

Roll, Stephan

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The Military and the Muslim Brotherhood

Will a Power-sharing Agreement Be Reached in Egypt?

Stephan Roll

The lower house of Egyptian parliament, the People's Assembly, convened for its first meeting on January 23, 2012. But that did not bring the political protests in the country to an end. Many of the predominantly young activists fear that the military will not withdraw from the political process. They accuse the generals of delaying the country's political reorganization and of showing no interest in the development of a democratic state—a view shared by actors across the political spectrum. Yet the majority of elected parties decided against a position of fundamental opposition. In particular, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP)—which represents Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the clear winner in the lower house elections—is apparently seeking a power-sharing arrangement with the military leadership. Since the military probably does not want to continue bearing sole political responsibility, such a power-sharing arrangement is likely. Whether this will serve as a stable foundation for successful and sustained political and economic transition, however, remains uncertain.

Since Hosni Mubarak's forced resignation, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces under the leadership of Field Marshal and Defense Minister Mohammed Hussein Tantawi has been the center of political power in Egypt. The officers have declared their intention to withdraw from the political process after parliamentary and presidential elections. Yet given their own vested interests, it is questionable whether they will do so completely.

What do the generals want?

On the one hand, Egypt's military rulers have no interest in continuing to make

political decisions in the future—the danger of constant confrontation with segments of the population is too great. The political situation in Egypt would remain unstable, which would negatively affect the country's already precarious socio-economic situation. This in turn would reduce the prestige of the armed forces among the population, which the younger officers would be unlikely to tolerate in the long term. Moreover, the establishment of a military dictatorship would endanger the continuation of US military aid. The \$1.3 billion provided annually by the US government finances around 80 percent of Egyptian military procurement. Up to now, this assistance

has been provided without political conditions, but during recent months, members of Congress are becoming increasingly vocal in calling for provisions tying US aid to Egypt's continued support for democratic political transition. And in light of the recent criminal investigations of American non-governmental organizations, it appears that it is no longer taboo for the US administration to make military aid conditional on the adoption of democratic reforms.

On the other hand, Egypt's military leaders do not want to submit completely to civilian political leadership. After all, they would have to fear being held legally accountable for their actions: for their role in the Mubarak regime, but particularly for their violent assaults on demonstrators after the military council seized power. Furthermore, not only the members of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces but also numerous other high officers are undoubtedly concerned that a civilian government could destroy the military's economic empire. At least 30 large enterprises under the oversight of the Ministry of Military Production, the Arab Organization for Industrialization, and the National Service Production Organization are owned by the Egyptian military. Several of these companies, which employ far more than 100,000 workers and thousands of conscripts, manufacture civilian products such as foodstuffs and technical equipment, in addition to military equipment. Military-owned companies are also active in agriculture, construction, mining, and the health sector. The lack of data on these firms makes it difficult to estimate the importance of their economic activities for the Egyptian economy. But one can reasonably estimate that this business empire contributes between 5 and 15 percent of GDP. The Egyptian military also exercises a significant influence on the economy through its extensive land holdings: Major development projects often cannot be carried out without its approval. Furthermore, there are indications that the military leadership has access to huge

funds not listed in the official government budget. Only sources such as these could have enabled the military leadership to lend the Egyptian Central Bank one billion US dollars to boost the country's foreign exchange reserves, as announced in early December 2011. Since the military's economic empire is still not subject to control of any kind from civilian authorities, high officers have numerous possibilities for self-enrichment. The complex clientelist network created through lucrative management positions in a few key companies must, from the perspective of the military leadership, be protected.

The strategy of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces

The repeated episodes of violent conflict that have erupted in the process of political transition in Egypt are not due to a lack of political experience but the result of an explicit strategy on the part of the ruling generals. In addition to the aim of intimidating demonstrators with brutal police force, this strategy has three further components: gauging public opinion, obscuring decision-making processes, and playing the various political parties and movements off against each other.

This strategy became strikingly evident in the discussion about how to design the new Egyptian constitution. The "road map" for political transition announced in March 2011 in a constitutional declaration by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces stated that a new constitution would be drafted by a constituent assembly. The members of this assembly were to be chosen by the two houses of the recently elected Egyptian parliament. The text of the draft constitution would then be submitted to voters for ratification. In late 2011, out of fear that Islamists would dominate this process after sweeping the elections, secularly oriented politicians and activists pressed for the adoption of "supra-constitutional principles" that would guarantee the establishment of a democratic state

with civilian rule. The Supreme Council attempted to utilize these demands for its own ends by having then-Deputy Prime Minister Ali al-Selmi introduce a document outlining principles for a revised constitution. The al-Selmi document met the demands of the secular political camp but also granted the military even greater authority than it had possessed under the previous constitution: It envisioned assigning the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces complete control over the defense budget and veto power over all decisions affecting the military.

