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MANY OF the iconic images from Egypt's revolution depict the Egyptian military supporting the uprising in Tahrir Square. As soldiers joined demonstrators and allowed them to scrawl "Mubarak Leave" on the sides of their tanks, the protesters became convinced that the military would protect the revolution and move Egypt toward democracy. The Egyptian army's top commanders pledged to do just that. The day after Hosni Mubarak fell, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the military body now governing the country, vowed to "ensure a peaceful transition of authority within a free and democratic system that allows an elected civilian authority to take charge of governing the country." Yet the SCAF's attempts to curtail dissent and the democratic process have fueled doubts about its true intentions. Will the military fulfill its promise to support democracy? Or will it seek to replace Mubarak's rule with its own or that of a friendly autocrat?

Thus far, the evidence suggests that the SCAF does not want to continue ruling the country after Egypt's parliamentary elections this fall, nor does it want to return the country to a single-party system. But that should provide little comfort to those hoping to see Egypt become a full democracy, in which the military is subordinate to civilian rule. Above all, the generals are determined to preserve stability and

JEFF MARTINI is a Project Associate at the RAND Corporation. JULIE TAYLOR is a Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation.

protect their privileged position. They recognize that ruling the country directly threatens their position by potentially provoking instability, exposing them to public criticism, and dividing their ranks. And they want to avoid being blamed for Egypt's growing economic and social problems, such as double-digit inflation and unemployment, continued labor unrest, and a rise in crime. As a result, the SCAF is eager to hand power over to an elected government—but only to preserve its power and perks, not out of some deep-seated belief in democracy.

Indeed, the SCAF's endorsement of democracy has been tepid at best. The generals have tried 7,000 people, including bloggers, journalists, and protesters, in closed military trials since the revolution. In May, General Mamdouh Shahin, a member of the SCAF, said that the military should be granted "some kind of insurance" under Egypt's new constitution "so that it is not under the whim of a president," and he insisted that the military not be subject to parliamentary scrutiny. In July, the military announced that it would adopt guidelines governing the drafting of the constitution, proposals for which may give it the legal basis to intervene in Egyptian politics under a broad array of circumstances, including to protect the secular nature of the state. The generals, then, seem to be seeking not a genuinely open and representative political system for Egypt but rather one that will allow them to retain the final say over the country's foreign policy and avoid civilian oversight. The elected government, in their vision, would carry the burden of day-to-day rule—and bear the brunt of any public displeasure.

Yet the generals may find that democracy, once unleashed, is difficult to control. If elections are held, a president or parliament hoping to rein in the military may eventually outmaneuver it. And if the scope of democratization falls short of the protesters' demands, the Egyptian people may become less willing to accept the generals' interference in political affairs. The United States, for its part, should help liberal forces in Egypt by exploiting the military's preoccupation with its image and publicly pressuring the generals to embrace democracy.

A SELECTIVE REVOLUTION

MANY EGYPTIANS were surprised when the military first declared that it would not intervene in the country's revolution and then forced

Mubarak out of office. Since 1952, when a group of army officers seized power, all of Egypt's rulers have come from the military and have relied on it for support. In return for their loyalty, the generals enjoyed access to profitable business and land deals. Almost no one thought that they would jeopardize their special relationship with the regime by supporting the protests.

Yet the break between the generals and Mubarak was not so sudden. Over the past decade, the regime had begun to balance its reliance on the armed forces by cultivating a class of crony capitalists. The generals felt their influence slipping away as Mubarak disregarded their economic interests, ignored their advice on ministerial appointments, and organized a campaign to transfer power to his son against their wishes. Although the military did not seek to overthrow Mubarak, this year's demonstrations gave it an opportunity to restore its central position. Since ousting Mubarak and ascending to power, the SCAF has deftly channeled lingering public outrage over corruption toward those who have threatened its own power, such as Mubarak's business cronies and members of his formerly ruling National Democratic Party (NDP).

The generals now hope to create a system of carefully shaped democratic institutions that will preserve their power and reduce the chances that any single political group can challenge them. The SCAF's decision to legalize banned political parties and allow the formation of new ones can, to some extent, be understood in this light. Although the move did represent a concession to popular demands, it also diffused political power—something that clearly benefits the military. In another example of this trend, although the SCAF has moved only slowly to bring Mubarak and his officials to trial, it has aggressively targeted members of the business elite, such as Ahmed Ezz, a steel magnate and former leader of the NDP who gained from Mubarak's privatization campaign and has threatened the military's political position.

