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Changes in the Balance of Power in Egypt: Egyptian Discourse on the Social Networks, August 2012

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Background

Following the terrorist attack in northern Sinai that killed sixteen Egyptian soldiers, the internal struggle in Egypt between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) reached a new level. Two days after the attack, President Mohamed Morsi announced the dismissal of Murad Muwafi, head of the General Intelligence Directorate, who had replaced Omar Suleiman, as well as the dismissal of the governor of the northern Sinai province and the head of the military police. Five days later, President Morsi announced that Defense Minister Tantawi, Chief of Staff Anan, and the commanders of the navy, air defense, and air force were “retiring.” It appears that the top command echelon of the Egyptian defense establishment, which operated as part of SCAF and has controlled Egypt since Mubarak’s ouster, was dealt a heavy blow in the struggle with the civil government. Many social media users are calling this development “check mate” and “a knockout” in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood. President Morsi also used the opportunity to recover the executive and legislative powers that SCAF had taken from him.

The Changes in the Military Leadership

Discussions in the social media have posited that a move of this magnitude requires coordination and internal cooperation between the Muslim Brotherhood and President Mohammed Morsi, and senior officials in the army and the SCAF. Generals al-Sisi and al-Assar, who were appointed to senior positions by the Defense Minister and his deputy, are said to have collaborated with the Muslim Brotherhood for the purpose of completing the “civil revolution.” Otherwise, the move would not have gone quietly: “tanks would have been stationed outside the presidential palace.” The assessment, therefore, is that a deal was made between the new heads of the military and the Muslim Brotherhood, so that in exchange for completing the “civil revolution,” the main interests of the military generals would be protected, including:



- a. The outgoing military generals retire with honor and with medals, without being arrested, executed, or exiled.
- b. Military personnel retain their benefits, bonuses, and pensions.
- c. The military retains its control of national security strategy. The newly appointed figures have a strategic approach to national security that is identical to that of their predecessors. In other words, this is a re-staffing (internal politics), not a change in defense policy.
- d. No harm to the economic interests of the military, which controls some 30-40 percent of the national economy. The air force commander's appointment as minister of military industry indicates that for now, the military's economic monopoly will be preserved. However, social network users believe that these monopolies will be broken up gradually (so as not to cause the collapse of the Egyptian economy) and that it will be possible to move to a freer economy.

Suspensions of US involvement in the ouster of the Egyptian military elite have been sounded frequently. The appointment of General al-Assar – known as “Washington’s man in Cairo” – as the deputy defense minister strengthens this conspiracy theory. Even before the recent developments, there were claims that Washington chose “to sell out the military elite” and to collaborate with the Muslim Brotherhood out of strategic considerations of realpolitik (abandoning a sinking ship in favor of new players).

Other discussions indicate that even those who hated SCAF and who in principle support President Morsi’s move to transfer complete control (both legislative and executive) to civilian hands wonder who will ensure that Egypt remains a civil and not a theocratic state. Morsi’s choice to deliver his two speeches to the nation from mosques and to give them a religious touch also increases fears of the establishment of an Islamic Republic of Egypt. It is understood that as long as the liberal, secular revolutionaries, known as the “third current,” were weak, it was SCAF that preserved the “secular” character of the country.

The Appendix to the Constitution and Parliamentary Elections

In addition to replacing the military generals, President Morsi took another drastic step and annulled the appendix to the constitution (the supplementary constitutional declaration of June 17), which limited the role of the president and established that the executive branch would remain in SCAF hands. When he nullified the supplementary constitutional declaration, Morsi announced that by virtue of the constitution of March 30, 2011 (article 56), the president is permitted to take back exclusive control of the country, such that the executive branch and the legislative branch are in his hands.



If the current assembly, which is today in the advanced stages of writing a constitution, does not succeed in completing it within thirty days, the president is permitted to appoint a new Constituent Assembly for drafting a constitution (the list of 100), which will represent all Egyptian sectors. Already today, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists have a majority in the Constituent Assembly.

Thirty days after the drafting of the constitution has been completed, it will be subject to a referendum, and if it is approved by an absolute majority, new parliamentary elections will be held within sixty days. Nevertheless, annulment of the appendix to the constitution cannot nullify the decision to dissolve the parliament. In other words, Morsi's government of technocrats is a transitional government, and it will operate as the legislative and executive branch until the new parliamentary elections, to be held in January 2013 at the earliest.

Liberal, Secular Fears

With the executive and legislative branches and control over the armed forces now in the hands of one man (even if he was elected in democratic elections), no civil constitution, and no date set for parliamentary elections, some people are expressing fear of over-centralization and a return to a non-democratic model, especially when the government is in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood. Now, when the balance of power between SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood has been tipped in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the civil society is still not strong enough, the question is, how will it be possible to maintain human rights and Egypt's liberal-secular character (according to the demands of the revolution) when there is no other force to balance the Muslim Brotherhood?

Assessment

It appears that there are grounds for the assumption that Morsi's move was made possible by collaboration between the Muslim Brotherhood and the "younger" generals against the older military generals (al-Sisi is almost twenty years younger than Tantawi). The younger senior officers in SCAF apparently feared that the veteran leadership would fail to preserve the interests of the military and its officers. If so, the question is whether the civil government succeeded with this one step in annulling the military's political power, or whether there is still some balance of fear and further conflicts can be expected if the president subsequently aims to limit the large part of the military's remaining power and assets.

Despite the conspiracy approach to the United States that is typical in Egypt, it is doubtful whether the United States was in fact involved in these moves. All signs are that the United States was surprised by these rapid moves, although it is reasonable to assume



that a short time before they were carried out, at least senior military officials reported to their US colleagues on what was expected to happen.

The fears among social media users of theocratic/dictatorial tendencies of the Muslim Brotherhood government will likely generate a high level of alertness to decisions by President Morsi and his government that might indicate that direction. It remains to be seen whether this awareness, which can translate into mass protests, will serve as a sufficiently strong deterrent to such religiously motivated actions. The moves toward new elections to the legislature and the drafting of a new constitution will serve as the main test cases.

From Israel's point of view, the military's continued control over national security strategy ensures stability in the main areas of relations with Israel for the short term, and perhaps even the medium term. In the longer term, relations with Israel will be affected by further possible erosion of the military's control of these issues.

