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A Tunisian Solution for Egypt's Military: Why Egypt's Military Will Not Be Able to Govern

By Clement M. Henry and Robert Springborg

The popular uprisings that swept Egypt and Tunisia this winter were remarkably similar, but their immediate outcomes have been quite different. In Tunisia, civilian politicians and technocrats quickly took the helm of the country in the wake of the revolution. In Egypt, by contrast, the military's Supreme Council is slated to rule the nation for six months, and whether it stays in power or returns to the barracks, it will surely try to ensure that civilians do not subordinate its role in politics. Given the nature and history of the two countries' militaries, this divergence is not surprising. Still, Egypt's military may not have the stranglehold on power that many think, and a real Tunisian solution -- a civilian government free of military involvement -- could form in Egypt as well.

Under President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia was a police state. The president relied on his handpicked security and intelligence forces in the Interior Ministry to maintain his rule. Mistrustful of large militaries, he purposefully ensured the weakness of the army. With merely 50,000 in uniform, the army, as a proportion of the population, is among the smallest in the Arab world. Denied significant amounts of the foreign assistance that came into Tunisia, undersupplied, poorly equipped, and excluded from Ben Ali's patronage network, it was not invested in the regime. Meanwhile, over the past few decades, Ben Ali had effectively placed it under U.S. tutelage, where it was given training and modest arms transfers. This was a hedge against the French, who retained some influence over the police after Tunisian independence. They supplied and trained the security and intelligence forces, and even helped the government suppress an uprising in 1955. U.S. involvement with the military, Ben Ali supposed, would prevent the French from having a monopoly of influence over his country's means of coercion. At the same time, it meant that the army, which already had little loyalty to Ben Ali and no economic interest in maintaining his regime, became the one well-trained and highly professional force in the country.

It is not surprising, then, that when Ben Ali ordered the Tunisian army's chief of staff, Rachid Ammar, to fire on the protesters as the Jasmine Revolution gained momentum, the general refused. Likewise, Ben Ali's order to dismiss Ammar was ignored. The military instead turned its guns on the security and intelligence forces and the gangs of hooligans that Ben Ali loyalists had sent into the streets to sow panic. The French foreign minister, of course, suggested that France reinforce the police to help Ben Ali suppress the crowds. The police, however, were not reinforced, and Ben Ali, left without protection, had no choice but to flee. Soon after, Ammar conspicuously stepped aside to allow for the creation of a new civilian government.

By contrast, former President Hosni Mubarak's Egypt was a military state to which the police were subordinate. Although outnumbering military troops three to one (a staggering 1.5 million to 450,000), the security and police forces were underequipped, poorly paid, and viewed with contempt by the military. And unlike in Tunisia, the Egyptian military was allowed -- indeed encouraged -- to develop its own economic empire, which alleviated some of the institution's expenses for the government and, more important, generated a patronage network to buy the loyalty of the officer corps.

Since the military was considered above such matters as crowd control, Mubarak called on the security and intelligence forces to subdue the protests when they erupted in Cairo. Those forces soon began to crack, creating a security vacuum into which the government poured thugs, officers out of uniform, and hired criminals. Unlike the Tunisian army in comparable circumstances, the Egyptian military stood aside, failing to protect civilians. Only when it became clear that Mubarak's tactics had failed, did it step in. On February 11, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces assumed control of the country and immediately began issuing proclamations as the new de facto government.

It appears that the Egyptian military has won the cake, at least for the time being, but eating it is going to be difficult. Although its size and strength are widely recognized, the Egyptian army is not the tight professional force that many consider it to be. It is bloated and its officer core is indulged, having been fattened on Mubarak's patronage. Its training is desultory, maintenance of its equipment is profoundly inadequate, and it is dependent on the United States for funding and logistical support. But even weapons systems the United States has given the Egyptian army, such as F-16s and M1A1 tanks, are underutilized. Many are also comparatively ineffective, in part because Minister of Defense Muhammad Tantawi, acting on behalf of Mubarak, denied them vital, state-of-the-art communication capacities. He did so to impede lateral communications within the officer corps and to prevent interoperability with nominally allied forces, including those of friendly Arab countries. The *raison d'être* of the military was always to support the Mubarak regime, not defend the nation.

As presently constituted, the military will also not be able to meet many of the protesters' demands. It cannot allow the core of the anti-Mubarak movement, such as the National Association for Change associated with Muhammad El Baradei, to play a leading role in forming a new government. Nor can it allow a parliament to have real power. The anti-Mubarak opposition and an empowered legislative branch would seek at least an oversight role and ultimately try to subordinate the military to the civilian government. This would be unacceptable to the military, which knows that its patronage network and economic influence would dry up if civilians took control. It will also try to deny calls for a full-scale investigation into the "economic crimes" of the *ancien régime*, for it has been involved in many of them.

But there has been a revolution, and re-imposing military control behind a civilian facade will now be extremely difficult, especially since the opposition seems to see through the military's strategies. The opposition's massive gathering in Tahrir Square on February 18, one week after Mubarak's ouster, for example, was a warning that it would force the military to share power with civilians. For its part, the military will likely try to maintain power and justify crackdowns by appealing to the need for order; steer a fellow traveler into the presidency, such as Amr Moussa, an Egyptian diplomat and the current secretary-general of the Arab League, or the current prime minister and a former general, Ahmad Shafiq; limit constitutional changes aimed at achieving a more democratic balance of power between the executive and legislative branches; and orchestrate economic show trials.

But Egypt faces dire economic conditions, and the military may already be jeopardizing the country's future and discouraging foreign direct investment by targeting some of the old regime's liberal economic elite, such as the former minister of trade and industry, Rachid Mohamed Rachid. The military high command may try to counter the lack of investment by calling for renewed economic nationalism, but that will condemn Egypt to economic stagnation, similar to that which it experienced in the mid-1960s. In addition to mobilizing the middle class seeking freedom and jobs, the revolution energized the poor, who joined in the protests to demand dignity, justice, and bread. If the economy worsens and the military overstays its welcome, the Egyptian people may well return to the streets.

Established military rule in Egypt is certainly not in the Egyptian people's interest, but neither is it in the United States' or any other country's interest. It would be politically unstable in the short term, and over the longer haul would likely lead to a repetition of this past month's events. The United States must encourage the institutionalized political participation of those who drove -- and are still driving -- the revolution. And rather than continuing to support the military, as the Obama administration has promised to do, the United States needs to signal that an overgrown, overfed, and largely useless Egyptian military is not acceptable. Aid the United States does send should be geared toward helping the Egyptian military deal with real national security interests, such as disaster relief, air and sea rescue, and cooperative engagement with allied military forces. And, as in the case of Tunisia, U.S. training certainly has a role to play. Through professional military education, the United States can assist Egypt's military in developing professional norms, which are supportive of civil-military relations within a democratic framework. To recall a chant inciting Cairo's January 25 movement: "Tunisia is the solution."

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Foreign Affairs
February 21, 2011