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Fighting the last war?
Civil-military relations in Egypt

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›› Few of the challenges for Egypt's political system are as persistent as the imbalance in civil-military relations. For the most part, the military has dominated Egyptian politics since Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser led the overthrow of the monarchy in the 1950s. Despite some short-lived hopes of civilian hegemony emerging during summer 2012, the 2011 revolution so far seems to have failed to uproot the dominance of the military, which is hindering Egypt's transition to democracy, accountability and good governance. Since the ousting of President Mubarak in 2011, the country's key political actors have shown insufficient understanding of the military's self-perception and institutional interests, and have consequently failed to achieve any breakthrough that would ensure civilian oversight. An orderly retreat of the military from Egypt's political and economic realms cannot be attained in the short term; yet, treading down that path cannot be avoided if Egyptian democracy is to flourish in the long term.

THE GENESIS OF A MILITARISED STATE

The modern Egyptian state precedes the existence of national identity. It was Muhammad Ali's nineteenth century state, centred on the military and bureaucracy, that gave birth to Egyptian nationalism – of which the military has ever since declared itself the patron, through a paradoxical position. On the one hand, the military glorifies the Egyptian nation and

HIGHLIGHTS

- The military dominates Egyptian politics, which is hindering Egypt's transition to democracy.
- The Egyptian military has two operating modes: a 'stability mode' to defend its own institutional interests, and a 'crisis mode' in which defending the state is the priority.
- The military should avoid 'fighting the last war' by only focusing on preserving state institutions; it should also enable reform of those institutions and create space for new political actors.

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takes responsibility for defending its well-being, while on the other it looks down on civilians, questioning their ability to understand and undertake the challenges of governing. In the 1950s, the military monopolised the political scene, and Nasser's socialist policies broadened its 'national responsibility' to include the attainment of social justice.

During Sadat's reign, the declining threat of war after the 1979 peace treaty with Israel, alongside a distorted process of economic liberalisation, brought major transformations. Decreased military spending encouraged the army to expand its economic activities beyond conventional military industries, encompassing revenue-generating and commercial projects in industrial and services sectors. This was considered necessary to compensate for a decreased military budget, help ensure a healthy supply/production of armaments, and to minimise the negative impact of economic liberalisation on middle-class officers.

The neoliberal reforms instigated by Mubarak during the 1990s brought an end to Egypt's strong bureaucracy. Structural and legal reforms led to a fragmentation of the system, and each powerful institution acted as a distinct self-interested 'sect'. Furthermore, these reforms led to the ascent of a new business elite seeking to share power with Egypt's officers and bureaucrats. Many businessmen allied themselves to the police – another institutional sect that gradually challenged the military's upper hand in domestic affairs. The military protected its interests through ensuring economic independence, heavy hands-on control over local government, control of oversight authorities, and a continued significant presence of retired officers in the presidential palace and key ministries. Retired army officers also increasingly held top managerial posts in the emergent private sector and privatised previously state-owned enterprises.

While the military increasingly behaved like a self-interested sect during the 1990s, it has been the sect that retained the greatest sense of responsibility for the state. As a result, it has developed two operating modes: the 'stability mode', in which its own institutional interests are the main focus; and a 'crisis mode', in which stability interests are transcended and defending the state becomes the primary focus.

MILITARY INTERESTS

The military uses its strong presence on the political scene to defend various interests. Among its most important institutional interests are defence expenditure, control over the military's size and armaments acquisition, and control over some economic resources. These interests were undermined under Mubarak, with defence spending dropping from 19.47 per cent of GDP in 1980 to 2.2 per cent in 2010, conscripts largely demobilised, and dependence on US military aid deepened.

The military defends these interests in two ways. First, through a *de facto* political veto power that averts risks of war and arms supplies shortages. And second, by maintaining enough economic independence to keep the military's industrial sector immune to privatisation, help afford subsidised services (including housing, social clubs and goods) for its middle-class officers, and provide necessary funding for arms imports.

Alongside its institutional interests, the military's sense of responsibility for the state also causes it to push for socially-sensitive policies that prevent the further widening of social inequalities. During the last years of Mubarak's reign, the military distanced itself from the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), stepping in occasionally to fill the vacuum caused by the government's retreat from some services (such as providing subsidised bread for citizens), and taking over the responsibilities of other (failing) state institutions (replacing public enterprises in construction and infrastructure projects).

None of this is to suggest that corruption does not play a role in formulating military decisions during stable phases. The military controls its oversight authorities and is immune from the legislative authorities, creating a high-risk context for corruption. This lack of transparency allows for wide speculation over the size of the military's economic interests, which ranges anywhere between 10 and 40 per cent of Egypt's GDP. Revenues generated by these economic enterprises are returned to the military's own accounts, with no civilian oversight. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Egypt was among the lowest-ranking countries both globally and regionally in Transparency International's 2013 and 2014 Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index.

