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Interview

Military Holds Key to Egypt's Future

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As protests continued in Cairo, questions intensified about when and how President Hosni Mubarak would step aside and what kind of transitional government might replace him. The "key actor" at this time is Egypt's military leadership, which is concerned about growing violence, economic damage, and continued instability, says Bruce K. Rutherford, author of *Egypt After Mubarak: Liberalism, Islam, and Democracy in the Arab World*. "If they want these demonstrations to end, they can either intervene and use force to disperse the demonstrators or they can ask President Mubarak to leave," he says, which would indicate the army's belief that Mubarak's continued presence is destabilizing. Rutherford says the opposition has organized a ten-person leadership group headed by Mohamed ElBaradei, but that Egyptians are skeptical about the government's offer to open discussions with the opposition because in the past, such dialogues haven't led to any change. He says a possible successor to Mubarak may be former foreign minister Amr Moussa, currently head of the Arab League.

Mubarak says that, while he will not run for reelection in the fall, he wants to live out his life in Egypt. Where do we go from here?

The key actor at this particular moment is the Egyptian military leadership and how they evaluate the turnout at Friday's demonstration. The military has made it clear that they would like the demonstrations to stop. They fear that they could become violent and become exploited by Egypt's enemies, internal and external. They also fear that these demonstrations are causing profound damage to the Egyptian economy.

The military wants to see this instability end; the question is how to accomplish that. They've been trying to accomplish it through a variety of means over the past week that failed to achieve the desired results. We saw the military request that the protestors not turn thugs to try to intimidate the demonstrators. That hasn't worked. We've seen an appeal to Egyptian culture and the notion of Mubarak as the father of the nation who merits the respect and esteem of a father. That didn't work. At this juncture, the military is basically facing two choices. If they want these demonstrations to end, they can intervene and use force to disperse the demonstrators, or they can ask Mubarak to leave, indicating the army has come to the conclusion that Mubarak's presence is itself an impediment to stability. The military's decision on that issue is really going to determine where [the Egyptians] go from here.

How much control does Mubarak have over his own military? Is there an independent military voice?

It's important to keep in mind that Mubarak is a very military man. He was a career military officer and the head of the Air

Force before he became vice president for President Anwar al-Sadat [who was assassinated in 1961]. And the military sees him as one of them, so it's not so much a question of the military challenging Mubarak for power or anything along those lines. It's more a case of military men sitting down and reaching an agreement on what best serves the interest of the nation. I imagine the discussion that takes place between senior military officials and Mubarak takes the tone that, "We are all professional military men and all sworn to defend the nation, and how best can we serve the nation at this time?"

The new vice president, Omar Suleiman, is a close Mubarak associate. What has he been urging?

The opposition is skeptical that this regime--which they hold responsible for creating a very autocratic order--can be trusted to manage a process of political transition.

The proposal put forward by the government is that Suleiman will lead discussions that would involve all the major political actors of Egypt, including the Muslim Brotherhood. The purpose of these discussions would be to undertake constitutional reform and eventually hold free and fair elections.

The issue for the opposition is whether the government can be trusted to manage a process of political reform. There have been a number of times when the government has called for a "national dialogue," in which they said they were going to reach out to the opposition.

These "dialogues" produced no meaningful political change. The opposition is skeptical that this regime, which they hold responsible for creating a very autocratic order, can be trusted to manage a process of political transition.

There are huge numbers of protestors, but it's hard to say who is in charge.

That's a hugely important point and will become enormously critical to resolving this situation peacefully. There is a shadow parliament the opposition has put together. They have selected a ten-person leadership committee headed by Mohamed ElBaradei [former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency], but it's not at all clear if these people represent the young people who are actually on the barricades. They have set aside five slots for the youth, but one of the challenges is being able to handle this process in a way that enhances the image and credibility of the opposition leadership group. If these demonstrators are not given some form of credible representation, this can move in all sorts of unconstructive directions. The way to do that would be for the government to perhaps give [this group] some small victories in the near term, to demonstrate that they can, in fact, deliver on at least some of the issues that the demonstrators care about.

Israel is concerned that the Muslim Brotherhood might take some leadership role in the government. What is your reading on the Muslim Brotherhood right now?

The Brotherhood has undergone an evolution. It was formed in 1928. It has had periods when it has used violent tactics to achieve its objectives. It was involved in some assassinations in the 1940s. They were accused of an assassination attempt against President Gamal Abdel Nasser that led to Nasser cracking down on them very aggressively. When they reemerged in the 1970s, they began to develop a different ideology about how to participate in political life. They issued a platform and draft party platform in 2007. The political order they say they want is, for the most part, quite reformist. Many of the critics say you can't believe these documents, but if you believe what they say, then what they want is a more democratic political order with free elections, an independent judiciary, and the rule of law under civil law--in other words, under existing civil courts, not Islamist courts. There are shortcomings. The most obvious is that they have not yet embraced a universal concept of citizenship that would grant fully equal rights to Copts. In particular, they have said they would oppose a Copt being president or a prime minister.

