

EGYPT AFTER THE SECOND WAVE OF PROTESTS

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From Friday, July 8th, to Tuesday, August 2nd, Egypt experienced a second wave of what were mass protests at times, and less massive at other times. The Fridays between the two dates witnessed large rallies in Tahrir Square and the squares in other major cities. In Tahrir Square, there was also a continuous sit-in that was initiated by a significant number of activists and families of martyrs. The number decreased quickly to a few scores, though it was not broken up without the intervention of military police and central security forces. Breaking up the sit-in was noticeably convenient for wide sectors of the people and owners of shops and commercial establishments in the vicinity of Tahrir Square, especially because protesters closed down all the streets leading to the Square - which occupies a central position in Cairo - and suspended the operation of the biggest governmental complex overlooking the Square.

Erupting after the release of police officers accused of shooting at people in Suez during the days of the first revolution pending the trial, the second wave of protests made a number of demands, and reflected the state of anxiety that marred the relationship between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the de facto ruler of the country since the collapse of the Mubarak regime and the Egyptian people. This wave ended up achieving some major gains. It also revealed the depth of the division that hit the corners of the Egyptian political arena in the transitional phase. However, it did not dispel doubts about the SCAF's orientations.

This paper aims to examine the demands of the second wave of protests and its achievements as well as probe its impact on the relations amongst Egyptian political forces and between these forces and the SCAF.

The second wave of protest: achievements despite differences

The second wave of protests erupted in a context of growing doubts of youth gatherings that led the Egyptian Revolution, and considerable sectors of the people about the policy pursued by the SCAF, the pace of change in the state structure and policies of the Transitional Government. On the one hand, there was a strong feeling that the SCAF is slow off the mark in the trail of symbols of the former regime and those responsible for killing more than 850 Egyptians during the 18 days of revolution. On the other hand, it seemed that the SCAF had restricted the authority of the Prime Minister Dr. Essam Sharaf, who was nominated by the revolutionary youth to lead the transitional government. Such restrictions included preventing him from reshuffling his cabinet government, or making the changes demanded by the popular forces in the state's structure and institutions.

However, the call for the July 8th demonstration was received with the same degree of enthusiasm in various political circles. It was clear that the Islamic forces, especially the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist movement in all its groups, did not welcome the invitation to demonstrate. One of the most significant motivations behind the Islamists' unresponsiveness is that the liberal and secular political forces have made no secret of their desire to exploit the demonstration in calling for making the preparation of the Constitution prior to the parliamentary elections, which contradicts the transitional road map that have been voted upon within the constitutional amendments in March. The disagreement on this issue of course is not new; it dates back to the time of referendum and reflects the mutual concerns between Islamists, on the one hand and between the liberal and secular forces and groups on the other hand.

Once the dispute has been resolved and the issue of the Constitution has been excluded from the demonstration banners, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists declared their

intention to participate in the mass. The July 8th demonstration played an important role in launching the wheel of political change, which has already begun to show signs even before the day of the massive demonstration. However, groups of revolutionary youth supported by a number of martyrs' families have not been persuaded by the initiatives made by the SCAF and Prime Minister Essam Sharaf. Thus, they decided at the end of July 8th to sit-in in Tahrir Square until meeting the demands agreed upon by most groups that represent the revolutionary youth of the 25th January.

This fragile unity that manifested itself in the Friday demonstration on the 8th July was to be destroyed soon, before making the decision to sit-in which was rejected by some Islamic forces and parties, as well as some non-Islamic parties. It is true that the Egyptian street was mostly in favor of the sit-in and this negatively affected life and businesses in downtown Cairo. However, the sit-in proved to be no less effective than the efforts exerted by the rally that produced it since the pressures generated by the demonstration in Tahrir Square turned on the wheel of change in the body of the state with remarkable speed.

Essam Sharaf initiated a wide cabinet reshuffle, excluding from the cabinet all ministers of the Mubarak era. Meanwhile, the Minister of Interior conducted a wide-range purge in the most controversial ministry in Egypt. That purge resulted in retirement of more than 650 officers, most of which were generals. The Supreme Judicial Council was reformed, the commencement of the trial of former President Mubarak and his interior minister Habib al-'Adli was announced for murdering hundreds of protesters during the revolution as was a plan to replace a large number of governors and the dissolution of municipalities inherited from the previous regime. The Prime Minister personally pledged to follow up with the payment of compensations to the martyrs' families. The trial of the former president and his interior minister already began on August 3rd. The next day, a change of some governors was announced though some of them raised a new controversy.

