

Position Paper

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Military Council: The Deal and the Clash

Al Jazeera Centre for Studies



It is now obvious that the decision of the "Muslim Brotherhood" to contest presidential election was not taken according to an understanding with the military junta. It is, rather, a result of the increasing differences between the two. So, it seemed that the final decision of General Omar Suleiman who announced his candidacy a few days after the entry of Shater, the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood, into the run-up for presidency (before their exclusion by a decision of the Committee on the presidential election on Saturday, April 14, 2012), and the insistence of the "Brotherhood" to proceed by supporting its reserve candidate, Dr. Mohamed Morsi, confirms that the two parties are further falling apart. The "Brotherhood" decided to present its presidential candidate for the position whose occupant is supposed to be, as wishes the Supreme Council, close to the latter, so that it can retain its grip on power after the transition.

Moreover, this decision comes shortly after signs of tension appeared in the past three weeks, in some form or other, in the speeches directed by each party to the other.

Is it possible that history will repeat itself and too will such escalation lead to a new clash between Islamists and the military, even after the exclusion of Shater from the presidential race, despite the different circumstances altogether not only in Egypt but also in the region and the rest of the world as well?

The question that is frankly propounded, contrary to what was the case a few weeks ago when the dominant impression for almost a full year since the Supreme Council had taken over the management of affairs in the country in the evening of February 11, 2011, is whether the relationship between the two parties was ever close. Some, most of those who differ with the "Brotherhood" intellectually and politically, have gone so far as raising this relationship to the level of an all-out deal.

The Brotherhood and the Council: A Tactical Agreement and Strategic Apprehension

There were indications that prompted the conclusion regarding the existence of a deal. However, by examining the facts and staying away from a conspiracy theory, one may reach a conclusion that may be closer to the reality; both parties were in a need to build a positive relationship with the each other, albeit with caution and concern over the intention of the other party at the same time. The relationship between them was harmonious, based on considerations of political tactical expediency rather than on a plausible strategic deal.

With the approach of the transition to an end, there is no longer the luxury of time. The army is supposed to return to the barracks in less than three months without its parameters pinpointed in the coming political system, which will be determined by the Constitution whose bill is prepared by a Constituent Assembly dominated by the "Brotherhood", which was supposed to do the drafting before its formation was repealed by a ruling of the Administrative Court. It is natural that this situation raises the concern of the Armed Forces and its Supreme Council.

At the same time, the "Brotherhood" is apprehensive over the Council's insistence on keeping the Ganzouri government, which they accuse of not only failing to solve basic problems, but of fabricating some in order to put the Parliament, which they dominate, in a critical position before the people.

Therefore, dispute escalates between the "Brotherhood" and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, leading to the declaration of the candidacies of both Shater and Suleiman for the presidency as a result of the repercussions to actions and reactions in recent weeks.

In light of the given facts, it is more likely that the decision of the "Muslim Brotherhood" regarding the nomination of Shater was taken suddenly. It came as a result of the repercussions of the events while the group is lacking a clear vision, and thus runs the political situation from hand-to-mouth and prefers what is tactical to what is considered strategic.

This was the same as other political parties and forces before the revolution of January 25. However, the situation continued after the ["Brotherhood"] group's position changed completely, after having founded its own political party (Freedom and Justice) that expresses its position, and after having achieved a land-slide victory in parliamentary elections.

The shift in the position of the group towards the Council of the Armed Forces began a short while before the opening of Parliament on 23 January 2012. This shift is coupled with the presence of a government that has nothing to do with the majority, represented by Freedom and Justice, and no capacity to address the problems of a huge backlog.

The "Brotherhood" party has found itself in a difficult position because the government does not solve any of the problems that cause anger to large segments of the citizens who elected members of parliament in the hope of addressing these problems. In a situation with such severe difficulty and confusion, the relationship between the Parliament, and especially the "Brotherhood" party, and the government has turned into a growing rift due to the increasing concern of the party and the group over the decline in its popularity because of the increasing problems faced by citizens who expect them to decrease. The dispute is further escalated by the fact that a large majority of these citizens do not distinguish between legislative and executive powers; they just elected MPs to solve their problems, and have started throwing their anger at the Parliament and the majority party who did not do more than carrying this anger and direct it against the government and demand its change.

However, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces refused to change the government and insisted on its continuation until the end of the transitional phase on 30 June 2012, so that the "Brotherhood" must not control the legislative power and the executive part of government before coming to an understanding regarding the post-transition arrangements, and the form of the new political system, in which they will play a role in determining it by controlling the Constituent Assembly elected by the Parliament to draft a new constitution.

Although there has been no conclusive evidence confirming the pursuit of the two parties earlier to find a solution based on dissolving the government and assigning the Freedom and Justice Party to form new ones, in return for agreeing to back a candidate acceptable to the Military Council and be supported by the "Brotherhood" as well as seeking to gather broader support for him as president by consensus, there is an indication suggesting that this is what is likely to happen shortly after opening the nominations for presidential elections.

The failure to reach a "deal" of this type was the beginning of the growing differences between the parties, leading to the declaration by the "Brotherhood" of the nomination of Shater for the presidency. This step was a sudden leap over all the stages, which has positioned the group in the crossfire of a severe attack, amidst an adventure, thus risking the most important of what is in its possession, credibility and confidence of a large segment of the electorate following its firm commitment since February 10, 2011 not to present a presidential candidate.

