

Egypt's military to outlast transition

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Protests and violence have returned to Cairo's Tahrir Square and other major cities in Egypt, echoing January's uprising against then-president Hosni Mubarak. This time the protesters have Egypt's transitional rulers, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, in their sights. But even if they can force the military back to the barracks, removing its influence from Egypt's political transition is likely to be more difficult than removing Mubarak.

This week's events began with a massive protest last Friday led predominantly by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.

They expect to win big in the parliamentary elections that are due to start next week although the current violence might see them postponed. After being quite cosy with the SCAF in the months after Mubarak's departure -- too cosy in the view of some -- the Islamists feared that the SCAF was now trying to limit any new power they were about to gain.

The Islamists' protests focused on the SCAF's moves to impose a set of supra-constitutional principles that would in part cement the military's role in politics, even after the elections.

But as that protest was coming to an end a new and far more serious one began, fuelled mainly by the heavy-handed treatment of a group of protesters by Egypt's notorious riot police.

Trying to clear the square, the police transformed a dwindling Islamist protest into a full-on confrontation between the same largely non-Islamist revolutionary youths who had led the January 25 uprising and the SCAF. Predictably the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups have expediently disassociated themselves from this new protest (although some of their members have continued to participate), fearing that the SCAF would use the violence as a pretext to postpone the elections.

Those now at the centre of Tahrir Square are determined to force the SCAF from power. For them it is less about "supra-constitutional principles" or the expedient manoeuvrings of the Islamists.

They have borne the brunt of brutal treatment and arbitrary arrests handed out by the military and police since Mubarak's fall and want to ensure their revolution is not hijacked by any new form of authoritarianism.

The protesters are backed to differing degrees by liberal political forces who have come to fear that the SCAF is not as uninterested in staying in power as it claims -- even if some in the secular elite see the military as a guarantee against growing Islamist power.

The biggest question mark, however, surrounds the attitude of those Egyptians who have not actively participated in the uprising, even if they have sympathised with its aims. The SCAF hopes that their desire for stability, security and economic activity means they will turn a blind eye to a crackdown.

In fact, judging by the swelling numbers in Tahrir Square and elsewhere, there is support for the protesters, especially because of the harsh treatment they are receiving.

Some observers have dubbed this last week's events as Revolution 2.0. Judged solely by the scale of the protests it does seem comparable to Mubarak's ouster. What is much less certain, however, is whether it will get the same result.

Even if the revolutionary youths succeed in forcing the SCAF to step back from running the transition in favour of a new civilian-led administration or government of national unity, they cannot make the military as an institution, its interests and influence, disappear from Egypt overnight.

The military has been at the centre of power in Egypt for 60 years, controlling not just the guns but, through economic enterprises, a lot of the butter as well.

In all likelihood the military will continue to influence Egypt's transition whether in the form of the SCAF or less obviously behind the scenes.

Indeed, given the divisions and lack of trust among Egypt's myriad political actors, there is no guarantee that a civilian administration will be any better at leading the transition than the military have been -- although it must be said they could hardly be worse.

The tragedy is that both the protesters and the SCAF seem to have lost sight of some of these hard realities. It has certainly been important to pressure and prod the SCAF during the transition period, but it needed to be done with the knowledge that establishing civilian control of the military is going to be a very slow process, relying on both the military's willingness to cede its powers gradually and a strengthening of civilian institutions and political forces over time.

But there was also no need for the SCAF to make its power and prerogatives so explicit, or to act as brutally as it has against protesters and revolutionary youths, when everybody pretty much understood its power and its red lines.

If the military and the protesters are really now irreconcilable then the cost is likely to be high for everybody, including for Egypt's transition to democracy.

A version of this piece originally appeared in the blog, *The Interpreter*

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