Egypt News - Revolution and Aftermath

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Egypt, the most populous country in the Arab world, erupted in mass protests in January 2011, as the revolution in Tunisia inflamed decades worth of smoldering grievances against the heavy-handed rule of President Hosni Mubarak. After 18 days of angry protests and after losing the support of the military and the United States, Mr. Mubarak resigned on Feb. 11, ending 30 years of autocratic rule, as the military stepped forward and pushed him from office.

The rapid fall of Mr. Mubarak in the face of protests that united young liberal demonstrators and the Muslim Brotherhood was the capstone event of the so-called Arab Spring, inspiring demonstrators in Libya, Syria and elsewhere.

But nine months later, as Egyptians began voting in the first parliamentary elections since Mr. Mubarak's fall, the future of the revolution was anything but clear.

Initially, the military had been seen as the linchpin of the transition to a more democratic regime. It was the institution Islamists hoped would steer the country to early elections that they were poised to dominate. Liberals regarded it as a hedge against Islamist power. And the Obama administration considered it a partner that it hoped would help secure American interests.

But in the months that followed, growing numbers of secular Egyptians wondered if what had happened was a popular revolution or a military coup — whether they had traded one military regime for another, one that would perhaps govern in partnership with the Brotherhood.

The military, which ruled through an 18-member council of its top leaders, did suspend some unpopular provisions of the constitution, but left in place the hated "state of emergency" laws" and cracked down on continuing demonstrations. It said it would hand over legislative powers after a parliamentary election in the fall, and that executive powers would be transferred after a presidential election that would follow. But doubts quickly began to grow about the military's commitment to the ideals of the revolution, with protests flaring into violence periodically.

In October, members of the military council said they planned to retain full control of the Egyptian government even after the election of a new Parliament. The legislature will remain in a subordinate role similar to Mr. Mubarak's former Parliament, they said, with the military council appointing the prime minister and cabinet. It threatened to delay presidential elections until 2013, and seemed to be working to guarantee itself a permanent special status in any new constitution, outside of civilian control.

In November, demonstrators once again seized Tahrir Square. When the military attacked the protesters the next day, public anger exploded, bringing tens of thousands into the street and setting off days of street battles that left 40 dead and about 2,000 wounded.

The military agreed to name a new civilian cabinet, led by a "technocrat" prime minister rather than a politician, and to speed up the transition to civilian rule, with a new constitution and a presidential election no later than June 2012.

The agreement, reached after a meeting between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood in a session that was boycotted by most other political parties, would allow the first round of Parliamentary voting to go ahead — the top priority of the Brotherhood, which was seen as likely to dominate the new body. But it would also leave the civilian government reporting to the military — effectively a continuation of what amounts to martial law in civilian clothes.

It was jeered by the vast crowds of protesters when it was announced, and the Obama administration called for the ruling council to hand over power. But the military hardened its stance.

The council's top officer, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, declared that "the position of the armed forces will remain as it is — it will not change in any new constitution." At the same time, the generals have set a political timetable calling for the Parliament to be seated in March and disbanded perhaps as early as July.





There were scattered calls by liberal parties for a boycott of the elections, and widespread complaints about a convoluted and opaque voting system that seemed almost doomed to lack credibility. But unexpectedly large crowds turned out to vote, with many saying they had cast their ballots to reclaim the promise of their revolution, even as the ruling generals said they intended to share little power with the new Parliament.

