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Egypt: Heading for more turbulence

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's fight for life during a key stage in his country's troubled transition, is unlikely to influence the course of events. Egypt's military rulers are battling it out with the Muslim Brotherhood and proponents of political and economic reforms in a decisive phase of Egypt's effort to move from autocracy to a more democratic state.

Commentary

Egypt's former president Hosni Mubarak was fighting for his life this week as the country's electoral committee postponed announcing the results of the presidential run-off between Ahmed Shafiq, a former air force general and last prime minister under Mubarak, and Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi. With both candidates claiming victory, irrespective of whoever emerges victorious, the outcome of the election promises to increase volatility and unrest rather than put Egypt back on a path towards political stability and economic recovery.

Victory for Shafiq would leave the Brotherhood feeling robbed of its electoral gains, while the youth and militant soccer fan groups who drove last year's mass protests that ousted Mr. Mubarak after 30 years in office, would feel that their revolt had been hijacked. Eighteen months of transitory military rule have already taught them that overthrowing the head of state is a far cry from uprooting an entrenched political system. The problem of the youth and soccer fan groups is that while Egypt's armchair activists, the country's silent majority, largely long for change, they may well opt for stability in the short run rather than the volatility, unrest and violence that pushing for real change would likely involve.

The joker in the pack is the Muslim Brotherhood, a cautious political movement that has proven to be inclined to compromise rather than rock the boat. The Brotherhood, like Shafiq has declared victory in the presidential run-off and has threatened a second popular revolt if the electoral commission fails to confirm this. The Brotherhood has already called for mass protests on Cairo's Tahrir Square against what it sees as the military's usurpation of power. Unlike the youth and soccer fan groups, the Brotherhood still has the power to bring large numbers of its followers on to the streets.

Turning confrontational

A Morsi victory however would not make the situation in Egypt any less volatile. The ruling Supreme Council of

the Armed Forces (SCAF) in a series of moves in the past week has effectively neutered the incoming president by declaring that he would only be in office until a new parliament is elected and a new constitution promulgated. The military council dissolved Egypt's first freely elected, post Mubarak people's assembly after the Constitutional Court declared the election of one third of its members unconstitutional. SCAF further issued an annex to the current constitution giving it a significant role in the drafting of a new constitution, depriving the new president of the right to initiate new legislation and stripping him of control of the defence budget and the military.

If the toppling of Mubarak was relatively bloodless compared to the overthrow of Libyan leader Moammar Qaddafi and the brutal 15-month old struggle to depose Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, the next phase in the battle for Egypt's future threatens to be far more confrontational. The military last year championed the protesters' cause because that allowed it to protect its political, economic and social interests.

The rise of the deep state

Those interests are now at stake as the military is pitted against the protesters, the Brotherhood and others seeking to curb the military's powers and return it to the barracks. The military has, since Mubarak's fall, refrained from reforming the interior ministry and the security forces that were the brutal enforcers of the former president's regime. It recently declared its right to make arbitrary arrests in what many see as a return of the police state. In doing so, the military has focused attention on the Egyptian deep state -- a network of vested political, military and business interests -- similar to the one in Turkey that took decades to uproot.

The return of the police state, the emasculation of the presidency and the resurrection of the interior ministry in the old regime's mould pits the military not only against the Brotherhood, the country's foremost political force, but also against the ultras, Egypt's fearless, street-battle hardened group of militant soccer fans who have years of experience in confronting the security forces and for whom an unreconstructed interior ministry has the effect of waving a red cloth at a bull.

Also sharpening the battle lines is the statement by military officials to state-owned newspaper Al Ahram that it would not allow the Brotherhood to take power. The paper quoted a military source as saying that the military would only return to the barracks once "a balanced political process" had been achieved, a code word for a system that guarantees the military's sway over politics as well as its economic privileges and social perks. The source justified the military's position in nationalist terms by portraying the Brotherhood as a pawn of the United States and the European Union.

A Morsi victory gives reformers a chance to fight for greater accountability, transparency and freedom from within the system. However, like a Shafiq victory, it is unlikely to make the transition in Egypt any less volatile. Nor will the outcome of the presidential run-off transform Cairo's Tahrir Square any time soon from being a focal point for political agitation to simply functioning as a traffic circle. In the unfolding battle, Mubarak dead or alive has become a side event in a show that threatens to be messy and potentially violent.

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