In Tahrir Square, the situation shifted from the sit-in to a mirror for the political split in Egypt. Soon after, the schism of the political forces that played an important role in the Revolution made room for advancing the Salafist forces that have not participated at all in the activities of the Revolution, or had a negative stance towards it. The demonstration on Friday July 29th was supposed to be a chance to re-unite and announce the breakup of the sit-in which has become objectionable in wide sectors of the Egyptian people – though it seemed before as if the demands of the second wave of protest or most of them at least have been met.

Salafist groups decided to forcefully participate in the July 29th demonstration, suggesting that it will abide by the slogans agreed upon by all political forces. However, this was not at all the actual scene in Tahrir Square: the Salafist movement mobilized supporters from all over the country into Tahrir Square. The symbolic presence of the Muslim Brotherhood has portrayed Tahrir Square as though it were totally influenced by the Salafi crowd. The Salafist movement had been mobilized against the liberal and secular forces' call for “supra-constitutional principles,” after having lost the battle of “A Constitution First,” Salafi chants confirming the Islamic characteristic of Egypt and rejection of liberal and secular calls escalated. Tahrir Square did not only witness a Salafi gathering as there were stands for the Islamic group, the Jihad group and another for the Supporters of al-Qaida.

On August 2nd and the 2nd of Ramadan – the security forces and military police broke up the sit-in after emerging signs of clashes between the shopkeepers and residents of Tahrir Square as well as a few protesters. However, the action of breaking up the sit-in was taken only after the Army was sure that the protesters lost cover from most of the political forces and youth groups and lost public support.

What is left behind the protesters' tents is the expansion of the political divide, and the still unopened files on the relationship between the SCAF and the upcoming Republic of Egypt.

The political divide: mutual concerns

The political divide manifested features immediately after the victory of the Egyptian Revolution, in part due to the ideo-political divide that shaped the features of Arab political consensus since the end of the nineteenth century. The political forces reunites at the beginning for demands of freedom, pluralism, peaceful rotation of power, transparency of justice and liberating the country from corruption. However, as soon as the country enters into the phase of change, the political arena is divided once again.

However, the political environment in Egypt witnesses the escalation of mutual fears between the political forces, particularly the Islamic groups and secular-liberal, secular- national groups. With Egypt heading towards establishing a democratic political life, political forces lack the initial knowledge of its popular size and weight. There is a consensus, for example, that the Muslim Brotherhood is the most organized, effective and widespread party that is able to mobilize supporters. However, no one knows for sure, not even Muslim Brotherhood itself, what they can achieve in free, transparent elections.

With the Salafis entering the political arena, the scene in Egypt becomes more complex. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, they do not represent a unified political bloc. Nonetheless, the last Friday of division in Tahrir Square showed their significant ability to mobilize masses, particularly in religious, poor and not necessarily educationally-qualified communities. After the Salafist groups refrained from engaging in political work for years, they are now rushing to form more than one party. It was initially thought that the Brotherhood would be able to contain the Salafist movement and its leadership, but the demonstration in Tahrir Square last Friday showed clear Salafi independence from the Muslim Brotherhood. After the Islamic Group resumed its work, it seemed to be closer to the Salafist movement than the Muslim Brotherhood. Just as was the case with the Muslim Brotherhood, it is not easy to predict what the Salafis – in all their communities and parties – would achieve in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

The fear of the liberal and secular forces from the Islamic movement as a whole led to the former's call for “supra-constitutional principles” before holding the next elections of the People's Assembly which is to choose a constituent body that will draft a new constitution. However, the Islamists fear of liberals-seculars is not less than others' fears as Islamists accuse the liberal-secular forces and figures of controlling the media and a broad sector of the financial and economic arena and seeking foreign support to strengthen their domestic standing. While the liberal-secular forces accuse the SCAF of colluding with the Islamists, some Islamists believes that the SCAF is under the influence of secular-liberal forces and that it is inclined to accept the idea of “supra-constitutional principles” that is nearly unprecedented in any other democratic constitutional states.

