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Six Months After the Egyptian Revolution. Prospects in the Struggle to Change the Unchanged^(*)

The Egyptian revolution, which sparked on January 25, was widely considered successful when it actually forced, after 18 days, old Mubarak to step down. Now after six months of this unexpected achievement renewed frustration dominates the domestic scene in the country, posing serious questions on whether the revolution has succeeded or is about to be aborted.

Uncertainty in Egypt and Renewed Demonstrations

Have the Egyptian people really taken back their destiny in hand as was chanted last February? Is the Military genuinely playing an earnest role in protecting a smooth transition to democracy? Have Mubarak and notables of the old regime truly become inactive? Are internal developments fully occurring no matter what domestic and regional balances of power are? These questions and many more are strongly presenting themselves in today's extremely ambiguous Egypt. The current precarious situation in Egypt is simply manifested in the fact that Mubarak is gone, but nothing else of the settings of the old regime seems to be changed. The struggle therefore to save the revolution and change the unchanged is again renewed with public protests accompanied with civil disobedience are currently sweeping across Cairo and Alexandria.

Why the Military is Suffering a Credibility Crisis?

These renewed protests, which started to be regularly organized on every Friday of the ongoing month of July, reflect public frustration with the ruling Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF). Indeed, the credibility of the SCAF has been greatly undermined as a result of the slow pace and reluctant attitude it has tightly embraced over the past six months in introducing real change to post-Mubarak Egypt.

First, the SCAF came under criticism for its slowness and apparent reluctance in prosecuting Mubarak and former regime officials, especially those responsible for killing hundreds of peaceful protesters during the January revolts. In addition, the repeated postponement of trials and the recent acquittals of some of the key figures of the Mubarak regime – namely, Ahmed al-Maghrabi; former Minister of Housing, Anas al-Feky, former Minister of Mass Media; and Yousef Boutros Ghali, former Minister of Treasury – have significantly shocked the public. Against this backdrop, the SCAF has been particularly

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Abstract

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The present Policy Brief attempts to provide insights to many of the puzzling questions regarding the current state of uncertainty in Egypt. These questions mainly include: Why the military is suffering a credibility crisis?; why the mission of the military in the current transitional phase is complicated and largely susceptible to political bargains and compromises?; what is the structure of traditional and new political forces in Egypt and how influential they could be in shaping a new political order in the country?.

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() The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.*

firm and expeditious in subjecting civilians to military trials with the pretext of deterring thugs and ensuring security. To everyone's shock, even those civilians who criticized the SCAF were promptly sentenced in military courts.

Second, many traditional secular forces as well as new youth forces continue criticizing the SCAF transition plan, which seeks to hand-in power to a civilian government through: the *rapid* commencement of necessary procedures for parliamentary elections by next September; then, presidential elections; and finally preparing a new constitution for the country. These forces fear that quick elections would allow Islamists – particularly the Muslim Brothers, who remain the most organized on the ground and appear to be up till now the number one beneficiaries of the January revolution – to gain considerable representation in the future parliament, which would eventually lead the process of drafting a new constitution. This fear led these forces to raise the slogan of “*Constitution First*” in a failed attempt to start the transition phase by firstly setting the constitution and then undertaking parliamentary and presidential elections.

Third, no tangible policies have materialized in the past six months to address the country's chronic economic problems and miserable living conditions.

Fourth, sluggishness in reforming the security sector and the latter's revived violent and humiliating treatment of accused/arrested civilians contribute to increasing mistrust in the SCAF's intent to take serious procedures towards a fundamental restructuring of the Ministry of Interior.

Fifth, SCAF's lack of transparency, excessive domination on government and society, and its tendency to surprise the public by brochette rules and decisions intensifies the state of mistrust and uncertainty.

For these five main reasons, the public is ever more questioning the authenticity of the military to bring in real change. Unsurprisingly, much talk – while still without a single evidence – started to come to surface about a SCAF's hidden agenda and a suspected deal with the Islamists to maintain the gains through sharing of power.

The Complicated Mission of the Military

Indubitably, the military institution has political and economic interests that it would seek to protect through preserving a special status for itself in any future political order in Egypt.

Concisely, political interests result from the post-January-2011 gained status as the most reliable arbiter of the Egyptian political life, due to its emergence as the unique state institution with broad domestic support. Indeed, with all the criticism the SCAF is currently receiving, the majority of the Egyptians keep thinking that the military institution remains the only guarantor of a safe transition to an aspired democracy due to continued fragmentation of political forces and their evident fragility. Equally important, the military is expected to seek a relatively independent say in national security issues, especially if it might regard potential military involvement in regional affairs as a result of a hypothetical radical foreign policy change. The SCAF's immediate stance in mid February, declaring its commitment to honoring Egypt's international and regional agreements, reflects its foreign orientation and much importantly identifies red lines for future change in foreign conduct.

