

Egyptian Liberals Compromise for the Sake of Dubious Unity

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Brief Analysis

The more that liberals concede to Islamist demands, the more they will be marginalized in the struggle for Egypt's future.

Tens of thousands of liberal and Islamist Egyptians gathered in Cairo and Alexandria today for protests dubbed the "Friday of Persistence." The demonstration -- a rare showing of national unity in a polarized political spectrum -- was made possible by a significant liberal concession to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). In order to ensure Islamist participation, the liberals agreed that the rallies would not focus on their core demand that the new constitution be drafted prior to parliamentary elections. Although a temporary consensus was forged and turnout for the protests was impressive, the liberals may have ceded what little leverage they had in the transition process.

"Constitution First" vs. the Muslim Brotherhood

The "constitution first" camp believes that the electoral timetable and transition plan laid down by the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) -- namely, to hold parliamentary elections in September, followed by a constitutional drafting process and presidential elections -- would give their more well-organized Islamist political opponents an unfair advantage. On May 27, noting the absence of a transparent and inclusive dialogue with the SCAF regarding a roadmap for the future, constitution-first advocates took to the streets in large numbers.

Meanwhile, Muhammad Morsi, head of the MB's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), told an audience of around 20,000 people last week that those who call for the postponement of elections are "Zionists and remnants of the former corrupt regime." FJP secretary-general Saad al-Katatni subsequently accused the daily newspaper *al-Masry al-Youm*, which posted video of the speech, of "fabrication."

Such rhetorical clashes have been occurring with increasing frequency between the liberal and Islamist camps. The MB's argument is that a constitution-first model runs contrary to the will of the people, as expressed in March, when 78 percent of voters approved amendments to the 1971 constitution stipulating that legislative elections occur first, followed by a constitutional redrafting process driven by the new parliament.

Setting the Stage for New Protests

Against this backdrop, liberals began to call for new protests, initially planning to include the constitution-first platform as a main demand. These calls gained momentum amid growing public frustration with the SCAF's apparent reluctance to prosecute former regime officials, particularly those accused of killing or injuring protesters during the eighteen-day revolution.

The extent of this frustration was shown by the broad participation in the Friday protests, including a rare showing by the MB -- not just its younger members or its representatives in the Revolutionary Youth Coalition -- as well as some hardline Salafi movements. The MB and FJP had announced that they would take part earlier in the week, after

two days of internal debate. In a contentious tone rarely heard from the group since the SCAF took over, the FJP criticized the pace with which the trials of former regime officials were occurring. Katatni further characterized the treatment of the families of slain protestors as "unacceptable" and called on all groups to "set aside ideologies and unite for Egypt's progress."

Of course, the MB's announcement also indicated that the constitution-first demand had been set aside, with "a majority of political forces" allegedly agreeing to proceed to elections first. Indeed, the final pre-protest statement released by a coalition of liberal factions -- eight leftist and liberal parties and eleven youth and revolutionary movements -- excluded any mention of the constitutional demand or the electoral timetable. Their statement, under the slogan "Revolution First," instead focused on three sets of demands.

The first set addressed economic issues, requesting a national minimum wage, the right for workers to freely organize, and the restoration of Egypt's assets "stolen" by the former regime. The second set concerned security-sector reform, calling for fundamental restructuring of the Ministry of Interior with judicial and civilian oversight. The third set focused on justice, calling for measures that would ensure judiciary independence, swift prosecution of human rights violators, the addition of former president Hosni Mubarak to the list of those accused of murdering protestors, and an immediate end to military prosecution of civilians.

Other aspects of the liberals' statement were noteworthy as well. One passage demanded that authorities "allow" the current prime minister to freely exercise his duties, such as reviewing new legislation and restructuring state institutions. Another section demanded that candidates from the former ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) be barred from running for the next two rounds of parliamentary elections, including for the Shura Council. The statement also called for "re-examination" of the national budget and transparency in all its provisions -- a demand that appears to be directed at the SCAF given that the military budget is currently not subject to legislative review.

Liberals Risk Marginalization

The liberal factions that signed the statement likely did so to achieve national consensus in advance of the Friday protests. But this appearance of unity may impede efforts to develop a sound roadmap for transition and force the liberals to relinquish their role as the voice of Egypt's non-Islamist camp, which has been increasingly vocal in its constitution-first demands.

Previously, these liberals and others had argued that the SCAF subverted the March constitutional referendum by issuing, after the vote, a constitutional declaration consisting of 63 provisions, only nine of which had been up for voting. In relinquishing the battle over the Constitutional drafting process, the liberals are now giving the SCAF and the Islamists a free pass and, more important, bypassing an opportunity to foster genuine democratic transformation. Compared to their Islamist political opponents, the liberals have thus far been weak in taking grassroots action to convince the vast majority of Egyptians that their roadmap is the most faithful fulfillment of the revolution's demands.

SCAF Response

In response to the calls for Friday protests, the SCAF announced that it is open to modifying existing electoral and political-participation laws. Its proposed changes include a mixed-proportionate and direct electoral system, as well as reducing the minimum age for parliamentary candidacy to twenty-five. Yet the proposals would not alter the requirement that 50 percent of parliamentary seats be reserved for "farmers and workers" -- an anachronistic and controversial provision that the SCAF has retained despite the fact that Egyptians were not permitted to vote on it during the March referendum. More importantly, the proposed new amendments were, as usual, the outcome of opaque, noninclusive, and arbitrary deliberations by the SCAF and its government.

The SCAF also announced a "compensation fund" for the families of revolutionary martyrs. And on Thursday, a decision was handed down to refer twenty-five prominent NDP figures -- including the party's former secretary-general and speaker of the parliament -- to criminal court on charges of killing protesters in the now-infamous February 2 "Battle of the Camel," in which regime supporters used camels to charge crowds of demonstrators. Although these measures did not dampen the will of the Friday protesters, they are emblematic of the piecemeal and tenuous way in which the SCAF and its appointed government tend to deal with the revolutionaries' demands.

More Concessions to Come?

Short of a constitution-first solution, Egypt's liberal forces are now proposing a "national dialogue" in which all sides agree to "supraconstitutional principles" and criteria for the selection of a constitutional drafting committee "in advance." Proponents of this view include those liberals simply working toward a civil (rather than military or religious) state, among them presidential hopeful and respected former judge Hisham al-Bastawisi. Such principles would reflect Egypt's foundation as a civil state, enshrine the separation of powers, and guarantee basic civil liberties, including freedom of religion. But some Islamists have already expressed disapproval, stating that no principles should be higher than the constitution. In this context, the more the liberals concede to Islamist demands, the more they will be marginalized in the struggle for Egypt's future.

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