At moments of crisis, Egypt's military becomes primarily focused on preserving the state. The 'Egyptian state' symbolises independence, and according to the military's own perception, sovereignty lies within its ranks (rather than within society). This mode of governance corresponds to the military's self-perception of working from above for the well-being of society, while keeping other (incompetent) societal actors away from decision-making. This state monopoly of the public sphere was jeopardised with the 2011 uprising, as 'civilians' were introduced into the scene as a strong actor. With the growing anger and insistence on the ousting of Mubarak, the military distanced itself from its supreme commander and demanded he step down, as his presence had become an existential threat to the state. In 2013, the military ousted then-President Morsi in similar circumstances, despite earlier efforts from his side to preserve the military's political and economic interests.

FROM CRISIS TO STABILITY, AND BACK TO CRISIS

Egypt's 2011 revolution shifted the military from stability to crisis mode. Mubarak's ousting brought the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) into the heart of Egypt's complicated and structurally-imbalanced political scene. The power and influence of state institutions had been eroded by years of neoliberal reforms, only to be further weakened by the revolution. In the aftermath of Mubarak's ouster, the military – as the only properly-functioning state institution – took responsibility for both maintaining state institutions and preserving a model of state-society relations that ensured state supremacy.

While initially facilitating the ouster of Mubarak, it was not long before the military revisited its strategy. The growing social protests, alongside the forced absence of police force (which was defeated and deflated by the protests) that used to contain them, was threatening the very foundations of the system. A conservative actor in a revolutionary moment, the SCAF soon realised its need for a popular conservative partner to contain the protests, and the Muslim Brotherhood soon stepped in. A new ruling troika was formed between the military, the police and the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) won the largest number of seats in parliament and the presidency in 2012, while the military maintained its sovereignty and institutional interests, and the police escaped reform whilst enjoying yet another wave of equipment modernisation.

The ascent of Brotherhood leader Muhammad Morsi to the presidency was enabled by the SCAF's poor performance during its 18 months in power post-Mubarak, which decreased the military's relative power within the troika. Cosmetic reforms were introduced under Morsi, including the dismissal of some senior SCAF officers, and a relative decrease in the number of former military officers in the government. But Morsi's ascent had also allowed the military to move back from crisis to stability mode, and hence refocus on its institutional interests (including their constitutional preservation).

Political protests re-emerged in December 2012, strongly shaking the ruling troika. With mounting polarisation and violence rapidly spreading from the centre to the periphery, 'state stability' was once again threatened, gradually returning the military to crisis mode, and the SCAF offered to mediate between different

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political groups. Instead of rapprochement with its political opponents, the Muslim Brotherhood capitalised on a broad Islamist alliance in parliament, appointed Mohamed Ibrahim – known for his obedience to those in power – as minister of interior, and increasingly relied on the police to silence dissent. This latter move provoked widespread dissent within the interior ministry, eventually leading to nation-wide police strikes in February and March 2013.

Alongside growing political violence and national and international security challenges (including an ongoing Islamist insurgency in Sinai, the Syria conflict and disputes with Ethiopia over the Nile basin), these police strikes were a serious threat to state stability, hence shifting the SCAF almost completely to crisis mode. Failing to realise this shift, the Brotherhood – which counted on providing the military with its 'stability mode' demands – made no serious effort for political reconciliation or socio-economic reform. This resulted in more violence, eventually leading to the mass protests of 30 June, and military intervention and the ousting of Morsi on 3 July 2013.

The hard-line position adopted by the Brotherhood following Morsi's ouster further intensified the military's crisis mode, paving the way for its assumption of wider national responsibilities. With persistent rumours of splits within the military, the SCAF – worried about the consequences of such splits – resorted to linking the Brotherhood to terrorist organisations. Abdelfattah El-Sisi, then-minister of defence, demanded a 'popular mandate to combat potential terrorism'. Egypt was now facing mounting political violence and social protest, rising levels of evident un-governability and the re-emergence of terrorist attacks. In sum, a serious political crisis along with growing and competing international pressures and interventions.

As a result, in this crisis mode the SCAF resolved to assume the responsibility of avoiding a Syrian, Iraqi or Libyan scenario, by sitting on the front seats of Egyptian politics. It decided to provide 'institutional support' for the already-powerful El-Sisi in the upcoming presidential elections (to be held at the end of May). This has meant intimidating strong potential candidates, proudly announcing in January 2014 the ratification of its proposed constitutional amendments by referendum with an incredible 98 per cent approval rate, and continuously harassing and trying to silence voices of dissent.

A RE-MILITARISATION OF THE EGYPTIAN STATE?

Within the broader context of the transition process, no single snapshot can capture the complexity of Egypt's civil-military relations, and the possibility of temporary setbacks cannot be ruled out. With the passing of the 'revolutionary moment', radical reform should not be expected. Nonetheless, the political, institutional and socioeconomic deficits that provoked revolution in the first place persist. This makes the military's comeback following Morsi's fall unsustainable. Capitalising on frustration with the fruitlessness of revolution thus far and the apparent 'threat to state and identity', the military can only temporarily overcome the impact of the deficits it encounters.