After massive protests by almost all of Egypt's political parties, but above all by young activists, the proposal of supra-constitutional principles was withdrawn. Instead, a political body was appointed to advise the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in managing the transition process. It soon became clear, however, that the advisory council's main purpose was to protect the interests of the military in the drafting of the new constitution. One member of the Supreme Council even demanded that the body should have a say in appointing members of the constituent assembly. After widespread protests by the Muslim Brotherhood, this plan was abandoned as well. Yet it demonstrates once again that the ruling military council would not unconditionally relinquish power to a freely elected civilian authority.

The strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership

The Muslim Brotherhood, the clear winner in the 2011/12 elections to the lower house of parliament with around 43 percent of the vote, has avoided any direct confrontation with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces up to now. Despite the Brotherhood's criticism of the actions of the military council, and despite the Freedom and Justice Party's explicit opposition, stated in its platform, to the establishment of a military dictatorship, members of the party leadership appear to repeatedly seek

dialog with the ruling generals. In contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood's youth movement, the party has largely distanced itself from the demonstrations and has not supported calls for an immediate handover of power from the Supreme Council to a civilian authority. The Muslim Brotherhood's strategy remains essentially what it was under the Mubarak regime: to change the existing political system from within. The party's members and supporters, who represent a huge part of the Egyptian middle class, fear that confrontation with the ruling military council would further deteriorate the socio-economic situation.

The Muslim Brotherhood's stated goal is therefore to implement the road map for transition to democracy set out in the constitutional declaration of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces as quickly as possible, in the awareness that their authority will be further consolidated after a victory in parliamentary elections. Since the party's platform is focused on domestic policy, they should have no qualms about bowing to military leadership on matters of security and foreign policy issues, at least initially. Such a division of labor could indeed even be advantageous for the Muslim Brotherhood leadership. In particular, it would enable them to avoid making potentially unpopular decisions about contentious foreign policy issues—particularly regarding relations with Israel.

A power-sharing arrangement between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood therefore appears very likely. At the same time, it seems almost inconceivable that the Muslim Brotherhood would allow provisions to be included in the constitution that resemble the principles proposed by al-Selmi. The resulting incomprehension and mistrust that would arise within party ranks, but also throughout large segments of civil society, would be too great. New protests would be inevitable, endangering the successful takeover of government by the Muslim Brotherhood.

One possible compromise between the military leadership and the Muslim

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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Deborah Anne Bowen

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Brotherhood would be to define specific areas of foreign and particularly security policy as domains under the authority of the president, and to establish a national defense council, including military leaders, to support him in these policy areas. Such a body was already provided for in the previous constitution (Article 182), but there it was only assigned an advisory rather than an executive role. Under Mubarak, it played no role in the political decision-making process. Elevating the status of this body by granting it veto power over foreign and security policy decisions could ensure the military leaders' political influence. The success of such a compromise would ultimately depend on finding a presidential candidate who can credibly represent the interests of both the military and the Muslim Brotherhood. Someone like Mohammed ElBaradei, who has called for the military to be subordinated to civilian decision-making structures, would not be considered suitable. The repeated statements by the Muslim Brotherhood that they intend to refrain from nominating a candidate from their own party appear understandable in this context.

Opportunities and risks of a power-sharing arrangement

Such an arrangement would mean a clear step backwards in the transition to democracy. Nevertheless, it would have an initially positive impact on the country's socio-economic development. A government legitimated by popular vote could attend to the day-to-day political business and would have a mandate to initiate long-overdue reforms of the economic and social system. This could help to regain the trust of the foreign investors that the country urgently needs. Egypt's foreign exchange reserves have been depleted by half since the start of the political upheaval: without a further influx of foreign capital, the country will face bankruptcy within a matter of months. Therefore, if the political situation is not stabilized, Egypt risks economic collapse.

This risk could be averted for the time being through a power-sharing arrangement.

Nevertheless, such an arrangement entails a series of risks that should not be underestimated. If the military-economic complex and the high defense budget are maintained at current levels, economic and social reforms will soon run up against severe resource constraints. Furthermore, the military's clientelist network, which also includes parts of the government bureaucracy, could prevent urgently needed personnel changes in the state apparatus. This could have a substantial impact—not least on the process of reforming internal security structures.

Above all, however, a power-sharing arrangement between the military leadership and the Muslim Brotherhood would prevent the investigation of the Egyptian security forces' brutal repression of demonstrators and the possibility of holding those (politically) responsible to account. The angry reaction that would likely result could lead to renewed protests by young activists demanding accountability for these abuses. New waves of bloody clashes between security forces and demonstrators would be a possible outcome. They could put a quick end to the political stability that a power-sharing arrangement would seem to offer.