Recent Developments

- **Nov. 28** Defying expectations of chaos and violence, millions of voters turned out at dawn to cast their votes in Egypt's first parliamentary election since the ouster of Hosni Mubarak in February.
- **Nov. 25** The military appointed a politician from the Mubarak era to head a new cabinet, potentially hardening the lines between the interim military rulers and protesters demanding their exit. At the same time, the Obama administration urged the generals to transfer power immediately to a civilian government "empowered with real authority."
- **Nov. 24** New divisions in the Muslim Brotherhood appeared, as a senior leader hinted that it might walk away from a deal struck with Egypt's interim military rulers, reflecting signs of confusion and hesitation as the Brotherhood's most viable bid for power in eight decades has become tangled in the uncertainty and anger gripping Egypt's streets.
- **Nov. 23** Egypt careened into another day of crisis with no end in sight as thousands of people occupying Tahrir Square rejected a deal struck by the military and the Muslim Brotherhood. Officials said that 31 people had died since the unrest began last week.
- **Nov. 22** Despite an increasingly lethal crackdown, a crowd of well over 100,000 filled Tahrir Square in Cairo and battled with the police in nearby streets for the fourth straight day. The ruling military council agreed to speed up the transition to civilian rule in a deal made with Islamist groups.
- **Nov. 21** After three days of increasingly violent demonstrations, Egypt's interim civilian government submitted its resignation to the country's ruling military council, bowing to the demands of the protesters and marking a crisis of legitimacy for the military-led government. The step was reported by Egyptian television, and it remained to be seen whether the military would accept or reject the offer of the resignation. The same day, the Health Ministry said that at least 23 people were killed in protests. Since Nov. 19, more than 1.500 people had been wounded, the ministry said.
- **Nov. 20** Egypt's interim military rulers battled a reinvigorated protest movement calling for its ouster, as thousands of demonstrators forced troops to retreat from Tahrir Square for a second night in a row.
- **Nov. 18** Tens of thousands of Islamists jammed Tahrir Square here to protest efforts by Egypt's military rulers to retain power, escalating a confrontation a week before the first parliamentary elections since Mr. Mubarak was deposed.
- **Nov. 16** The Obama administration has warned Egypt's military rulers that failure to move to civilian control could undermine the defining revolt of the Arab Spring.
- **Nov. 10** The question shadowing Egypt's parliamentary elections is whether a robust enough Parliament will emerge to challenge the military's 60-year grip on power.
- **Oct. 9** A demonstration by angry Christians in Cairo touched off a night of violent protests against the military council ruling Egypt, leaving 24 people dead and more than 200 wounded in the worst spasm of violence since the ouster of President Mubarak. The protest occurred against a backdrop of escalating tensions between Muslims and Coptic Christians, and appeared to catch fire because it was aimed squarely at the military council, at a moment when the military's delays in turning over power had led to a spike in public distrust of its authority.
- **Sept. 24** Egypt's military ruler, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, testified at the trial of his onetime patron and colleague, former President Hosni Mubarak, in a closed hearing that disappointed prosecutors who had hoped he would help determine whether the ousted Egyptian leader conspired to order the killing of unarmed demonstrators in his final days in power in February.
- **Sept. 12** Acknowledging a credibility crisis after it allowed a mob to invade the Israeli Embassy in Cairo, the military-led transitional government said that it would exploit a reviled "emergency law" allowing extra-judicial detentions as part of a new crackdown on disruptive protests. This marked an abrupt reversal for the military council, which had promised to eliminate the law, which had been considered emblematic of Mr. Mubarak's authoritarian rule.



Background — Before the Revolution

Egypt is a heavyweight in Middle East diplomacy, in part because of its peace treaty with Israel, and as a key ally of the United States. The country, often the fulcrum on which currents in the region turn, also has one of the largest and most sophisticated security forces in the Middle East.

Mr. Mubarak has been in office since the assassination of Anwar el-Sadat on Oct. 16, 1981, whom he served as vice president. Until the recent unrest, he had firmly resisted calls to name a successor. He had also successfully negotiated complicated issues of regional security, solidified a relationship with Washington, maintained cool but correct ties with Israel and sharply suppressed Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism — along with dissent in general.

The government for decades maintained what it calls an Emergency Law, passed first in 1981 to combat terrorism after the assassination of Mr. Sadat. The law allows police to arrest people without charge, detain prisoners indefinitely, limit freedom of expression and assembly, and maintain a special security court.

In 2010, the government promised that it would only use the law to combat terrorism and drug trafficking, but terrorism was defined so broadly as to render that promise largely meaningless, according to human rights activists and political prisoners.

From Apathy to Anger

While Mr. Mubarak's regime had become increasingly unpopular, the public long seemed mired in apathy. For years, the main opposition to his rule appeared to be the Muslim Brotherhood, which was officially banned but still commanded significant support.

In 2010, speculation rose as to whether Mr. Mubarak, who underwent gall bladder surgery that year and appeared increasingly frail, would run in the 2011 elections or seek to install his son Gamal as a successor. Mr. ElBaradei, the former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, publicly challenged Mr. Mubarak's autocratic rule, but the Mubarak political machine steamrolled its way to its regular lopsided victory in a parliamentary vote.

