Are Egypt’s Islamists Headed for a Collision with the Military?

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- Much has been written about a tacit agreement between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) led by Field Marshal Tantawi and the Muslim Brothers. But as events leading up to the presidential elections began to unravel, it has become clear that no such arrangement was ever brokered between the two sides, and if it were, it is today null and void.

- Fourteen months after the revolution it is an accepted fact that the Islamists have hijacked the revolution and have become the leading force in Egypt. They adopted a tactic to create the illusion that they would share power with the non-Islamic forces, but then went on to win 70 percent of the seats in parliament.

- The current situation has been created by the inability of SCAF to rule Egypt since the end of the Mubarak regime. Their zig-zag policy, particularly towards the Islamists, has created a situation in which liberals and secular forces lost at each encounter.

- The Presidential Election Committee has barred three leading candidates: former Minister for Intelligence Omar Suleiman, Salafi candidate Hazem Abu Ismail, and leading Muslim Brotherhood candidate Khairat el Shater. (The Brotherhood was careful to nominate an additional presidential candidate who qualified, Mohammad Morsi.)

- Egypt is entering a period of political instability with dire consequences for its neighbors, first and foremost for Israel. The Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty could become a "scapegoat" to divert attention from unsolvable domestic economic problems, seeking to blame outside factors for Egypt's deteriorating situation.
Was There Ever a Power-Sharing Deal?

Fourteen months after the popular uprising that brought down the Mubarak regime, Egypt is heading toward a head-on collision between the Islamic forces and the secular military apparatus that ruled Egypt since 1952, when a group of young officers led by Gamal Abdel Nasser revolted against the monarchy and toppled the regime.

Much has been written about a tacit agreement between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) led by Field Marshal Tantawi and the Muslim Brothers.¹ SCAF’s legitimacy to rule Egypt since the fall of Mubarak has been drawn from Egypt’s constitution. The Muslim Brothers, the historical rival of the military, formed the backbone of the opposition. The organization was declared an illegal political body for almost 70 years and, as a consequence, was banned from participating in any open political process, with its members ill-treated and jailed — most often without trial — under the umbrella of the Emergency Laws that governed Egypt.

The so-called "deal" was supposed to divide power between the two protagonists, whereby the Islamists would retain power in the legislative bodies, and the military, through their proxies, would keep control of the executive branch of government, first and foremost the presidency. But as events leading up to the presidential elections began to unravel, it has become clear that no such arrangement was ever brokered between the two sides, and if it were, it is today null and void.

Islamists Have Hijacked the Revolution

Indeed, the Muslim Brothers and the Salafists were the last to join the forces that toppled Mubarak. Fourteen months after the revolution it is an accepted fact that the Islamists have hijacked the revolution and have become the leading force in Egypt. They seem to have adopted a tactic whose purpose was to create the illusion that they would share power at all costs with the non-Islamic forces – the liberals and former military. The Islamists even declared they would not participate in the presidential election and would suffice with representation in the legislative bodies of Egypt. Operating under this cover, the Muslim Brothers conquered bastion after bastion of the Egyptian nation-state and succeeded in becoming the dominant force in the People's Assembly and the Shura Council where, together with Salafists, they hold almost 70 percent of all seats, thus representing a formidable democratic force able to decide and promulgate laws as it pleases.

An Islamic President of Egypt?

The sudden decision of the Islamists to take part in the presidential elections is indeed a wake-up call for the military, the liberals, and the secular forces in Egypt.² The grim possibility of a state where the Muslim Brothers and their Islamic allies would rule Egypt has become very
likely and could be the worst nightmare for all democratic forces in Egypt, particularly the military, the liberals, and the 10 percent Coptic minority. Such an event would mean the rapid establishment of an "Islamocracy" and the beginning of the end of Egypt as a military society – a possibility that could affect not only the economic advantages of that class but mainly the personal freedoms guaranteed today by a pseudo-liberal constitution. All this could occur immediately, but it seems more likely that the Islamists' approach will be gradual in order not to provoke a confrontation with the military before they consolidate their position within the state apparatus.

The military could not ignore the statement of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Khairat el Shater, who said that if he reached the presidency he would seek to reform government institutions and society on the basis of Islamic teachings. El Shater added that Egypt's new government would exercise civilian oversight over the armed forces' budget and their business interests. “It is not just taxing the military that is an issue. There is a problem of conscripts who are forced to work in army economic projects without payment. What about the land that the army controls for free? All these issues should be addressed by the new government.”

The Military's Inability to Rule

No doubt this situation has been created by the inability of SCAF to rule Egypt since the end of the Mubarak regime. Their zig-zag policy, particularly towards the Islamists, has created a situation in which liberals and secular forces lost at each encounter:

A) While allowing Egyptians to demonstrate and unprecedented freedom of speech, more than 12,000 people were jailed after summary trials before a military tribunal.

B) The military encouraged the political participation and emancipation of women but instituted a very bizarre practice called "virginity tests" for all females arrested in demonstrations, which was ended only recently after the intervention of an Egyptian court.