The generals understand, of course, that they cannot operate as if the revolution never happened, and they realize that they risk further unrest if they fail to meet some of the protesters' demands. Thus, the SCAF has instituted presidential terms limits, strengthened judicial

The Egyptian military wants to preserve its power and perks.

oversight of elections, and created a more transparent process for the registration of political parties. It has also promised not to run one of its own in the country's presidential race and to maintain the long-standing policy whereby military and internal security personnel—up to 1.5 million people—abstain from voting. Yet the military ultimately wants an Egyptian government that does not threaten its position. It is attempting to build a system more democratic than Mubarak's but still beholden to its interests, betting that in a desire for stability, many Egyptians will accept this compromise.

THE MILITARY'S KIND OF DEMOCRACY

THE SCAF HAS carefully directed the course of Egypt's transition by empowering political forces that do not oppose its dominance or are too vulnerable to try. It has courted two main partners: the established opposition parties, such as the Wafd Party, which have criticized the military on certain policies but have demonstrated loyalty by not questioning its right to rule, and, more important, the Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, who share the SCAF's desire to limit the growth of liberal forces (albeit for different reasons) and have considerable power to mobilize the street.

The military's insistence that parliamentary elections take place this fall, less than a year after Mubarak's ouster, is the clearest indication yet that it intends to work with these groups to shape Egypt's future. Although the generals rightly claim that the sooner elections are held, the sooner they can return to their barracks, the compressed timetable is making it hard for new political forces to get off the ground. Even more dangerous, perhaps, is the new electoral law put in place by the SCAF that maintains a system of single-member districts for half the seats in the lower house of Egypt's parliament (the other half will be chosen based on a party-list system). Although it may seem like a minor technicality, this law is harmful to Egyptian democracy. For one, it will aid local power brokers. These officials typically ran as independents under the prior regime, only to join the NDP after the election to secure patronage for their districts. A system of single-member districts will cement this kind of pattern by reducing campaigns to competitions over which



DYLAN MARTINEZ/REUTERS

At Tahrir Square, Cairo, February 12, 2011

candidate can best win resources for his region. The military prefers this to proportional representation, which would foster party identification by allowing voters to choose between parties campaigning on national platforms. It would also introduce Egyptians to new political forces that might challenge the SCAF's authority, particularly in less developed areas of the country where local power brokers still rule.

The military is also working to secure its influence over parliament by maintaining a provision that reserves half the seats in the lower house of parliament for what the electoral law calls "farmers" and "workers." First adopted by former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser as a means of empowering the masses, the provision eventually came to

be used by retired military officers and internal security personnel as a way to enter government, by qualifying as farmers or workers. Indeed, Amr Moussa, a presidential candidate who has served as Egypt's foreign minister and as secretary-general of the Arab League, has conceded that "in reality 90 percent of the 'farmers'" are former military officers. On taking office, these legislators typically joined the parliament's Defense and National Security Committee, the only body in the Egyptian government that even nominally supervises the military, further diluting what little civilian oversight there was.

Since the revolution, the generals have sought to maintain control over key instruments of power, especially provincial governorships, to complement their top-down control. Governors are appointed by the regime and oversee all local development projects, making them central players when it comes to distributing patronage. In the Mubarak era, roughly three-quarters of the governors came from the military or the internal security and intelligence services. After the revolution, many expected the SCAF to increase the number of civilian governors. Yet just the opposite has occurred. In April, the transitional government actually increased the number of posts held by former military or security officers. In the face of popular criticism, the military is now considering allowing governors to be directly elected, but it has yet to make a final decision.

Meanwhile, the SCAF has wasted no opportunity to justify the continuation of the security state. It has played up the threat of a counterrevolution, of supposed efforts to create divisions between the people and the army, and of the prospect of a "foreign hand" interfering in Egypt's internal affairs. After 15 people were killed and two churches burned in sectarian violence in Cairo this past May, the SCAF warned that Egypt's security and economic problems "are the result of . . . internal and external enemies of the state" seeking to "create disunity between the army and the people and internal divisions within the Armed Forces itself." The military has also stoked fears of foreign conspiracies by claiming to have broken up a ring of Egyptians spying for Israel and by arresting an American-born Israeli citizen, Ilan Grapel, who is accused of inciting sectarian violence and urging protesters to use violence against security forces. The military has also found willing allies among parts of the media, which have questioned

whether the “shaky hands” of civilian leaders can impose law and order in such unstable times. Although some of these security concerns are legitimate, this coverage has conditioned the public to believe that handing power to civilian leaders risks destabilizing the country.