What about women?

They've said they would not want a woman to be president. They say they are willing to allow women to assume leadership positions in society, but not the presidency.

Would they accept the Israeli Egyptian peace treaty of 1979?

The position that they've put forward is that would submit the treaty to a referendum. It's also important to put into context that they have called on several occasions to break off diplomatic relations with Israel, in other words, to withdraw the Egyptian ambassador from Israel. They have not called for restarting a war with Israel. It's worth noting that has not been a theme of any of these demonstrations.

Mubarak never made a state visit to Israel. What were his feelings about relations with Israel?

Mubarak has been very pragmatic on this point. When he came to power, he was fully aware of the economic weakness of Egypt. In the wake of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty in 1979, a lot of the economic ties to the Persian Gulf states were cut off. He basically tried to evaluate what would enable Egypt to return to a position of economic, military, and, eventually, regional political strength. He calculated that continued war with Israel would not accomplish that. Maintaining the peace with Israel would give him access to American aid, access to American and European markets, and [he calculated] that eventually Egypt's size and military strength would lead it to return to a position of influence in regional politics. It largely worked. In other words, peace has paid off.

But your point is a good one in that he hasn't made an effort to broaden the peace, beyond the very pragmatic element of maintaining the absence of conflict, with the important exception of Egypt selling its natural gas to Israel. Some 40 percent of Israel's natural gas comes from Egypt. That is one arena where Mubarak did establish very substantial ties with the Israelis. He hasn't made an effort to try and make the broader peace that would involve the exchange of tourists, cultural liaisons, and the development of a wide-ranging peace dimension. That did not occur in large part because it wouldn't have been popular with the Egyptian people.

So a new government in Egypt is probably unlikely to break relations with Israel.

That's very unlikely.

And from the Israeli point of view, what would a new Egyptian government's attitude be toward Hamas in Gaza, to which Mubarak was rather unfriendly?

Mubarak has taken a very firm stand, regarding Hamas as a threat not only to Israel but also to Egypt and the region. His point of view--which has been articulated by others in the government--is that Hamas is part of a broader radical Islamic agenda to destabilize the region. Therefore, he wanted to contain Hamas to the extent that he could. He did some controversial things in that regard. When Israel launched attacks in December 2008-January 2009, Mubarak came under enormous pressure to provide greater support and provide Palestinians humanitarian aid, and in some circles he was being encouraged to help Hamas defend itself from Israeli military operations. He resisted those pressures. He provided some humanitarian aid, but not as much as many hoped, and he largely facilitated Israeli efforts to isolate Hamas in Gaza.

The question of what will happen next depends on who assumes the position of power within the government. If the process of transition involves Omar Suleiman being the central figure, it's safe to say that Egypt's unwillingness to assist Hamas will continue. Suleiman has been intimately involved with Egypt's policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict.

To some extent the outside demands may have backfired a little bit and motivated Mubarak to dig

It's safe to assume he will continue that policy. If someone other than Suleiman comes in, the question is more uncertain. Mohamed ElBaradei was very critical of Mubarak for not having provided at least greater humanitarian support for Palestinians in Gaza.

in his heels. How long will he dig in his heels? It's uncertain.

Is ElBaradei the leading candidate to be the next president?

He is certainly among the leading candidates. The other candidate who just appeared on the radar screen, and I thought would have been there sooner, is Amr Moussa. He is a former Egyptian foreign minister who is now the leader of the Arab League. He is very popular among the Egyptian public, is well-known, and has high name recognition. He might be a more acceptable figure to the inner circle of Mubarak if Suleiman is not the successor. The question is whether the demonstrators and opposition would accept him as a plausible alternative to Mubarak. That is hard to tell at this point.

Did the United States make a mistake in speaking out so much recently?

That's an interesting question. We chose to take a fairly high-profile approach in publicly calling for the acceleration of Mubarak's departure. The Europeans have done the same. My guess is that they tried to do it privately with Mubarak, but he was completely unresponsive, which is probably what led to these public statements. But the complication is now it becomes an issue of pride for Mubarak and Egypt. If Mubarak resigns in the face of external pressure, is that a humiliation for Egypt as a country? That is certainly how Mubarak is presenting it and how Suleiman is presenting it. To some extent, the outside demands may have backfired a little bit and motivated Mubarak to dig in his heels. How long will he dig in his heels? It's uncertain.

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