. In response, the SCAF-appointed interim government made modest concessions to the protestors, installing a new cabinet and substantially reshuffling the Ministry of Interior's personnel. Dissatisfied with these gestures, a coalition of liberal, leftist, and Islamist groups staged a day of "unity" protests in Tahrir Square on July 29.

Liberals and leftists viewed such a demonstration as important for three reasons. First, they believed that a unified showing would stem growing public disenchantment with demonstrations that have shut down major thoroughfares throughout Cairo for months. For example, some Egyptians blame the Tahrir sit-in that began on July 8 for the country's economic woes, and clashes between vendors and demonstrators have erupted sporadically.

Second, liberals and leftists feared that an intensified SCAF-driven propaganda campaign against them was gaining traction. In mid-July, the council accused "April 6" -- a leading revolutionary youth group -- of receiving illicit foreign funding and training, using online videos and other social media tools to allegedly "prove" the activists' foreign connections. These accusations resonated among other civil society groups, many of which were quick to disavow

any foreign links.

Third, the liberal/leftist camp hoped to reverse growing polarization with the Islamists over transition issues. While the former preferred that Egypt draft a new constitution before elections, Islamists supported the Supreme Council's decision to hold elections first, believing that the SCAF-mandated timetable would give them a strong presence in the new parliament and therefore greater influence on the constitutional drafting process. As the protests continued, Islamists across the spectrum began to view them as undermining this transition plan. For example, al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah -- a U.S.-designated terrorist organization -- decried the protestors as "communists and secularists who want to hijack political power by fomenting strife between the people and the army."

At the same time, Islamists were apparently concerned that the SCAF would support the creation of "supraconstitutional principles" limiting the next parliament's role in drafting the new charter. Accordingly, they agreed to participate in last week's "unity" demonstrations in part to showcase their capacity for mass protests if the SCAF veered from its transition plan. As July 29 drew nearer, liberals and leftists -- increasingly fearing a violent confrontation with the Islamists -- agreed to suspend their partisan demands in favor of a joint demonstration. But hardline Salafists had other plans, overwhelming the protests with thousands of supporters calling for the implementation of sharia law. Islamist speakers also praised the Supreme Council, and pro-SCAF demonstrators from northern Cairo's Roxy Square eventually joined them in Tahrir. By midday, the liberals and leftists had withdrawn from Tahrir in defeat, canceling plans for continued protests during Ramadan.

Victory for the SCAF and the Brotherhood

Friday's outcome was a win for the SCAF. The council viewed the revolutionary protestors' ongoing demonstrations as a challenge to its authority, and the Islamists' mobilization of tens of thousands of supporters around a partly pro-military message seemed to grant the SCAF the legitimacy it needed to forcibly halt further gatherings. On Monday, military and Central Security Forces police cleared Tahrir Square: tanks broke through barricades that demonstrators had erected at the square's entrances, and officers chased away thousands of protestors, including family members of those killed during the January revolt. After the military established control of the square and reopened it to traffic, dozens of shopkeepers and Salafists gathered to thank the SCAF and the police.

The council also benefited from hardline Islamist actions during Friday's demonstrations. By vociferously calling for an Islamic state, the Salafists signaled their uncompromising pursuit of a fundamentalist political order that, according to polls, most Egyptians reject. In response, the SCAF has seized on the Salafists' overreach and called for the people to stand with it against hardline Islamist demands; SCAF official Maj. Gen. Ahmed Salah Abdul Halim went so far as to warn the public that "Egypt is now in danger."

The Muslim Brotherhood successfully exploited the Salafists' overreach as well, portraying itself as a comparatively "moderate" Islamist group. On Friday, as the hardliners were overwhelming Tahrir with chants for sharia, the MB was making inclusive gestures such as opening its stage to Coptic prayer, and it later criticized the Salafists' use of Islamist slogans as antithetical to national unity. Yet the Brotherhood echoed the SCAF in pinning most of the blame for Friday's disunity on the revolutionary protestors, whom it accused of mocking the Islamists. To further cement its claim to representing the Egyptian center, the MB declared its commitment to retaining the country's Islamic identity. According to the Brotherhood, recent events prove that acceptance of sharia principles is widely shared throughout Egypt's various factions.

By accommodating Islamists at the expense of the revolutionary protestors while publicly -- particularly in the international arena -- casting hardliners as a national security threat, the SCAF is seemingly reverting to the former regime's formula of using Islamists to ward off domestic and international pressure for expanding liberties. This

tactic may backfire, however, inspiring some Islamists to push for even greater power.

On Saturday, for example, gunmen chanting Islamist slogans launched rocket-propelled grenades at a police station in al-Arish, a city in northern Sinai, killing five people and wounding at least fifteen others. Later that day, Islamists fired RPGs at a gas pipeline to Israel in Sheikh Zuwaid, approximately thirty kilometers north of al-Arish. Meanwhile, a previously unknown group called "al-Qaeda of the Sinai Peninsula" has circulated a flier around al-Arish mosques calling for the establishment of an Islamic state in Sinai.

U.S. Policy Options

In resorting to Mubarak formulas such as divide-and-conquer and consent-through-fear, the SCAF is not advancing the interests of either Egypt or the United States. In addition to prompting expressions of "concern" from the State Department, the SCAF's use of violence against protestors on Monday has already led revolutionary protestors to call for a new Tahrir sit-in. If the public becomes skeptical regarding the conduct of Mubarak's trial, those calls will gain strength. Meanwhile, the Sinai attacks that followed the Salafists' strong July 29 showing suggest that the SCAF's strategy of accommodating extreme Islamists to undermine revolutionary protestors is having harmful effects.

When a high-level SCAF delegation visited the United States recently, deputy chief Gen. Muhammad al-Assar stated that while U.S. support for liberal revolutionary groups is "illicit," U.S. military assistance to Egypt is legal. But American support for the SCAF's management of Egypt's transition should not be unconditional. The challenge for U.S. policymakers, then, is to quickly find effective leverage -- not only to encourage political and economic reform, but also to ensure that the transition process does not intentionally strengthen Islamists at the expense of revolutionary forces.

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