BROTHERHOOD AND ARMS

IN THEIR efforts to maintain control of Egypt, the generals have been aided by the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood helped build public support for the March referendum that mandated elections this fall and has reliably backed the SCAF in the months since. For example, when critics accused the military police of using live ammunition on April 8 to clear Tahrir Square of protesters pressing for a civilian-led transition, and the SCAF claimed that the bullets had come from counterrevolutionary snipers intent on driving a wedge between the people and the army, the Muslim Brotherhood’s leader, Mohammed Badie, endorsed this conspiracy theory and condemned all attempts to “bring about division or subversion between the people and its army.”

The Brotherhood has also supported the generals by calling certain protests against the SCAF illegitimate. For example, the Brotherhood boycotted a second “Day of Rage” in late May, organized by youth groups to protest the SCAF’s insistence that elections come before the drafting of a new constitution. Brotherhood members organized pro-government demonstrations and called the youth’s event “the Friday of Subversion.” Even when it did join protests against the generals in early July, the Brotherhood agreed to participate only after youth groups dropped their public demand for a faster transition to civilian control and agreed to focus instead on speedier trials for former officials and security personnel accused of killing protesters during the revolution. And when youth demonstrators chanted for the removal of Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, leader of the SCAF, the Brotherhood called on the protesters to “appreciate the role of the military in protecting the revolution rather than criticizing it.”

The SCAF views the Muslim Brotherhood as an attractive partner not because of any ideological affinity but because the party is both

publicly popular and legally vulnerable. On the one hand, the Brotherhood has been able to mobilize the public in favor of government initiatives, such as the constitutional referendum, and quiet things down or organize counterdemonstrations when the protesters' demands have crossed the military's "redlines." On the other hand, the generals' fear of an Islamist takeover may lead them to crack down on the Brotherhood should it outlive its usefulness. To do so, the SCAF may target the Brotherhood's new political party, the Freedom and Justice Party. According to election laws, political parties in Egypt must demonstrate that their base extends beyond a religious affiliation. Freedom and Justice has recruited token support from elements in the Coptic community, but its base is overwhelmingly Muslim. In addition, the Brotherhood has only nominally separated itself from the party, raising questions about whether the Brotherhood has truly separated its religious work from politics. The Brotherhood's leaders understand that to cement its place in Egyptian politics, they must convince the military that they pose no threat to the basic order, which makes them keen to demonstrate their loyalty.

But the informal alliance between the SCAF and the Brotherhood may prove dangerous to the generals in the long run. In exchange for its support, the Brotherhood is being given a voice in the country's politics. But it remains the junior partner in the relationship. The Brotherhood could eventually seek greater authority over the country's affairs, leading to a confrontation with the military. The generals do not fear an Iranian-style coup on the part of the Brotherhood as much as its growth into a political force, like the Islamist Justice and Development Party (known as the AKP) in Turkey, which could gradually wrest power from the armed forces. The Brotherhood's 600,000 devoted members could then pose a significant threat to the military's control.

THE IMAGE CONTEST

ARMED WITH its alliances with Egypt's established parties and the Muslim Brotherhood for now, the SCAF will not allow a full democratic transition in Egypt. Even if those arrangements fall apart, the military is likely to hold enough power to keep internal and external

opponents at bay. How, then, can liberal Egyptians and the international community convince the SCAF to embrace democracy?

The United States, in particular, appears to wield a great deal of influence over the military. Washington's most obvious leverage is the \$1.3 billion in aid that the United States provides the Egyptian military each year, estimated to cover up to 80 percent of its procurement costs. Additionally, to strengthen Egypt's faltering economy, the White House has offered \$1 billion in debt relief and \$2 billion in private-sector investment. The United States also helps Egypt attract international aid: in May, the Obama administration convinced the G-8 to commit billions of dollars to Egypt's development. The United States could pressure the SCAF by threatening to withhold any of this financial assistance.

