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Egypt's Military Council: Between a rock and a hard place

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The Egyptian armed forces, revered before the popular revolt that ousted President Hosni Mubarak, took power in February with a pledge to lead the country to free and fair elections within six months. It has since stumbled from crisis to crisis and extended the period for a handover of power to 2013.

Commentary

RECENT ELECTIONS in Tunisia have moved the country closer to fulfilling the goals of the popular revolt sweeping the Middle East and North Africa. However the contrast between the calm in Tunisia and the convulsions of the post-Mubarak transition in Egypt could not be more stark. Following the first election since mass protests forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to resign in January after 23 years in power, erstwhile foes – moderate Islamists and liberal secularists – are forming a coalition government that promises to shelve disputes over religion and focus on creating jobs, writing a new constitution and reforming state institutions shaped by decades of autocracy.

In stark contrast, the transition in Egypt is marked by continued protests; civilians being tried by military tribunals; arrests of dissident voices, most recently including popular blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah; a crackdown by soldiers that killed 24 Coptic Christian demonstrators last month; and mounting suspicion that the ruling military is reluctant to relinquish power.

Between a rock and a hard place

No doubt, the complexities of government in transition have overwhelmed the 24 Mubarak-era generals that form the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which has been in office since Mubarak's ousting. They have governed the country by trial and error, trying to satisfy everyone and succeeding in pleasing no one in the process.

The military's fumbling has put it between a rock and a hard place. It wants to return to the barracks but only once it has secured its status and privileges as well as immunity from future prosecution for alleged crimes committed during the Mubarak era and the post-Mubarak transition period.

Suspicion of the military's intentions were fuelled in early November when it sought to persuade political leaders to sign off on a set of constitutional guidelines that would have put the armed forces beyond civilian scrutiny, granted it a right to veto drafts of a new constitution and dismiss and reappoint an elected constituent

assembly. The Muslim Brotherhood, the country's foremost organised political group, has called for mass protests on November 18.

The reason for the contrast between Egypt and Tunisia lies in differences in how Mubarak and Ben Ali sought to curb potential military threats to their rule. In one of his first moves after coming to power, Ben Ali decimated the military and ensured that unlike the Egyptian armed forces, it had no stake in the system he built. As a result, the Tunisian military had no reason to obstruct real change; indeed if anything, it was likely to benefit from reform that leads to a democratic system, in which it would have a legitimate role under civilian supervision.

For his part, Mubarak secured the military's loyalty by giving it control of national as opposed to homeland security and allowing it to build an independent relationship with its US counterparts that enabled it to create a military industrial complex as well as a commercial empire in other sectors. It is those prerogatives and perks that the military is now trying to preserve.

Reversal of roles

As a result, the Egyptian military is caught in a vicious circle in its effort to realise its goals and stabilise Egypt. Increasingly, it is resorting to the only thing it really knows- by reviving the very emergency laws the anti-Mubarak protesters wanted to see abolished.

The military's efforts have been complicated by the fact that it was forced to take responsibility for policing the country as the police and state security forces, widely seen as Mubarak's repressive, henchmen, seek to come to grips with the post-Mubarak reality. Defeated by anti-Mubarak protesters in battles on Tahrir Square led by militant soccer fans, the police has since become a demoralised force too concerned about polishing its tarnished image to enforce law and order that would risk confrontation with the public.

In its bid to restore order, the military has tried some 12,000 people since Mubarak's downfall in military courts whose proceedings have been denounced by international human rights organisations and Egyptians because of lack of due process and repeated allegations of torture and forced virginity tests.

As a result, roles have been reversed in post-Mubarak Egypt with the military emerging as a perceived force of repression and the rank-and-file of the police backing demands for an end to military trials and staging protests for salary hikes and improved working conditions. Nonetheless, many ordinary Egyptian still see the armed forces as the only force that can guarantee order and fix a sinking economy, plummeting tourism and rising crime.

Looking at the wrong model

Even so, the military has so far unsuccessfully sought to defend its record. Military spokesmen say they are doing their best to combat spiralling crime and street violence. However, many Egyptians find it hard to believe that one of the world's larger militaries is incapable of curbing violence on its own streets. "How can it be that an army and its leaders are unable to round up the thugs who have been on the streets for eight months?" is a typical question asked.

Increasingly, the Egyptian military is looking at the Turkish military as a model. The problem is the model they are looking at is a decade old. Under Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's military has evolved from being the country's political guardian to one in which it is responsible under civilian supervision for Turkey's territorial integrity and the fight against terrorism.

In doing so, the Egyptian military is fuelling concern that it will take another confrontation to disentangle it from politics. Having shown its ineptitude at solving the country's problems, the military would be best advised to avoid any such confrontation.

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