

Underneath the Chaos in Egypt

What's going on?

Mary Ann Pevas, 20 June 2012

The Military Council has re-assumed all legislative powers and affirmed the dissolution of the recently freely elected Islamist dominated Parliament.

The results of the Presidential elections are so close both candidates seem to have a valid claim to victory. The official results will be announced Thursday by the Supreme Election Committee. That is the group that has the responsibility to oversee all elections from beginning to end. At this point it appears Shafiz, the leftover leader from Mubarak's regime, has won Cairo but Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, has dominated in many rural areas. Whatever the final outcome, discontent will spill over onto the streets and tensions may lead to some skirmishes. Emotions are running high on all sides in the midst of all this.

As if all of this is not enough, Mubarak is dying. But whomever is making decisions on his behalf is choosing to keep him alive by extraordinary medical means.

Conclusion? Egypt's revolution has been reversed somewhat but not really. Watch on Friday to see if the discontent is massive enough to bring massive numbers into the streets. That is the weekend for them and the day of worship. We will see if their desire for freedom and a new government is still strong or whether they are tired and give up. What's going on in all of this?

The facts are:

1. Egypt's economy is in shambles. Many many people are barely able to buy food for their families. Unemployment is very high. Petrol (gasoline) is scarce and more often than not cars line up for more than a kilometer to get to the pump. Prices for everything have made most items out of reach for many. Tourism (constituting over 16% of the country's GDP) is non-existent and has been so since the revolution began 18 months ago.
2. Islamists, who have been long suppressed under Mubarak, have surfaced and dominated in the political arena. But, although they are the better organized and won almost 60% of the seats in Parliament, they have lost much of the trust of the people. Why? Their actions are interpreted to be more self-serving to gain power for themselves than to act on behalf of the people who elected them. According to my sources, if new Parliamentary elections were held today, the Islamists would lose much of their strength and be replaced by revolutionary candidates, more "liberal" candidates.

Two groups constitute the Islamists. The predominant one is the Muslim Brotherhood, a moderate well organized political and social machine. The second are the Salafists. They are extremely conservative religiously and follow a Muslim religious tradition similar to that of Saudi Arabia. Hence, the name of Salafists from Salafi, the scholar who created this interpretation of Muslim teachings. Together, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists, won almost 60 % of the Parliamentary elections. Most of their energies has been spent trying to maintain control of the selection of members of the committee who will write Egypt's new constitution. That would determine how much of Sharia law would be written right into the document.

3. The streets of Egypt are not safe as before. Crimes of robbery (in banks and of persons), car thefts, kidnappings, etc. have surfaced everywhere. In a nutshell, the people see a collapse of the Mubarak security and law and order. None of these occurred when he was in power. The belief is that Shafiq would bring back the security of the pre-revolution times.

4. The pro-democracy groups, the revolutionaries, are fractured and disagree on what to rally behind and who to support in the elections. This division has led to their losses in the Parliamentary and in the Presidential primary elections. But, the people are quickly learning, and becoming more organized and powerful as a political force to compete with the Islamists in any future elections. Together this mentality seems to be more popular than the Islamist mentality.

5. The Military Council, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), holds the only truly organized physical and legislative power in Egypt today. It has its own interests. SCAF controls almost a third of Egypt's economy through several dominant industries from water products to concrete. And, they come to the political arena not only with power from their military might but also a mindset which they acquired through a half century of military rule in Egypt. That began with the overthrow of King Farouk in 1952 by Nasser and company of military officers. "We've always been responsible for Egypt's well-being and we are still." This is the mentality SCAF are acting out.

How so? In this mentality, if the former "cancer" of the Muslim Brotherhood seems to be taking over, SCAF see their role as one of squashing that power. Hence, they pounced on the Court's rule that the recently elected Parliament was elected illegally and, therefore, should be dissolved and a new Parliament should be elected. Such elections SCAF has declared to be done after a new Constitution is written. And, if that Constitution gives too much power to a "religious" organization, i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood, SCAF reserves the right to veto its adoption. This sounds like a repeat of Turkey's history where the military leadership was granted the responsibility of "protecting" the government from dominance by any religion like Islamists.

Much more can be said but this is sufficient for today's situation. These next few days and weeks will be critical for Egypt's future. Will they continue to fight for democracy and the dream of a people's government, or will they say "enough". Regardless of who is declared to have won the Presidential race, the people will once again take to the streets, but in what numbers. Emotions are running high and the only topic discussed everywhere is their political future.

Egyptians are learning fast of how to exercise their democracy but they are not yet where they want to be. The revolution continues but June 2012 is different than January 2011. Then the demand was clear: "Mubarak must go!" What will it be now? "SCAF must go!?" And who will surface as an effective leader to pull them through this? Stay tuned.

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