

## Growing Frustration in Egypt

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Brief Analysis

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Egyptians are becoming increasingly angry and frustrated about the slow pace of political change. The July 14 statement by Jose Manuel Barroso, head of a visiting European Union delegation, that the revolution "is not over yet...and is facing many challenges" captured the mood. Since July 8, the "Day of Persistence," protesters have continued sit-ins in three major cities. And on July 12, Maj. Gen. Mohsen al-Fangari of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) issued a stern warning against continued "disruptions to public order," which only aggravated the situation.

Fangari's warning has since been nuanced by a statement from interim prime minister Essam Sharaf, as well as an additional press conference by two SCAF members. These gestures were clearly meant to assuage the public but did not appear to do so. Instead, more Egyptians are beginning to believe that, with the revolution in trouble, a new government of technocrats and politicians should be formed --one with authority independent of the SCAF. Some protestors have even designated today, July 15, as the "last warning Friday," sending a message to the SCAF that delaying revolutionary demands will no longer be tolerated.

In his mid-week televised speech, Sharaf seemed to respond at least partially to some demands. He pledged to "purge" the Ministry of Interior by mid-July, in part by removing senior officers. (The ministry promptly announced the honorable discharge of 60 percent of its generals, along with the transfer and, in limited cases, firing of some of the senior officers accused of torture.) In addition, Sharaf promised a new government by the end of the week and the appointment of new governors by the end of July. The speech also included an appeal to the Supreme Judicial Council -- a body composed of senior judges--to make the trials of former regime officials accessible to the public. The next day, the council announced that large screens displaying the trials would be placed outside the relevant courthouses, though actual use of the screens would ultimately be subject to the discretion of individual judges.

Sharaf's concessions were seemingly bolstered by a more conciliatory press conference in which two SCAF generals sought to remind the public of the SCAF's role as "guardians of the revolution." They also asserted that no one party would be allowed to "hijack" power -- a warning apparently directed at Islamists. The SCAF further announced that it would lay down the "guiding principles" for the selection of a constitutional drafting committee after "national consensus" was reached.

The SCAF's constitutional announcement has since been rejected by the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, which, after participating briefly in last Friday's protests, refused to join the sit-ins or today's protests. Capitalizing on revolutionary fatigue, Islamists are waging a rhetorical and grassroots campaign against those who would alter the SCAF's original transition plan of holding parliamentary elections in the fall, to be followed by a legislatively driven constitutional process.

Many liberals argue that the Islamists' position betrays an opportunistic desire to monopolize the drafting process through anticipated electoral victories that would give them substantial parliamentary representation. This is why some believe Islamists have definitively rejected calls for initiating national consensus on "supraconstitutional principles" that would enshrine the civil nature of the Egyptian state, among other principles -- a proposal advanced by presidential hopefuls Mohamed ElBaradei, Hisham al-Bastawisi, and other figures. Proponents of this view are working to build a movement in which these principles would be agreed to in advance and respected independently of the eventual constitution, which they fear might be a product of Islamist-oriented ideology that does not fairly represent the interests of the country as a whole.

Meanwhile, a number of stakeholders in Egypt's future, including the al-Azhar religious establishment, are joining the debate on constitutional principles in order to create a compelling national dialogue outside the SCAF-driven transitional process and beyond the council's "dialogue" with various political actors, which many view as arbitrary and divisive. Their challenge will be not only to build consensus among Egypt's fragmented non-Islamist camp, but also to immediately bring back within their fold the growing number of citizens who have become disenchanting with the revolution and the continued disruptions to daily life. To do so, they will need to remind all that the revolution was a people's movement for freedom, dignity, and economic opportunity, including but transcending calls for deconstruction of the former regime. In this vein, the guiding principles for a new Egypt must focus on strong democratic and accountable institutions and a new constitution establishing separation of powers, the principles of pluralism, and economic rights.

Failing this, Egyptians risk perpetual return to Tahrir Square. Incremental change and reluctant mollification from the SCAF will only lead to more popular skepticism.

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