

Egyptian Revolution and the Military Council ... Where to?

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When a group of activists who called for the Friday 15th July protests under the name of “Friday the Final Admonition,” a week after sit-in’s in Tahrir Square and other Egyptian Squares since the “Friday of Revolution comes First” protests on 8th of July, it seemed as though things were moving towards a clash with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that runs the country's affairs since Hosni Mubarak’s resignation from office in the afternoon of 11th of February, 2011.

The angry reactions towards the SCAF’s harsh statement, delivered by the SCAF member Major General Mohsen al Fangari, on Tuesday (July 12) gave the impression that the people and the army are no longer “one hand,” and that the positive relationship, which brought them together and contributed to the success of the 25 January revolution, is at risk.

This raises two pressing questions: the first is about the evaluation of the SCAF’s performance since it began running the country’s affairs; the second is about the real stance of the political forces, youth gatherings, and activists’ coalitions towards the SCAF, and the impact of all this on the course of events in Egypt during the coming period.

The Military Council’s Performance: Dialectic of Slacking and Collusion

The SCAF’s stance was clear then: having a temporary task in a transition after which it would hand the authority to an elected civilian government; thus the SCAF was at the head of the authority as a result of a revolutionary state, meanwhile, it sought to be in power through constitutional legitimacy. It resulted in a duality that embodies a conflict of the revolutionary reality that could not be ignored, and a constitutional legitimacy that was sought to be established. This duality was the primary source of imbalance that still confuses the transition and negatively affects the performance of the SCAF.

As one of the many examples of this imbalance, there is the repeated talk in the political street comparing dealing firmly with the civilians who were referred to the military court and were convicted in speedy conclusive trials in a few days or weeks, while the symbols of the former regime and those who were charged with murdering the martyrs in this revolution were referred to their natural judges in trials which, so far, are proceeding slowly. Actually the SCAF’s choice of preferring the constitutional legitimacy was not a wrong choice, because the revolution of January 25 is a democratic one that aims mainly at achieving freedom which could not be guaranteed under a full revolutionary legitimacy that usually starts with abolishing the legal system and declaring martial law.

Moreover, such revolutionary legitimacy may open the door to another authoritarian rule, though in a new shape that might be less oppressive and corrupt, but not more democratic.

Therefore, the SCAF’s choice was right in principle. But what actually happened is that it created a feeling among many sectors of society in general, and among most revolutionary forces, in particular, that giving priority to the constitutional legitimacy has led to nothing more than giving new look to the status quo ante. Mubarak and most symbols of his regime were deposed from office and are now inmates in Tura Prison, but the structure of their political regime continues in the Essam Sharaf Cabinet, Ministry of Interior, the state television and many state agencies. This government whose head was said to be coming from Tahrir Square, while most of the ministers are from the Mustafa Mahmoud Square where Mubarak’s supporters rally from time to time calling for honoring Mubarak rather than bringing him to trial.

This led to a gap between a main sector of society and both the SCAF and the government. Meanwhile, there was confusion in the political arena since the referendum on amending some articles of the 1971 Constitution on March 19, then abolishing this constitution after

adding a number of its articles to the other amended articles in the new constitutional declaration that was issued at the end of the same month.

The non-clear purpose of the referendum led to an unwarranted polarization between Islamic forces and the others. If the referendum was conducted on the new constitutional declaration after the abolition of the 1971 Constitution, there would not have been such polarization that was due to the ambiguity surrounding Article II, which provides that principles of Sharīah, i.e. Islamic Law, s the main source of legislation. This polarization resulted in a division, since last April, regarding the steps of the political process set by the Constitutional Declaration, which is to hold the parliamentarian elections first in order for the parliament to elect a Constituent Assembly that proposes a new constitution draft to be put to a referendum, then the presidential election will be the last step in this process.

The political duel started between two slogans: “elections first” and “constitution first”, combined with a general feeling of confusion and frustration fueled by slow trials of the symbols of the former regime, the ambiguous situation concerning the trials of police officers accused of murdering the revolution martyrs, and not arresting or even suspending most of them from work until the end of these trials. The scene was amazing, as well as being provocative, when the police officers charged with murder go to the court to attend their own trails, and then leave it to their work sites in security and police departments to take advantage of their authority and influence to obliterate everything that can be used as evidence against them, and to put pressure on witnesses to change their testimonies during the investigations.

The confusion of the political track, the subsequent division concerning it, the slow justice parallel with the absence of social path relating to the reduction of gross injustice and the flagrant contradiction of social classes. The Government of Essam Sharaf was unable to take any action that restores hope in the possibility of achieving the absent social justice. Three ministers from the former regime took over this issue; the most prominent of them (the Minister of Finance) was a member of the National Democratic Party Policies Commission that was headed by Gamal Mubarak and a neo-liberalist.

Within all this, the government remained without a clear policy. All ministers are known not to exercise any political action except for three; two of them came from two opposition parties (the liberal al Wafd and the leftist al Tagammu‘) in two secondary ministries. The third who was in-between the former regime and the opposition served as Deputy Prime Minister, but he was unable to bridge the gap between the government and the revolutionary youth, taking side of some parties against others in the political arena, as his explicit secular tendency prevailed the Consensual role that he was supposed to do. He conducted a “national dialogue” that did not contain much of its name, just like a parallel dialogue conducted by a former prime minister, ‘Abd al ‘Aziz Hegazy, who took office in the seventies of the last century.

