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Analysis: Egypt military in power grab amid unrest

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After two weeks of protests, Egypt's military now has four of its own in the nation's top government posts and thousands of its soldiers providing security in the streets.

The military, already the country's most powerful institution, has taken advantage of the unrest to solidify its authority, using a combination of force and public relations to deliver what amounts to a soft coup in a country where it is widely viewed as the ultimate guarantor of national interests.

Vice President Omar Suleiman, a former army general and chief of intelligence, issued a veiled threat that the army could go even further. He warned that an outright coup could take place if the protests by tens of thousands continue in Cairo's central Tahrir Square.

It was a strong hint that the military could move to impose martial law and snuff out the protests, which have grown since Jan. 25, demanding the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak and the implementation of sweeping democratic reforms.

"We cannot bear this for a long time," Suleiman told a round-table briefing of newspaper editors on Tuesday. "There must be an end to this crisis as soon as possible."

The mention of a coup left the circle of editors in stunned silence, media reports of the meeting said.

Suleiman may have been bluffing, but some analysts believe the military could be left with a limited number of options, especially if the strikes and protests grow in number or intensity.

"If this thing continues or grows, the military will have to decide whether to stage a coup and order a crackdown," said Michael W. Hanna, an Egypt expert at the New York-based Century Foundation. "In the meantime, the situation will not change unless the army decides to change it."

Holding so much sway is not new for the Egyptian military.

It gave the country all four of its presidents since young army officers seized power in a 1952 coup that toppled the monarchy. It has over the past six decades lowered its public profile, but nevertheless remains Egypt's most powerful institution.

The recipient of \$1.3 billion in annual U.S. aid, it has in recent years ventured into business, strengthening its hand with lucrative government contracts in construction, road building and food production. For decades, its generals have been given key government posts after retirement, including serving in the Cabinet, as heads of government departments, provincial governors and mayors.

"Any successor to Mubarak who does not enjoy the support of the senior military brass will be actively undermined and thwarted by the generals," said Augustus Richard Norton, a Middle East expert from Boston University.

The military's stealth offensive to take control of the country is multi-tiered.

For now, Mubarak, a former air force commander, still stands at the top of the regime, at least nominally. The Egyptian leader rejected calls for his ouster, insisting he serve out his term but said he would not run again for president in September elections.

Suleiman, a longtime Mubarak confidant, has become the face of the regime since Mubarak appointed him as vice president soon after the protests erupted. It was the first time Mubarak had named a vice president — and therefore presumed successor — since he came to power in 1981.

Suleiman has taken the lead in efforts to get through the crisis, creating a road map for reforms and trying, so far unsuccessfully, to draw the disparate protest organizers into participating in it.

The protesters are deeply wary, fearing Suleiman will use negotiations on reform simply as a cover to force through cosmetic changes that preserve the regime's hold without bringing real democracy.

The vice president has fed that suspicion by repeatedly saying Egypt is not ready for democracy.

"We have two options to resolve this crisis: either dialogue and understanding, or a coup," Suleiman sternly warned in the meeting with editors. "A coup can be either beneficial or detrimental, but it could lead to further irrational steps and we want to avoid reaching that point."

In a sign of the military's solidarity with Mubarak, he said the protesters' blunt calls for Mubarak to "leave" were an insult to the armed forces.

"Mubarak is a hero of the October war," he said, alluding to the 1973 Arab-Israeli war when Mubarak served as air force commander. "The military institution takes care of its October heroes and will never forget or relinquish its history."

Egypt's foreign minister, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, warned Wednesday there would be chaos if Mubarak stepped down immediately and the opposition tried to form an unconstitutional government.

"Then maybe the armed forces would feel compelled to intervene in a more drastic manner," he said in an interview with "PBS NewsHour." "Do we want the armed forces to assume the responsibility of stabilizing the nation through imposing martial law, and army in the streets?"

So far, the military's two-week deployment in the streets — the first since it quelled a revolt by conscript policemen more than two decades ago — has projected the image of an institution that is preserving stability. Its pledge not to use force against the protesters won the hearts of many, though some remain wary the soldiers surrounding their protest camp could eventually move to clear them.

Its commander, Defense Minister Hussein Tantawi, was rarely seen in public before the crisis. But in a symbolic but significant move, Tantawi, a serving field marshal who is also the deputy prime minister, was the most senior regime official to visit Tahrir Square, talking briefly with protesters before driving away in a convoy of SUVs.

"I think the military is trying to firmly guide Egypt's transition," said Jon Alterman of the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. "The military has played a

public and prominent role in steadying the events and it does not seem inclined to turn over the reins of power any time soon."

Rounding out the new quadrumvirate running the country is Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq, a former air force officer like Mubarak. He heads a new government put together by Mubarak, has held talks of his own with the opposition and, in a bid to ensure the loyalty of Egyptians, ordered a 15 percent salary increase for some 6 million civil servants at a time when the economy has been dealt a severe blow by the unrest.

Taking advantage of the political vacuum created by the massive demonstrations, the military swiftly moved to settle old scores with two main rival groups. One consists of the mogul businessmen-politicians who have over the past decade rallied around Mubarak's powerful son Gamal to dominate society, causing friction with the military's own economic interests.

The second is Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party, in which the younger Mubarak rapidly rose through the ranks to become its de facto leader.

Nurtured by the two Mubaraks, these two groups have risen to such a position of power in recent years that they posed a credible threat to the military's longtime domination, according to the analysts and a senior NDP official who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

Shafiq has purged the businessmen who served in the administration he replaced and the attorney-general is now investigating three of them for alleged corruption.

The NDP official said the ruling party has been significantly weakened after its six-man leadership, which included Gamal Mubarak and a number of his father's longtime aides, resigned and a group of little-known members replaced them.

The official defended the party's record, saying that, allegations of corruption aside, the party was trying to "build a civilian state." But now, he said, "we are in the middle of a conflict between the military and all other forces, including the party and the businessmen."