

Egypt in transition

What issues, what dangers?

Egypt's post-revolutionary transition is fraught with difficulties. **AlJazeera Centre for Studies** examines the political forces at play, the dangers and issues of contention in the political arena and how these may play out.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has been ruling Egypt since 11 February 2011 when Egyptians forced President Hosni Mubarak to step down.

Through resolutions and statements, the Council has formulated its vision for restoring civilian rule in Egypt, and for moving towards a democratic society. It is doing this through a road map for the introduction of constitutional amendments.

In this process, the Council has incorporated the views of Egyptian people. It has also promoted dialogue through a referendum of Egyptians around a provisional constitution while the 1971 constitution is being repealed.

People had hoped that parliamentary elections would take place in July 2011 and that these would immediately be followed by a People's (constituent) Assembly of 100 members. The assembly over six months would then prepare a draft constitution.

At the same time Egyptians would elect a new 'President of the Republic' two months after elections for the People's Assembly. After the presidential election, the army would return to barracks, and their governing role would end.

In addition, the new president

would ensure the holding of a public referendum to give input on the draft constitution within two months after the completion of the constituent assembly's work.

The road map has, however, stirred up intense debate in Egypt. This has continued despite calls to restore a climate of national consensus that prevailed during the revolution.

The essence of the polarisation is between Egypt's Islamic front, especially its largest organised political movement, the Muslim Brotherhood and secularist, liberal and some nationalist groups. This polarisation is giving rise to fears that the transitional phase will not lead to the establishment of civilian rule and institutions.

MILITARY TOO SLOW

Tensions have emerged between political activists and the Supreme Council. This is not because these groups reject military rule. Indeed, Egyptians are grateful for the role of the army in resolving the revolution in a beneficial manner to the people.

However, the sluggish pace of the political leadership of the Council, especially with removing the last vestiges of the previous regime, has generated concern. There is

a feeling that the Council is more concerned with maintaining stability than ensuring that a new political system is established.

Some of the criticisms relate to the manner in which the government was disbanded, and the calls for the prosecution of members of Mubarak's family and senior figures and business people who surrounded the former president.

The other issue is that in the referendum of 19 March an overwhelming majority of Egyptians supported the constitutional amendments, and road map reforms.

At the end of May 2011, the Council stressed its commitment to holding elections in September 2011. However, it has not set a date nor has it submitted a draft law regarding presidential elections. As a result, those who put forward their names as presidential candidates cannot become official, nor can official electoral campaigning begin.

The elections will come under full judicial supervision. But because the judiciary lacks human resources to cover all constituencies it is likely that elections will happen over two or more stages. This means the election for members of the People's Assembly will take at least a month.

Considering that the Council is first going to draft a constitution which people will vote on in a referendum before presidential elections, this probably means that an elected president will only assume authority by March 2012 at the earliest. This shift in timing has opened up a different scenario for the transition period.

The military Council has also neglected maintaining unity among Egyptians. It is aware of concerns about its slow pace and also of how normal standards of productivity, work and tourism need to be re-established. Yet it seems that it is apprehensive about hastily adopting any radical measures in this transitional period.

ROAD MAP OPPONENTS

The primary cause of tension, however, are different views around the referendum on constitutional amendments. Some groups opposed to the road map felt that there is a lack of readiness on the part of political forces and parties to contest elections. They also felt that drafting of a new, permanent constitution should precede any other step.

This group believes in the immediate establishment of a presidential council comprising both civilian representatives and military members.

It seems, however, that the deeper concern of these political forces is the dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the next parliament. This extends to the fear that the Brotherhood will also enjoy a dominant position in the constituent assembly that will draft a new constitution.

Opponents of the road map encompass a broad spectrum of political groups and individuals, including presidential candidates, public figures, academics and an array of political parties. The problem faced by these objectors is that not one of their allegations rest on solid political and constitutional grounds.

Critics of their position fear however that if presidential elections are held prior to other developments, the country could be governed by a president with a mandate different from that of the new constitution.

Groups advocating a presidential council comprising civilian and military personalities also overlook the challenge of Egypt being ruled by a coalition presidency made up of divergent ideologies and positions. In addition, they ignore the enormous challenge of selecting civilian members to such a council.

Perhaps the weakest argument of opponents of the road map is their claim of a lack of preparedness of political parties for elections.

Most political groups have existed for years. It is only the Muslim Brotherhood that was a secret organisation subject to attacks by the security apparatuses. It is unclear how established political parties will be more ready in a few months time to do electoral battle with the Brotherhood than at present.

