

Egypt's Triangular Power Struggle

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Brief Analysis

Egypt's political future is being decided by the military, the Muslim Brotherhood, and protest groups in the streets.

Yesterday, July 21, Egyptian prime minister Essam Sharaf swore in a new cabinet in front of Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). During the Mubarak era, changing ministers was a rare event. These days, it is becoming an almost routine occurrence -- but one with only peripheral importance in Egyptian politics.

Currently, three groups are battling for the country's political future, and the civilian government is not among them. First is the SCAF, which has controlled the country since Hosni Mubarak's February resignation. Second is the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which has formed alliances with most major political parties and will likely prevail in this fall's parliamentary elections. Third are the protestors, who continue to pursue their demands through mass demonstrations that often bring daily activity in downtown Cairo and other key areas to a halt. These parties hold occasionally overlapping, but mostly competing, interests -- a situation that has complicated efforts to pursue a stable, secular, democratic future in Egypt.

The Triangle's Three Sides

The SCAF -- currently the most powerful force in Egypt -- has two primary interests. First, it aims to avoid becoming the target of mass protests that would substantially challenge its public legitimacy. It has thus made occasional, though largely superficial, concessions in hopes of quickly and quietly ending ongoing demonstrations. The council's second goal is to end its day-to-day rule of Egypt without losing the many privileges that the military has enjoyed historically, including control over large swaths of land, ownership of major industries, and a budget that remains above public or parliamentary scrutiny. In turn, the SCAF has sought to appease the political factions most likely to control the next parliament, particularly the MB.

For its part, the Brotherhood is widely expected to win a plurality in the elections because of its significant

mobilization capabilities, which include a nationwide network of approximately 750,000 members. Its profile has risen considerably since Mubarak's fall: it has opened at least thirteen new local headquarters throughout the country, inaugurated additional headquarters for its Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in most governorates, and cemented an alliance with twenty-seven other parties, many of which sacrificed their demands for delayed elections in exchange for the MB's cooperation in drafting electoral procedures. The Brotherhood's primary aim is to hold elections as soon as possible, before other parties can organize effectively enough to become competitive. It would then use its electoral success to control the subsequent constitutional drafting process, through which it hopes to establish an Islamic state.

The pro-democracy protestors are perhaps the politically weakest of the three forces, in part because they are divided among a number of revolutionary organizations. But they also possess significant mobilizing capabilities. The catalysts of the January uprising, they broadly share several key goals: prosecuting and imprisoning former regime officials, compensating the martyrs of the revolution, ending military detentions and trials, canceling emergency laws, reforming the Ministry of the Interior, and establishing a democratic political order. They have pursued these goals by holding mass protests in central Cairo squares and shutting down major thoroughfares. Such demonstrations are likely to continue indefinitely because the protestors have little hope of achieving their demands through the current SCAF-controlled, MB-dominated political transition process.

Two Against One

Typically, only two of the three groups agree on a given issue. These triangular tensions have increased in recent weeks, creating a potentially explosive situation that threatens the future of the revolution. The most prominent disagreements include:

The SCAF and the MB vs. the protestors on holding elections first. The MB and SCAF share an interest in holding elections as soon as possible, much to the protestors' chagrin. According to the MB, the passage of the March 19 nationwide referendum on eight constitutional amendments mandated that elections precede the drafting of a new constitution. Yet the protestors continued to call for a new constitution first. In response, FJP leader Muhammad Morsi called them "Zionists and remnants of the old regime," and the MB threatened mass protests against the SCAF if it did not hold elections first.

Since then, the protestors have formally dropped their "constitution first" demand, but they still seek to prolong the transition period. In response to their latest effort -- a two-week sit-in against Sharaf's interim government -- the SCAF made the superficial concession of having the prime minister dismiss much of his cabinet (superficial because most of the new ministers are ideologically similar to their predecessors). The MB has since announced its support for Sharaf's new cabinet and condemned "all attempts by some communities to pressure his choice of ministers." Sensing public frustration with the ongoing demonstrations, some of the most prominent protest groups have hinted that they will leave Tahrir Square after today's gathering. But they have vowed to use the hiatus to plan further demonstrations, and they are scheduled to march against military trials tomorrow, July 23.

The MB and the protestors vs. the SCAF on demonstrating unity. The Brotherhood and protestors share an interest in unifying behind the revolution's more general, consensus demands. The protestors need the MB's cooperation to mobilize the largest possible crowds and pressure the SCAF for further concessions. And the MB wants to avoid the criticism that it has abandoned the revolution in favor of outright partnership with the SCAF. Protestors have been so desperate for the MB's cooperation and imprimatur that they have made tremendous concessions of their own. For example, they formally dropped their "constitution first" demands to ensure that the Brotherhood would support the July 8 "Friday of Persistence" demonstrations.

The SCAF views both the rallies and their increasingly anti-SCAF tone as deeply threatening. For the moment, it has

responded with superficial concessions rather than large-scale crackdowns because it understands the MB's position: the Brotherhood is participating mostly to give the appearance of unity with the protestors, not because it has overriding grievances. Yet by joining the demonstrations, the MB has affirmed its mobilizing potential, and it retains the ability to participate in future mass protests if it believes that its interests are threatened.

The SCAF and the protestors vs. the MB on supraconstitutional principles. Since abandoning their "constitution first" demand, the protestors have called for establishing a set of immutable parameters to guide the eventual drafting of the new charter. In their view, such a move is essential to preventing the MB from imposing Islamist rule. The council regards such principles as a means of protecting the military's continued autonomy against the "whims" of any future president, as SCAF official Maj. Gen. Mamdouh Shahin recently commented. Accordingly, it has formed a committee to pursue this effort. Although the protestors do not want to give the SCAF constitutional autonomy, they may not be able to achieve their supraconstitutional demands unless they cooperate with the council.

Meanwhile, the MB views such principles as a means of "circumventing of the will of the people," characterizing the campaign for them as "aggression against the sovereignty of the people." In response, it has announced its participation in a July 29 million-man demonstration alongside other Islamist forces that oppose the principles; these include al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah, which remains a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, and the Salafist Nour Party, which has denounced the liberal protestors as thugs and remnants of the former ruling party.

U.S. Policy Options

These triangular tensions provide little hope for an outcome that will equally satisfy the MB, SCAF, and protestors. The current trajectory promises more demonstrations, whether by Islamists opposing supraconstitutional principles or protestors seeking to stall elections for which they are ill prepared. Increased violence is also a possibility given the SCAF's habit of allowing armed thugs to clear protest sites.

To forestall such violence and facilitate the most favorable outcome for both the United States and Egypt's democrats, Washington should leverage its relationships with liberal youth activists and the military in order to promote greater consensus between the SCAF and the protestors. One of the revolution's greatest disappointments has been the council's tendency to grant major concessions to the MB while leaving crumbs for the protestors. The campaign to establish supraconstitutional principles could serve as a starting point for a more cooperative relationship between the SCAF and the demonstrators.

Washington should proceed with caution, however. All three sides of the triangle regard one another with tremendous skepticism, and U.S. intervention that is viewed as inordinately privileging one party will unite the other two firmly against it.

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