Such formation of the government was a burden rather than a help for the SCAF. However, it did not make any initiative to any change in its formation. Moreover, there were frequent reports that it rejected such changes when the PM suggested replacing 7 ministers. The SCAF also rejected the resignation of Deputy Prime Minister in spite of the expanding scope of the calls to replace him in demonstrations, sit-ins, and several conferences. Even when the Prime Minister agreed on the resignation, the SCAF rejected it.

Since some of what is going on behind the scenes, particularly during the last two months is not disclosed yet, there is no answer to questions such as: Why the SCAF is insisting on keeping a government of which poor performance contributed in widening the gap, day by day, between SCAF and a sector of society, especially revolutionary youth? And, what is the

significance of non-intervention in responding—or even attempting to respond—to the easily achieved demands, such as speeding up trials, purging the interior ministry of corruption, and the exclusion of former regime's ministers and so on? The significance of such questions increased when it became clear that it is possible to achieve progress concerning the trials, the security apparatus, and replacing ministers in just a few days during the past two weeks, which were the hottest ever since ending Mubarak's rule in February 11, 2011.

Therefore, the controversy of whether it is slacking or collusion increases in spite of the honorable stand of the Army taking the side of the revolution since its inception. This was decisively enough to exclude the presumption of collusion, or even the presumption that mistakes made by the SCAF were intentional. However the slacking allowed room for such an assumption that the supporters of the former regime and other stakeholders sought to fuel in the context of early attempts to drive a wedge between the people and the army. The SCAF warned against such attempts in some of its statements since mid-March, 2011.

However, warning alone is not enough, and it may be in vain without handling errors and removing distortions that marred the transition providing an opportunity for those who wanted to threaten the connection that the revolution of January 25 was not to succeed without it in ousting Mubarak and the symbols of his regime from power.

The Military Council and the Revolution...What's next?

Slacking in terms of trials and in initiating some significant first steps to achieve social justice, and the disruption process of political change course were not the only mistakes of the military council; there is also its refraining from calling the people to direct participation in choosing their future except for the referendum on constitutional amendments.

The SCAF underestimated the importance of the popular presence; therefore, the Council chose a top-down political approach to build the new regime (starting with the parliament and the presidency) rather than a bottom-up approach (starting with municipals, trade and professional unions, universities, and other). Several proposals were submitted to the Military Council suggesting that building democracy would be better and more solid when following the bottom-up approach without exceeding the deadline set for the parliamentary elections in the coming autumn.

It was possible to hold municipal elections, other labor unions elections, all the professional unions, and in universities in the period from May to July 2011; prior to starting the parliamentary elections in this coming November (2011) after opening the registration and nomination process in September.

However, the lack of political experience has prevented the SCAF from properly estimating the importance of directly referring to the people instead of listening to anyone who says that they are representing this people, carrying the banner of the revolution, seeking position, or pursuing public or narrow categorical targets.

The result is that the channels of communication, though numerous, were not enough neither to achieve constructive communications between the SCAF and the huge number of parties, groups, and coalitions that have proliferated like mushrooms, nor to prevent the expansion of the increasing gap due to the conflict between the slack performance and revolutionary expectations.

When the gap expands, some parties may think they can exploit that for their own interests that may intersect with, though not necessarily match with, the overall objectives of the revolution. Therefore, some have sought to exploit the confusion in the political process in

order to restore a demand put forward early by some of the revolutionary forces and that was not agreed upon. This demand was establishing a presidential council assisting the SCAF, now its new version is meant to be a substitute for the SCAF.

It seemed as if the revolution is going to a clash with the SCAF, when it represented its new demand in this way during the last week starting from the Friday of “Revolution comes First” in 8th of July, at the same time, some protestors in Tahrir Square closed the largest office building in Egypt (Tahrir complex), calling protestors in other governorates to close the Suez Canal and the roads linking some of these governorates. This may explain the harsh statement delivered by the SCAF last Tuesday (July 12), in which it was confirmed that they “determined not to relinquish its role in administering the country’s state of affairs,” “shall not tolerate the hijacking of power,” and that “measures shall be taken to counter threats seeking to tamper with the country”.

In addition to the severity of tone of the statement aired on the official Egyptian television channels, the generalization of its wording suggested that it warns all, or most of the revolutionary forces, while such warning should have been directed to a small group of them that took advantage of the non-participation of most revolutionary forces in the sit-in began on Saturday 9 July; when angry non-politicized youth and frustrated kin of the martyrs constituted most of those who participated in this sit-in, when it was decided to close the Tahrir office complex, and threatening of some practices that go beyond the scope of the peaceful nature that characterized the Revolution of January 25.

The mainstream of the revolutionary forces managed to correct these practices quickly, and 17 forces amongst them released a statement that reaffirmed the peaceful nature of the revolution, as well as the parties of the “Democratic Alliance for Egypt,” which added renewed confidence in the SCAF while stressing the need to accelerate achieving the goals of the revolution.

Here, precisely, is the horse stall or the name of the game concerning the future of the relationship between the Revolution and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in the short term. It is true that an important aspect in this relationship depends on the ability of the reshuffled Essam Sharaf Government to correct the imbalances resulted from its performance, especially on the issue of social justice, where quick primary steps could be taken, as well as the role of the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) in speeding up trials while ensuring fairness, in the same time.

However, a large portion of this relationship remains dependent on developing the performance of the military council after re-reading the scene, making a greater effort to extend bridges with various parties, and paying attention to the ‘real’ goals of those who claim to support the SCAF against the Tahrir Square and attempt to drive a wedge between the military council and the revolutionary forces.