The anger fueling the street protests was not new. It had been seething beneath the surface for many years, exploding at times, but never before in such widespread, sustained fury. The grievances are economic, social, historic and deeply personal. Egyptians often speak of their dignity, which many said has been wounded by Mr. Mubarak's monopoly on power, his iron-fisted approach to security and corruption that has been allowed to fester. Even government allies and insiders have been quick to acknowledge that the protesters have legitimate grievances that need to be addressed.

In the last few years, Egypt has struggled through a seemingly endless series of crises and setbacks. The sinking of a ferry left 1,000 mostly poor Egyptians lost at sea, an uncontrollable fire gutted the historic Parliament building, terrorists attacked Sinai resorts, labor strikes affected nearly every sector of the work force and sectarian-tinged violence erupted.

And in nearly every case, the state addressed the issue as a security matter, deploying the police, detaining suspects, dispersing crowds. That was also true in 2010, even as evidence mounted of growing tension between Egypt's Muslim majority and a Christian minority that includes about 10 percent of the approximately 80 million Egyptians.

A Police State

Egypt's police bureaucracy reaches into virtually every aspect of public life here, and changing its ways is no easy task, everyone concedes. Police officers direct traffic and investigate murders, but also monitor elections and issue birth and death certificates and passports. Every day, 60,000 Egyptians visit police stations, according to the Interior Ministry. In a large, impoverished nation, the services the police provide give them wide — and, critics say, unchecked — power.

The Egyptian police have a long and notorious track record of torture and cruelty to average citizens. One case that drew widespread international condemnation involved a cellphone video of the police sodomizing a driver with a broomstick. In June 2010, Alexandria erupted in protests over the fatal beating by police of beating Khaled Said, 28. The authorities said he died choking on a clump of marijuana, until a photograph emerged of his bloodied face. In December 2010, a suspect being questioned in connection with a bombing was beaten to death while in police custody. Abuse is often perpetrated by undercover plainclothes officers like the ones who confronted Mr. Said, and either ordered or allowed by their superiors, the head investigators who sit in every precinct.





The government denies there is any widespread abuse and frequently blames rogue officers for episodes of brutality. Even so, for the past 10 years, officers from the police academy have attended a human rights program organized by the United Nations and the Interior Ministry.

A Stagnant Economy

On the economic front, Egypt's most important sources of income remain steady, with tourism the notable exception. The other pillars of the economy — gas and oil sales; Suez Canal revenues and remittances from workers abroad — are either stable or growing, according to Central Bank figures.

But those sources of income have accomplished little more than propping up an ailing economy. Over all, economic activity came to a standstill for months, with growth expected to tumble to under 2 percent in 2011 from a robust 7 percent in 2010. Official unemployment rates rose to at least 12 percent from 9 percent. Foreign investment is negligible.

Part of the blame for Egypt's economic malaise rests with the caretaker cabinet, which reports to the ruling military council. The ministers, mindful that several businessmen who served in the Mubarak government sit in jail on corruption convictions, are reluctant to sign off on new projects.

Military Rule

The ruling generals and their supporters argue that repeated demonstrations and strikes by unrepresentative activists are undermining all attempts to restore stability and the economy.

Activists accuse the generals of resurrecting the Mubarak playbook to stay in power. The military deploys draconian measures to silence critics, they say, banning strikes and singling out individual critics.

The surprise appearance of posters of the military's top officer, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, and the slogan "Egypt Above All" fueled widespread suspicions that the generals want him to be the fifth military president in a row since the armed forces seized Egypt's government in 1952. Presidential elections are likely to be at least a year away.

The generals denied any connection to the campaign, but activists recognize that toppling Mr. Mubarak turned out to be the easy part and that they should have pushed harder for sweeping change while they had momentum.

Reading Questions:

Who controlled Egypt for decades?
Who rose up against his control last spring?

What were the revolutionary's criticisms and demands?
What impact did the Egyptian revolution have on the nation and the world?

Where was the center of the Egyptian revolution? (Identify the city and the specific location in that city.)

When did the revolution begin? Describe the general course of events from the first sparks to today.

Why were revolutionaries suddenly ready to risk their livelihoods and even their very lives to rise up against their government?

How is the country adjusting in the aftermath of revolution? Describe the state of Egypt today, including the government.