The group is also accused of adopting a revolutionary approach and a compact plan to take over the various key positions in the State and to exercise a full dominance, as did the National Party even before the revolution of 25 Jan.

However, the closest facts to reality suggest that the group "Muslim Brotherhood" rushed into something that it had never planned for. In fact, the group drifted to such a

position, as a result of the numerous errors it has committed since its landslide victory in parliamentary elections, when it felt the strength that weakens its own when it cannot avoid its evils. It has abandoned its allies of liberal and nationalist parties, which led to the disappearance of "Democratic Alliance" that played a key role in reassuring many Egyptians about the direction of the movement and the fate of the country in light of the expansion of its role. Besides, the party's parliamentary majority has poorly managed parliamentary work in a way that rendered it weak in the eye of the government. Parliament is only left with two options, each worse than the other; soliciting the issuance of executive decisions or yelling and threatening a no-confidence vote, in a constitutionally ambiguous situation regarding the relationship between the two (parliament and the government).

The biggest mistake committed by the parliamentary majority and what contributed strongly to pushing the "Brotherhood" towards escalation of conflicts with the Supreme Council on the issue of government, is the marginalisation of the legislative role of parliament. Parliament's role was only used as an exception as if it were an advisory board with no mandate to enact and amend laws, even though this is its main role and its powerful tool whereby to compel the government - any government - to issue certain decisions or to change specific policies and throw the ball in the court of the Supreme Council and to convince public opinion - which is disappointed at Parliament's performance - that the representatives of the people are doing their part and issue laws that the people want without delay.

For all that, the relationship between the group and the Council has reached the most difficult stage since the 11 February 2011, in such a manner that makes the future of Egypt and probably its destiny dependent on the development of this relationship in the next few weeks, either to reach an understanding on contentious concealed issues, or drift to confrontation, which both parties seek to avoid at the moment.

Expectations of Conflict and the Need for Settlement

Understanding is still possible, whether through a political - general societal - settlement or a bilateral "deal", albeit strategic and not tactical, other than what they have been forced to do over the past months while there was plenty of time. If something of this sort is not possible, or with both sides manoeuvring each other, or one of them trying to impose its will on the pretext of having a majority, it may not be possible to avoid a clash between them in some way even without a prior decision to go for it.

In a tense atmosphere of increasing congestion, things can slide into the abyss without a decision by one or both parties, because the repercussions of the events may push them in this direction if they do not realise the absolute need for a general national and societal dialogue. Should this dialogue remain far off, and ambiguity and tension dominate, the country may slide into a serious clash in one of two moments or occasions.

If it is not possible to solve the crisis of the Constituent Assembly, following the decision of the administrative court, Tuesday, April 10, 2012, to halt the decision of forming the Constitutional Assembly, or following the presidential election (May 23 and 24 ,2012), or the approaching absence of a constitution defining the powers of the President, the continued current tension may perhaps increase along with the continuing repercussions of the events in the manner of action and "reaction". It is also likely that the two parties may delve into the game of testing the strength of each other whose consequences could be dire.

The second expected moment is in case the candidate of the "Muslim Brotherhood" wins the presidential election (currently Dr. Mohamed Morsi) before the features and components of the new Constitution are known, besides the identity of the State and the position of the army therein. This is a prospect that seems the Council seeks to stop, after the news leaked that Field Marshal Tantawi was against holding presidential election before the adoption of the Constitution. Holding presidential elections in light of

the current ambiguity overshadowing highly sensitive issues of this magnitude is likely to raise the concern of "the military junta." The Council, along with other parties in the political arena and society, finds that handover of power in a situation dominated by confusion involves a risk, and the crisis may then take a new qualitative turn that leads to a kind of confrontation. However, the adoption of the Constitution before the election of the president needs more than the remaining time for the presidential elections, which means further extension to the transitional period. That involves tension and congestion which will be centred on the military junta.

There is a third scenario for this clash, in case the current state of uncertainty continues, if the Council tries to influence the course of the presidential election without intervening directly. It is possible that the Council may use the popularity it enjoys so far among considerable sectors of public opinion that regard the Army as the only guarantor of the desired stability; "the only pole of the tent."

Confrontation may occur if the "Brotherhood" opts for escalation in response to intervention, if there is any indication that it will happen, or fix a ceiling on its options, or adopt a plan for return before reaching the edge of the abyss. Confrontation may also happen if the crisis of the Constituent Assembly is solved, where Freedom and Justice and An-Nur parties will remain dominant, whatever the size of changes that will happen in its formation. This is due to the fact if the candidate of the "Brotherhood" loses in favour of a candidate closer to the Council or identical to it, majority parties will resort to stripping the President of any powers in the new Constitution by establishing a parliamentary system.

In this case, voters for a President who is stripped of the basic executive powers and other opponents of the "Brotherhood" may opt for escalation, which could lead to confrontation.

So, the spectre of confrontation between the "Brotherhood" and the Military Council looms large on the horizon of Egypt, unless the two parties come to a compromise that puts an end to the tests of strength, and, together with the other parties, reach an understanding about the elements of the State and society and the position of the Army, before it is too late for everyone.

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