C) The military lost almost all control of the Sinai Peninsula to al-Qaeda and Bedouin collaborators. The gas pipeline between Egypt and Israel has been sabotaged 14 times in spite of Israel's acceptance of the introduction of seven more battalions in Sinai to restore order. Sinai today is a safe haven for al-Qaeda operatives and the continuous attacks along the Israeli border are but one example of the loss of control by Egypt of part of its territory.

D) In the showdown with the U.S. over the issue of foreign-funded, pro-democracy NGOs, SCAF proved that it could bend. After the issue was raised in the media, SCAF finally agreed (after very clear threats from U.S representatives) to let most of the accused leave Egypt after the U.S. paid a ransom of $300,000 for each person. The NGO issue did not prove to be beneficial to SCAF domestically.
E) After having failed to secure the Israeli Embassy in Cairo that was ransacked by soccer fans, SCAF finally accepted the return of the Israeli ambassador, ignoring the huge anti-Israel sentiment prevailing today in all political circles in Egypt.

F) Unlike the former regimes in Egypt, SCAF gave little weight to the possibility of the Islamists controlling the National Assembly. Instead, they most probably believed that the Egyptian electorate would vote for balanced participation in the legislative bodies. SCAF maintained a neutral attitude toward the election and refrained from intervening in the electoral process, as was the custom in Egypt for decades. To the military's dismay, the Islamists won almost 70 percent of the seats.

G) Economically, Egypt is drifting towards disaster. The Egyptian economy is in shambles. Tourism is almost nonexistent in a country where the livelihood of one out of seven Egyptians is dependent on the tourism sector. Foreign currency reserves are almost depleted and are enough for less than three months of imports. Egypt desperately needs a loan from the IMF, but the Islamists argue that SCAF has no authority to agree to such a loan and that only a new government independent of SCAF control can negotiate such a deal.

Finally, the issue of the presidential election illustrates more than any other example the shortsightedness and clumsiness of SCAF in governing Egypt. It is quite obvious that SCAF was taken by surprise by the decision of the Muslim Brothers and the Salafists to participate in the elections by presenting candidates for the presidency. But before doing so, the Muslim Brotherhood was dealt a blow when the Cairo Administrative Court ordered the suspension of an Assembly-appointed constitution drafting panel.

At the same time, SCAF chose its alternative candidate – Omar Suleiman, 75, the former Minister for Intelligence and Mubarak's vice president during his last days. In the reality of Egypt of 2012 it was the wrong choice: Presenting a figure who was part of the defunct and hated regime whose military was involved in the repression of Islamists, who was a prominent advocate of the Peace Treaty with Israel and was known for his close relations with the American administration, represented a red sheet in front of a bull.

The Islamists understood the choice as "an insult" aimed to restrain them and as an expression of the resolve of the military to maintain power in Egypt after the scheduled transfer of power on July 1. Moreover, Suleiman seemed to still be accepted by the liberals and the secular, thus becoming a formidable opponent in the race for the presidency.

**Election Committee Bars Three Top Candidates**

It took less than 48 hours for the People's Assembly to adopt a law forbidding Suleiman from participating in the presidential race. The law could not be implemented without the approval
of SCAF. However, the Islamists' goal to bar Suleiman from running was attained by the very Presidential Election Committee set up by SCAF to filter candidates for the presidency. Suleiman was barred on a technicality: the 30,000 signatures needed to allow him to run were not collected from each of Egypt's 15 directorates. It seems he was short by 1,000 signatures in one directorate.

Together with Suleiman, the committee barred two other prominent presidential candidates representing the Salafists and the Muslim Brothers on technical grounds: the mother of Salafist candidate Hazem Abu Ismail was declared to have had a U.S. passport (which was not allowed by the constitution) and the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Khairat el Shater was disqualified due to an indictment from which he has not yet been pardoned. Out of 23 candidates the committee barred 10, leaving 13 in the race, including former air force commander and Mubarak's last prime minister Ahmad Shafik, and the head of the Muslim Brothers' party, Mohammad Morsi. The 10 barred candidates still have 48 hours to appeal to the committee, which in turn will respond within 24 hours.

Fourteen months after the revolution, Egyptian society seems to be closer than ever to a head-on collision between the Islamists and the military. Egypt is entering a period of political instability with dire consequences for its neighbors, first and foremost for Israel. Whoever wins the elections on May 23-24 will have to devote most of his time to domestic issues and to the consolidation of power. This means that issues dealing with regional politics could be deferred to second place. A pro-military win would probably spark dissent and repression against the Islamists, whereas an Islamist as president would signify to Israel greater imminent danger to the Peace Treaty with Egypt. The issue of the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty could become a "scapegoat" to divert attention from unsolvable domestic economic problems, seeking to blame outside factors for Egypt's deteriorating situation. On the other hand, the Muslim Brothers have a historical dispute to settle with their former oppressors – the military.

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Notes

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
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