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Egypt's Security Forces: A Key Factor in the Crisis

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The current wave of protests in Egypt has pitted thousands of demonstrators against the police and Central Security Forces (CSF). The performance of these forces is key to the outcome of the crisis. If they can contain the demonstrations without excessive violence, the protests will likely burn themselves out over time. But if the demonstrations continue or escalate into greater violence, the police and CSF could break down, either dissolving entirely or engaging in undisciplined violence that further exacerbates the situation. Such a scenario, or even the likelihood of it, would probably spur the government to deploy army personnel to support the security forces, deter further demonstrations, and, if necessary, put down the protests through force. That would be a true crisis for the government, one with an uncertain outcome.

Previous Crises

Egypt has experienced significant civil disturbances, but not in the recent past. The two most serious cases were the January 1977 food riots (which lasted for two days) and the 1986 mutiny by CSF personnel over terms of service (lasting four days). In both cases, military intervention was required to restore order.

The current crisis is in its third day, with demonstrations continuing in major cities and signs of increased organization among the protestors. Potential leadership is also emerging, with the Muslim Brotherhood announcing its support for the movement and popular opposition figure Mohamed ElBaradei set to return to Egypt. A massive demonstration has been called for in Cairo after Friday prayers -- an event that could test the government's resolve and ability to prevent, or at least limit, further gatherings.

History is not a particularly useful guide for the current situation. During the Iranian revolution, security forces were unable to deal with the protests, and the military decided not to intervene. Following the stolen 2009 presidential election, however, the internal security forces, backed by a determined and cohesive regime, dealt effectively with the demonstrations on their own. And in Tunisia, the military did not back the government during the recent crisis, sealing the regime's fate.

Types of Security Forces

The Egyptian government has three types of security forces it can employ against civil disturbances: the national police, the CSF, and the army. The police are essentially a standard law enforcement organization not intended for dealing with major civil disturbances. In contrast, the CSF is a 300,000-strong, purpose-built organization whose main mission is suppressing civil disorder. It possesses riot-control equipment and vehicles and is being heavily employed in the current crisis. Historically it has suffered from low status, poor cohesion, and low-quality personnel and unit leadership. The 340,000-man army is organized, trained, and equipped for conventional war, but as mentioned previously, it has been used for internal security purposes in the past, during the 1977 and 1986 riots.

Challenge of Maintaining Momentum

As the current crisis unfolds, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the demonstrators and the CSF is important. The protesters are widely distributed, motivated, substantial in numbers, and, so far, moderately successful. Their spontaneity, amorphous organization, and lack of clearly defined leadership make them more difficult for the internal security forces to handle. Yet this lack of definition is also a weakness, at least in terms of sustaining and focusing the movement. Demonstrators have jobs and responsibilities and need to be supported in a logistical sense if they are to remain in the streets. They also need positive results, or at least the appearance of success, to keep going.

For their part, the security forces also have substantial numbers, along with formidable equipment and state resources behind them. Their internal cohesion and discipline in the face of violent protests will be crucial, as will continued government backing. Neither of these is assured in the current situation.

Prospects for Army Intervention

If the CSF and police are incapable of dealing with the protests, the government could resort to using military forces. The army can deploy well-organized heavy units (armor, mechanized infantry) and light units (airborne, special forces) either in support of the internal security forces or in a direct role against the protesters. Army units are already stationed in or near the major trouble spots identified so far, and additional forces can be rapidly moved to areas where they are needed. The heavy firepower (e.g., tanks, armored personnel carriers) and sheer numbers of these units could have a deterrent effect on demonstrators and would be lethal if ordered to act forcefully.

The critical question is whether the army would obey such orders. The answer is probably yes, as the army is a better disciplined and more professional organization than the CSF and has a history of being used to control civil disturbances. But the loyalty and discipline of junior officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted men could become an issue, as could opportunism among more senior officers. It is possible that some units would execute their orders as directed while others do not -- a scenario that would become more likely as violence escalates. And individual defections or simple desertions could occur under any conditions.

Other Variables

The CSF and military have key roles to play, but they are not the only variables in the situation. Another factor is the demonstrators' ability to sustain and escalate their actions over time. Spontaneous demonstrations are effective in the short term, but at some point they must become more organized, develop leadership, and become purposeful. This failed to happen with Iran's so-called Green Movement in 2009, when protests collapsed in the face of a determined regime and security forces.

A second factor is regime strength, which includes, but is not limited to, the military component. Any displays of absenteeism (i.e., avoidance of public appearances), wobbling, defection, or outright fleeing by key personalities will encourage the protests and undermine the confidence of the security forces and military. In all likelihood, the regime will either stand together or run separately. A related factor is the regime's capacity to be flexible and creative in at least giving the appearance of accommodating some of the demonstrators' grievances.

A final potential factor is external intervention, whether to support the regime, stay its hand, or bolster the protests. The regime and its antagonists will be watching to see how key outside actors approach an ongoing crisis in a key regional state.

Potential Outcomes

Currently, the outcome is in doubt; there is no way to know for sure what will happen as the crisis develops. Yet three broad scenarios can be sketched out:

Containment. The internal security forces may be able to contain the situation long enough and at a sufficiently low level of violence that the protests burn themselves out. This effort could be coupled with more or less sincere reform offers from the regime, along with the arrest of perceived protest leaders.

Collapse. The internal security forces could collapse, leading to either army intervention or regime collapse, possibly preceded by an attempt at instant reform.

Military intervention. The government could decide to commit the army, whether in response to imminent CSF/police collapse, or to bring the protests to a rapid halt before that point is reached or the regime is clearly threatened.

By resorting to military intervention, the government would be betting on the army's ability and willingness to obey orders and effectively suppress the demonstrations. Although army forces would probably come through on both fronts, that is not a guaranteed outcome.

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