Yet the United States' capacity to advance democratization in Egypt remains limited. To begin with, U.S. strategic interests could interfere with hopes for reform. The United States works closely with Egypt to preserve regional security, relying on safe passage through the Suez Canal and over Egyptian skies to conduct military actions in the Middle East and beyond. Securing this cooperation with Egypt requires maintaining good relations with the SCAF, which would not appreciate U.S. pressure to democratize. Even if the United States were to vigorously campaign for democracy, it would still have limited power to shape events on the ground given the weakness of liberal democratic parties in the country, the reverence for the military in Egyptian society, and popular distrust of U.S. intentions. Even the \$1.3 billion in security assistance buys little clout, since the generals view it as a reward for maintaining peace with Israel, an attitude that the United States can do little to change.

That said, the United States can still promote democratization in Egypt by exploiting the generals' concern for their image. As the protesters' admiration for the armed forces during the revolution illustrated, the military enjoys a sterling reputation in Egyptian society as a symbol of unity and the protector of the people. Although Egypt's forces were humiliated in the 1967 war with Israel, their early success in the 1973 war

Obama should use as leverage the Egyptian military's preoccupation with its reputation.

restored the country's dignity and set the stage for the return of the Sinai Peninsula. Since then, by carefully cultivating and protecting its own mythology, the Egyptian military has maintained unparalleled popularity, with public approval ratings hovering around 90 percent.

But this steady diet of praise has made the generals hypersensitive to criticism. For example, when over 1,000 people died in a ferryboat accident in the Red Sea in 2006, critics accused the military of failing to deploy quickly enough to rescue them. Rather than submit itself to public examination, however, the military reportedly tampered with the parliamentary investigation that followed and made sure that it did not receive any of the blame. In the postrevolutionary era, the SCAF has demonstrated the same aversion to public criticism. When the transitional government held its first public meeting with youth groups after the revolution, a military spokesperson, sounding hurt and mystified, revealed that the SCAF had documented 23 instances of its being chastised on television and questioned whether such negative coverage represented a good use of press freedom. The SCAF has also summoned journalists critical of its rule to appear before military tribunals for, among other things, reporting that military police fired on protesters and subjected female demonstrators to virginity tests. The generals have prosecuted some of these journalists using a long-standing regulation that criminalizes "insulting" Egypt's armed forces. The ambiguity of what constitutes insulting gives the military wide authority to target media and opposition figures who challenge it.

The United States can take advantage of the military's intense preoccupation with its reputation. For starters, Washington should openly praise the SCAF when it promotes democratic reform. The United States should have publicly backed the generals after they took measures in March to strengthen judicial oversight of elections, and again in June when they upheld judicial independence by supporting the courts' decision to dissolve municipal councils. By endorsing such efforts in the future, the United States can give the generals a taste of the support that they will receive from the international community if they truly liberalize.

But when the SCAF stands in the way of democratization, the United States should voice its disappointment—at first privately but then, if need be, openly. When the generals violate democratic principles, the

Obama administration must criticize them. In late June, for example, Egyptian internal security forces injured more than a thousand protesters demanding compensation for the families of those killed in the revolution. The White House should have forcefully condemned the SCAF and urged it to conduct thorough investigations. Instead, a State Department spokesperson expressed his belief that “the Egyptian military really set itself apart as sort of a paragon of professionalism during the events of Tahrir Square . . . and it is incumbent on them now to carry that spirit forward in a transparent manner to adhere to rule of law.” This subdued response was a missed opportunity.

The United States must also prevent the SCAF from hiding behind its relationship with Washington. For example, when General Shatin insisted that the military receive special protections under the new constitution, he justified his position by arguing that the U.S. military is given the same privileges under U.S. law—an obvious falsehood. The Obama administration should have publicly disputed Shatin’s disingenuous comparison by noting that in the United States, unlike Egypt under current SCAF rule, military budgets are in the public domain, national security issues are subject to congressional oversight, and, most important, the military executes, rather than makes, national security policy.

Such tactics, of course, are risky for the United States. One of the few points of broad agreement in Egypt today is that the country should assert its independence from Washington. The Egyptian people could interpret public criticism from the United States as an attempt to meddle in Egyptian affairs, provoking a backlash and strengthening the SCAF’s hand. In addition, should U.S. pressure directed toward the military fail to change the generals’ behavior, it would jeopardize U.S. credibility and threaten to undermine cooperation between the two countries.

Even so, the Obama administration can avoid these potential pitfalls. Rather than lecture the generals about what they should do, the White House should question whether the generals are honoring their stated commitment to democratization. The military is gambling that its mythic status in Egypt and public fears of instability will allow it to create a political system to its liking. The United States should raise that bet and use as leverage the generals’ concern for their image in order to support a democratic future for Egypt. 🌐