It is possible, however, that road map opponents may lead the military Council into easing its compliance with the road map, and to extending time-frames for political restructuring even further. However, if the transitional period drags on, and the country witnesses an escalation in political polarisation, no one can predict what measures the military might resort to.

ISLAMIC BLOC STRONGEST

Debates that have taken place in the media and in discussion forums on features of the transitional period have not yet filtered into the strategies of political parties which must define the features of a future parliament, constituent assembly and permanent constitution.

Parties which existed before the revolution are generally weak. The most prominent are the liberal Wafd Party, the leftist Hizb al Tagammu'



Anti-government protester carries a soldier at Tahrir Square in Cairo.

(striving to forge an alliance of liberal groupings) and the Nasserist Party. The National Democratic Party that dominated government from the 1970s has been disbanded following a judicial order.

A number of groups have also announced new political parties but they have failed to fulfil the minimum condition of 5 000 signatures from at least ten governorates to gain official recognition as a political party.

Only two parties easily met the 5 000 signatures requirement: the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, and the Al-Nur Party that represents a Salafi group from the Delta region. These parties will most likely be officially recognised soon. So it is only the Islamists who have managed to comply with this modest requirement considering Egypt's large population of about 83 million.

Egyptian politics is characterised by diverse voices and ideological tendencies. This suggests some significant trends.

First, the Islamic bloc support the road map. The Islamists will likely represent the largest bloc in the People's Assembly. It is impossible to envisage civilian rule without taking into account the Islamic political forces in Egypt. The ruling



Members of the liberal opposition Ghad Party, the Sixth of April Youth Movement, the Revolutionary Socialists, the Karama Party, the Muslim Brotherhood, and others chanting slogans against the extension of Emergency Laws.

council of armed forces has come to realise this.

The Muslim Brotherhood will contest parliamentary seats irrespective of the electoral system. It has emphasised, however, that it will not contest more than 49% of seats in the People's Assembly. It will forge alliances with other candidates in respect of the 20-30% remaining seats.

Since Egypt has not experienced fair elections in decades, it is difficult to anticipate what the Islamists will achieve. At this stage the only certainty is that the Islamic bloc will be the leading political force.

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

There is a high number of people who have publicly expressed their candidature for president.

These include Amr Moussa, secretary-general of the Arab League, Mohamed ElBaradei, a well-known opponent of the Mubarak regime and former chair of the International Atomic Energy Agency, prominent judge Hisham al-Bastawisi, the Nasserite politician and former member of parliament Hamdeen Sabahi,

Mubarak's former presidential rival Ayman Nur, and the senior Muslim Brotherhood leader Abd al-Munim Abu Al-Futuh.

Indications are that the most likely winners would be Moussa, ElBaradei or Abu al-Futuh. This, however, is not the final list.

In addition to Abu Al-Futuh, who enjoys the backing of the Islamic trend, there is the possible candidature of Islamic scholar and public personality Muhammad Salim Al-Awa. There are also a number of people close to the incumbent prime minister, Essam Sharaf, who feel he should stand.

Within the broad Islamic camp a consequence of additional presidential candidates will be that they represent the same political vision.

Conversely, a decision by the Islamic camp to throw their weight behind one candidate will bring the presidency for the first time in Egypt, which usually represents moderate Islam, within the broader Islamic world.

What seems certain, however, is that the new constitution will curtail presidential powers - this after the president has enjoyed near-absolute power for over half a century.

WHERE WILL TRANSITION LEAD?

If opponents of the road map become dominant, the transition will be prolonged and political polarisation could deepen. It is then conceivable that the idea might emerge in the ranks of young military officers that political authority should be vested in the army in a new guise.

However, the delicate balance of power between political forces makes this unlikely. This is in part because of the dominant call for a rapid transition from military rule in the Egyptian streets. But it is also because it is difficult to imagine that the military would make any attempt to re-establish political control. The possibility, however, should not be dismissed.

What is certain is that there is an urgent need to resolve the political status of the military and what role it should play in the affairs of state and public life.

The military's role will be clarified through the new constitution, and through legislation. People's impatience for this to happen is motivated by the desire to safeguard the civilian character of the future state and system of government. It is also necessary to prevent infiltration of the military into political leadership or attempts by politicians to use the army for their own interests.

The polarisation in political debate will probably continue for some time. It is only likely to diminish when Egyptians elect members to the People's Assembly, approve the constitution, choose a president, and until clarity is reached on the role of new institutions of government based on leaders' accommodation of diversity and political pluralism.

It is crucial that there is no escalation of political polarisation so as to prevent the transitional period becoming more complicated than it currently is. ^{LB}