Economically, the military interests do not only materialize in its long privileged position in the state economy but also in its interest to maintain the US military assistance estimated of approximately 1.3 billion dollars annually since 1979. As precisely described by one analyst, «What seems most likely is that the generals want to ensure that they retain their privileged but insulated position in the Egyptian state, maintain a strong voice in external security, and keep their affairs immune from the political process. In short, they do not want a military regime, but neither do they want civilian oversight»¹.

¹ N.J. BROWN, *Egypt's Revolution Stumbles Forward*, Carnegie Middle East Center, Commentary/Arab Politics, June 15, 2011, accessible online at: <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=44635>, last retrieved: July 2011. On the same point

For these perceived interests, the process of re-defining the status of the military institution in any future order would be an arduous one and is largely expected to be subject to bargaining and compromises with influential political forces. Perhaps, because of this logic many analysts were quasi affirmative in envisioning a potential deal between the military and the Muslim Brothers.

Influential Political forces in Egypt and the Controversial Weight of the Muslim Brothers

This talk inevitably leads many to question the real weight of the Muslim Brothers and how crucial their role could be in shaping post-Mubarak Egypt. This argument has been a source of controversy among scholars, whose opinions could be distinguished in two main groups: the first argues that the Muslim Brothers represent only a fraction of Egypt's political forces that does not exceed 25%. This group, thus, sustains that the brothers cannot monopolize power and that their recognition and inclusion is a healthy procedure in an effort towards democratization. On the contrary, the second group believes that the representation of the Muslim Brothers might not exceed 25% but their organization and religious rhetoric can significantly boost their mobilization capacity, especially among the unsophisticated public who are easily affected by religious talk, to approximately 50%. According to this reasoning, and taking into account that the Muslim Brothers are just one player among other resurgent players of fundamental Islamists, they are considered a serious menace in the road towards constructing a modern democratic system.

Perhaps the experience of the public referendum, which was held on the 19th of March on amended constitutional articles, supports the this second logic. Islamists in general and the Muslim Brothers in particular, had an undeniable role in mobilizing the ordinary public to vote "yes" for the constitutional amendments, resulting in 77.2% of the Egyptian public approving these amendments. This happened in the time that most secular political parties, youth coalitions, intellectuals and legal experts opposed the amendments. The message that Islamists successfully spread was that approving constitutional amendments is a matter of "obedience to God and His Prophet". The majority of the Muslim public was thus convinced that voting "yes" is a "religious duty". Talking to the more cultured public, Islamists worked to diffuse the idea that approving constitutional amendments would achieve political stability and would help the country to proceed with further steps in the current transitional phase².

Despite the numerous changes that took place in post January 2011 to modify the domestic political milieu in Egypt, the structure of political forces could be delineated in two grand categories: first, traditional forces; and second, new youth forces. Traditional forces comprise old political parties, which are generally fragile, and the Muslim Brothers. These forces are widely believed to be more prone towards securing private political gains in the transitional phase power race rather than overwhelmingly preoccupied with paving the way towards the construction of a real democracy.

One main characteristic of the domestic political scene now in Egypt is the fluidity and fragmentation of all political forces. Enough to mention is the creation of at least 16 new political parties during the past six months.

Even the Muslim Brothers are struggling to: first, maintain the cohesiveness of the group, which has been witnessing constant splits ever since last February; and second, compete with newly resurgent fundamental Islamic forces that adopt a radical line in presenting their comprehensive Islamic reform agendas. The talk regards mainly the *Salafis* and the *Jamaa' Islameya*.

see also: P. RAZOUX (), *What to Expect of the Egyptian Army?*, Research Division-NATO Defense College, Rome, February 14, 2011, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=241>, last retrieved: July 2011.

² S. KHALIFA ISAAC, *Mehr Demokratie wagen in Ägypten?: Von der Änderung der Verfassung profitieren alte Kräfte und die Islamisten*, Berlin Internationale Politik, April 2011, http://www.internationalepolitik.de/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/3-2011_Khalifa2.pdf, last retrieved: July 2011.

The cohesiveness of the Muslim Brothers has been largely affected by continuous splits among its members. Examples include the formation of Al-Nahda Party last March by a former Shura Committee member Ibrahim al-Zaafarani, the establishment of al-Riyada Party last June by a group of high-ranking Muslim Brothers who left the group, and most recently the split of a grand portion of the group youth activists to form al-Tayyar al-Masry Party³. Yet, despite internal problems in the ranks of the Muslim Brothers they remain the most influential political force in the country.

Real Change is Dependent on Un-Politicized Youth Forces

The new youth forces, however, are significantly un-politicized and seem to be genuinely aspirant of a real democratic change. The purity and genuineness of youth forces appear therefore as the only possible drive for resistance in confronting political bargains among old traditional forces. Hence, change seems dependent on the persistence of youth and their ability to organize and unit. Nonetheless, the apparent fragmentation of youth forces in numerous coalitions, socio-political movements, and newly established political parties – let alone mere virtual activism – greatly weakens their cause.

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³ E. TRAGER, *Youth Activists Chip Away at Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood*, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Watch, 1828, July 6, 2011, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3381>, last retrieved: July 2011.