Egypt's 2011 revolution shifted the military from stability to crisis mode

At least two reasons make the revitalisation of a Nasser-like regime unlikely. First, Nasser had inherited a strong state apparatus from the British occupation, but the current state is largely weak and fragmented, and highly incompetent. Second, Nasser had sufficient economic resources to build a strong political constituency, while the current regime lacks similar resources, is already penetrated by economic interests, and is likely to pursue conservative policies to protect its institutional interests. Plus, the scarcity of resources will likely soon deprive it of the political support it needs; namely the petty bourgeoisie and the professional middle class. This clash of stability and stagnation means that the only government capable of bringing stability to Egypt is one that works for deep political and institutional reform.

A failure to understand these challenges could push Egypt towards chaos. The military's inherently conservative approach may provoke the re-emergence of protest, especially with the irreversible social empowerment caused by the revolution. Unlike during the military leadership's previous governing experience right after Mubarak's fall, at the moment there seems to be no political alternative to military rule. The now-banned Muslim Brotherhood will not regain its popularity in the near future, and the state institutions have become even more dependent on the military.

Capitalising on being the last resort of popular choice is a risky game: fear of chaos could inhibit protest against the military despite dire economic conditions; but continued state failure could provoke the resumption of mass demonstrations, perhaps leading to an almost complete collapse of the state. The SCAF therefore has to act in a sophisticated manner to cope with a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, it needs to maintain its support for state institutions to prevent their collapse, while on the other it needs to catalyse the emergence of new political actors, and to push for change within these very same institutions in ways that may be unfavourable to its institutional interests.

El-Sisi is expected to easily win the presidential elections, and his presidency could potentially be an important milestone for civil-military relations, in the sense that he will have an unprecedented opportunity to reform state institutions. He should have two big advantages: a strong popular mandate that would make him stronger than the networks of interests defending the status quo, including the military trying to broaden its economic activities; and a long history within the ranks of the Egyptian state that gives him sufficient understanding of how it functions.

Combining these two factors, in theory he would stand a good chance of transcending interest networks, overcoming resistance and pushing for meaningful change. More realistically, however, expecting such change to happen in the short term is overly optimistic. Forty years within the ranks of the military leaves little scope for anything but a conservative approach, and with an entourage of status quo advocates, one should not expect El-Sisi to push for change. In fact, a 'remilitarisation' of the state should be expected under his presidency, as trustworthy officers will likely be appointed to critical positions.

CONCLUSION: THREE WAYS TO UPROOT MILITARY DOMINANCE

Two main challenges need to be addressed to achieve better civil-military relations. First, developing and paving the way for different actors to fill the political vacuum. Second, ensuring a smooth transformation similar to an open-heart operation, whereby the current state remains functioning while more legitimate institutions are being formed to replace its existing modes of governance, so as to ensure good governance and accountability, and hence sustainability. The key to addressing these challenges is the military's return to its 'stability' mode, and the simultaneous reform and revitalisation of civil elements of the state and civil society institutions.

Concerned international actors and civil society should employ three different strategies to that end. The first strategy – akin to fire-fighting – should focus on maintaining the existing margins of the civil space. The European Union (EU) should persistently highlight the necessity of building democratic institutions and observing the rule of law and human rights as essential steps on that front. They are only attainable through revitalising civil society organisations, which should – in turn – pressure the emergent regime on specific matters, including conducting fair

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parliamentary elections, passing less restrictive NGO laws, and prohibiting military trials for civilians. Further, local business networks and civil society organisations should be more vocal in their opposition to construction and infrastructure contracts being granted to military-owned companies, and special privileges enjoyed by these firms should be revisited.

The second strategy would focus on revitalising state institutions. The EU, civil society and other international actors should persistently bring the emergent regime's attention to the hazardous impact of re-militarising the state and/or attempting to maintain state structures in their current form. Instead of the military's growing tendency of 'taking over' state activities, the capacity of existing state institutions should be enhanced through bureaucratic reform that encompasses structures, salaries and regulations – thereby encouraging greater transparency and accountability. This would decrease the state's dependency on the military, and allow for the latter's retreat to its stability mode of action.

The third strategy for uprooting military dominance would be to capitalise on the recent constitutional amendments, by using legal reforms to empower local government. A genuine empowerment of the periphery would automatically undermine the uncontested power of the centre, i.e. military rule, and would pave the way for the emergence of new civil political leaders and groups capable of running the state and pushing the military back to its barracks. Capacity-building and creating spaces for the new civil actors will be essential to transcend the current military-Islamist polarisation, and provide new institutional channels for change.

In addition, advancing a meaningful process of transitional justice – including a process of reconciliation – would help bring security and political stability to the country, further pushing the military towards its stability mode of governance. This retreat to stability mode, alongside bureaucratic reform and the emergence of competent political groups are prerequisites for addressing the more serious questions, including renegotiating control over military assets and industrial complex, and constitutional guarantees for military independence. It is important – nonetheless – that civil actors keep track of developments on these issues and keep reminding the public of their importance.

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