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Egypt: Revolution or Coup?

By Jim Lobe

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Four days after the stunning departure of Hosni Mubarak from the presidential palace in Cairo, analysts are still trying to determine whether his ouster represents a revolution heralding the advent of democratic governance or a coup d'état staged by the already dominant military.

Despite the media euphoria, skepticism among Egypt specialists about the military's intentions has been running pretty high here since Mubarak's resignation.

Jon Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, for example, warned the "rise of the Military Command Council (MCC)" could result in a "huge step backward," while Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former CIA officer now with the neoconservative Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, predicted that the army "will test to see how much autocracy (and wealth) it can keep in its hands."

During a White House press conference Tuesday, however, U.S. President Barack Obama indicated he was encouraged by the steps taken to date by the MCC, to which Mubarak ceded his powers.

"[O]bviously there's still a lot of work to be done in Egypt itself, but what we've seen so far is positive," he said, noting that opposition representatives who met with two senior officers Monday "felt [the Council] is serious about moving towards free and fair elections."

"[S]o far at least, we're seeing the right signals coming out of Egypt," he added.

But most independent analysts are not so certain where the five commanders who make up the Council want to take the country.

“I agree the military is sending the right signals, but the proof of the pudding will be in the eating,” said James Zogby, a veteran Middle East expert who heads the Arab American Institute (AAI). “This was an uprising that toppled the president; it didn’t topple the state, and the military is still the state.”

Many analysts believe the military is prepared to make some concessions but will try to retain as much control as it can.

“Even the most senior members of the Mubarak-affiliated, authoritarian-oriented old guard know there is no turning back and that nothing resembling a façade-like democracy would pass muster publicly,” according to Wayne White of the Middle East Institute (MEI) and a former senior State Department Middle East analyst.

“However, at the same time, it is difficult to believe that those control-oriented officers currently in charge have not engaged in some internal debate over the past several days concerning how much they might be able to concede – but perhaps also hold back – in an effort to split the difference between a fully functioning and transparent democracy and their own possibly more constricted vision of an ‘orderly’ or more ‘stable’ Egypt,” he added in an email exchange with IPS.

So far, the Council, whose titular head is a long-time Mubarak loyalist, Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, has issued a series of communiqués abolishing parliament, suspending the constitution, and pledging to hold elections within six months.

On Tuesday, it convened a committee of jurists charged with amending the constitution within 10 days. The amended charter would then be subject to ratification in a referendum in two months’ time, according to the Council.

While these are the steps welcomed by Obama, the Council has not yet complied with a series of other demands made by opposition forces that have come together in a broad-based coalition called Activists for Democracy.

They include most notably the immediate lifting of the 30-year-old emergency law, the release of thousands of political prisoners, and the investigation and prosecution of police and security officials believed to be responsible for the deaths of some 300 people during the 18 days of popular demonstrations that culminated in Mubarak’s ouster.

The coalition’s demand for the inclusion of civilian technocrats and representatives of the democracy movement in the transition government has also been ignored by the Council.

“It appears that the military has the right intent for the end-game, but it doesn’t want to cede control over managing that process,” said Joel Rubin, deputy director of the National Security Network (NSN) who specialized on Egypt during his foreign-service career.

“This is a key sticking point, because, if they wait too long [to bring in civilians], there’s likely to be a lot of uneasiness about whether they just want to maintain control of the country,” he added, noting as well that the speed with which the constitution is to be amended under the Council’s timetable was also troubling given the complexity of the challenges.

By all accounts, Washington has an important role to play in the transition process given the two militaries’ close relationship built up since the signing of the 1979 Camp David Accords.

Indeed, Egypt’s most-senior military officers, including Chief of Staff Gen. Sami Hafez Anan, who many believe is the most powerful member of the Council, were visiting Washington for annual consultations with their U.S. counterparts when the political crisis began in Cairo Jan. 25.

Over the last 30 years, Washington has provided some \$40 billion in military assistance and training with the result that the Egyptian armed forces have become almost entirely dependent on U.S. equipment, particularly for its more-advanced weapons systems, such as the F-16 warplane, Apache helicopters, and Harpoon anti-ship missiles.

“These relationships provide a bond with Egypt’s armed forces that no other country possesses,” according to Charles Dunne, a Mideast specialist also at MEI who served as political-military officer in the U.S. embassy in Cairo 10 years ago.

Threats by influential lawmakers in Congress to cut Washington’s annual \$1.3 billion military-aid package reportedly played an important role in backing up the administration’s repeated public – and the Pentagon’s private – appeals to the military not to resort to violence in dealing with the protesters.

“This is the payoff, at just the right moment, for 30 years of U.S. military assistance to Egypt: the Egyptian military will be loathe to jeopardize this vital relationship by thwarting a transition to democracy or continuing to wield power indefinitely,” Dunne wrote Monday, suggesting that Washington offer more aid as an inducement to the army to follow through on its democratic promises or threaten to reduce assistance if it fails to do so.

On the other hand, it is not yet clear that the administration is unhappy with continued military control of the transition process, particularly as it tries to reassure Israel and other U.S. allies in the region – which clearly prefer the military to remain in charge, at least of foreign and defense policies.

“It’s difficult to know where they’ll come down on this,” said Zogby. “They’re pretty happy that the military said it will uphold the peace treaty [with Israel]. There are policies, such as Gaza or co-operation in rendition [of terrorist suspects], that the military will continue to embrace that a civilian-led, more-democratic government might not.”