The Brotherhood's (backed by the Wafd Party) attempt to reduce the political divide by forming the Democratic Alliance for Egypt, which includes 28 parties, political groups and one party under construction that convenes weekly meetings to coordinate efforts and prepare for elections in national alliance, has achieved limited success so far. What Egypt is going through is very similar to a huge political explosion, like a cosmic explosion, that expelled dozens of forces, groups, movements and figures into the broad arena of political action and rendered them unable to be adjusted or controlled. What adds to the complexity of the situation is the uncertainty that still surrounds a lot of the SCAF's stances and policies.

The SCAF: potential role in the new republic

The SCAF's rapid bias to the public movement caused the revolution's victory and made the SCAF the de facto ruler of the country since Mubarak's resignation. However, there is no doubt that the SCAF did not want to make a fundamental and deep change in the structure of leadership. Like all armies, it seems the Egyptian army by its nature is a conservative institution and because professionalism is the major feature of the Egyptian military establishment, the military leaders lack political experience. Since assuming the country's affairs, the army has been surprised by the size of burden on its shoulders involving the management of such a big country, almost entirely ruined and with unlimited economic needs.

The revolution overthrew the regime's head and the small ruling class, but the regime's roots were controlling the state structure. The traditional opposition forces and new youth groups soon realized that the revolution march must continue in order to achieve any actual reform in the governing body and the state structure. The collision between the conservative nature of the SCAF, on the one hand, and necessity of continuing the revolution, on the other hand, resulted in a state of uncertainty between the forces of revolution and the SCAF. There are hardly any major political decisions taken by the SCAF without public pressure, including the measures taken after the second wave of protest.

There is no doubt that recent measures, including bringing the former president before a criminal court, suggest the SCAF's intention to split from the former regime. However, the Egyptian arena is full of questions about whether these measures are just an attempt to absorb public anger, or whether the SCAF is still lagging towards reforming the system of ruling the country.

However, it is difficult to accuse the SCAF of being partial to any of the parties in the political arena although it could not be totally acquitted from responding to external and internal pressures. It is likely that, despite its eagerness to appear free from the former regime's hostility towards the Islamist movement, it also fears the Islamists' takeover of the rule through the ballot box. This, perhaps, explains the still amorphous inclination of the SCAF toward the idea of "supra-constitutional principles."

What could be asserted is that the SCAF is thinking carefully about the role and position of the Army in the new Egyptian Republic. It is known that the Egyptian army, like military institutions in countries such as Turkey and Iran, is not only a professional army but also nearly a guarantor of the Republic's existence and entity and accordingly, many of military officers are appointed to positions in the state's civil bodies. The army also plays an important role in the fields of industry, trade and civil construction. The issue that has not yet been raised for the public debate, or rarely has – and that seems to reflect most of the SCAF's actions – is concerning what can be determined by the new Egyptian constitution regarding the role and position of the army. Will Egypt jump into a new phase where the state is entirely liberated from the military's role in ruling and the army returns to purely military tasks, or will Egyptians accept the army as guarantor of the democratic system as was the case with the Turkish army after the coup of 1960? In either case, how will the political expression of this constitutional consensus be?

The problem is that the SCAF does not express clearly enough the aspirations of the army and its intentions; and this lack of clarity are reflected in the slow take-off of the transitional political process. After it was agreed upon that the elections are to be held in September, it is now said that *preparations* for the elections will begin in September, and the elections are to actually take place, in three stages during the second half of November. As for the presidential election, there is no clear indication of a fixed date for its arrangement.

Moreover, the law on presidential elections has not yet been submitted for public debate despite the fact that the SCAF's handover of power to civilian rule would not be completed until a new president is elected.

Urgent requirements

There are three urgent tasks that must be addressed by three major bodies in the Egyptian political arena, in order to ensure a smooth transition that will pass the country onto a stable political system with the confidence and consensus of the people.

The first task is to confront radical Islamic forces and circles, which did not have a mention-worthy role in the Egyptian revolution. This task can only be carried out by the Muslim Brotherhood, moderate Islamic political forces, Muslim intellectuals, scholars, and mainstream opinion leaders.

The second task is to alleviate the tension and political polarization in the country, generated mainly by the struggles of traditional political forces, which perceive the next stage as one for reaping the fruits, while the country is actually still in the early stage of transition and there is no clear picture for the new political system yet.

The third task is for the SCAF, which must take the initiative or be pushed by public pressures to clarify the intentions of the army and the roof of its constitutional demands, in order to launch a public national dialogue about the position of the army and its role in the new republic.