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Constitution pits SCAF against Islamists yet again

Amr Eman

RECENT statements by a member of the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) about the next Parliament and the new Constitution is stirring up a hornet's nest, pitting the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist organisation expected to dominate the next parliament, against the council.

"The SCAF has no intention of abiding by democracy or the will of the people," said Mohamed el-Beltagui, a senior Brotherhood member.

"The party with a majority in parliament has the right to choose the members of the constitutional assembly who will write the new Constitution," he added.

SCAF member Mukhtar el-Mulla said in a recent interview with some foreign reporters that the next parliament will not be a reflection of the true power of Egyptian society, which is why MPs will be able to choose only 60 per cent of the members of the constitutional assembly.

He added that an advisory presidential council, a committee of representatives of the nation's political powers, will choose the remaining 40 per cent of the members of the assembly.

But, confident of their ability to win a parliamentary majority, the Muslim Brotherhood vociferously opposes this suggestion of the military council, pointing out that neither the council nor its advisory presidential committee is elected by the people.

"This is why they do not have the right to choose the members of the constitutional assembly," said Mahmoud Ghozlan, the spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party. "This is unconstitutional and illegal."

The Muslim Brotherhood has managed to win more than 40 per cent of votes in the first round of the parliamentary elections.

Some people expect them to be the dominating force in parliament, together with the more radical Salafists who have also managed to win a sizeable portion of the votes in the first round.

There are fears, however, that, if the Salafists control parliament, they will also manipulate the writing of the Constitution, which might harm some social groups, including the nation's Christians, who account for around 10 per cent of the country's 80 million population.

Some Islamist figures have been making incendiary statements that have done nothing but make these people feel pessimistic about and afraid of the prospect of an Islamist takeover.

One of these Islamists is Sheikh Abdel-Moneim el-Shahat, a spokesman for the Salafists in Alexandria.

Apart from branding creative writers like Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz as 'immoral', el-Shahat says Christians do not have the right to be in positions of power in an Islamic country.

SCAF member Mamdouh Shahin tried to calm the Islamists down on Friday by saying that the next parliament will have absolute authority over forming the assembly that will write the Constitution. But this seems to have done nothing to appease these Islamists.

Some Islamist leaders have already called on the people to take to the streets to protest against what they claimed was the desire of the ruling military council to overlook their votes in the elections.

But, as the temperature between the Islamists and the military council rises over the Constitution, moderate Egyptians, the people who want Egypt to stay a country for everybody, are feeling totally ignored.

"We are stuck in the middle between the SCAF and the Islamists," said Amr Hashem Rabie, a political analyst with local think-tank Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies.



Back to normal: Protesters helping ease traffic in Tahrir Square yesterday as it was reopened after 20 days of blockage. Seen also are some tents in the middle of the square, where few protesters are still staging a sit-in.

Revolutionaries re-open Tahrir

Ashraf Madbouli

AFTER being blocked for 20 days, Tahrir Square was open to traffic yesterday, after protesters decided to voluntarily evacuate their tents and remove metal barriers in the streets leading to the iconic square.

The protesters helped direct the traffic in the square as Mohamed Mahmoud Street, which leads to the headquarters of the Ministry of Interior, was kept closed because of the barricade erected by the Army.

A few protesters remained in their tents in the roundabout in the middle of the square and outside the Mogamma, the mammoth administrative building in the square's southern part.

The protesters were holding aloft a big banner reading: 'The Square is open at the orders of the revolutionaries'.

Protesters who held discussions early yesterday were divided on whether to open the square or continue with a 20-day sit-in marred by bloody clashes with police near the Interior Ministry, where dozens were killed.

"We have temporarily suspended the sit-in in Tahrir Square until the parliamentary elections are over," one protester, helping ease the traffic in the square, told *The Egyptian Gazette*.

He added that most of the demands of the protesters have been met, especially setting a deadline for the transfer of power and the resignation of the Government.

"However, some people have decided to move the sit-in to outside the Cabinet headquarters in protest against the appointment of [Kamal] el-Ganzouri, who belongs to the Mubarak era," another protester shouted, as he was carrying a small tent towards the Cabinet building.

Some political groups have been staging a sit-in outside the Cabinet building in Majlis el-Shaab Street in downtown Cairo, blocking the road and preventing el-Ganzouri from getting in.

Newly appointed Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim told reporters yesterday he will 'very soon' hold discussions with the protesters about opening the road to the Cabinet.

"God willing, el-Ganzouri will enter the Cabinet headquarters soon,"

Ibrahim said, without setting a date.

El-Ganzouri said yesterday that the first Cabinet meeting will be held within two days, although he didn't say where.

He had said in press remarks on Friday that the Government was able to disperse protesters outside the Cabinet in just a quarter of an hour.

"However, I will never accept using violence against them," stressed el-Ganzouri, who urged the protesters in Tahrir and at the Cabinet building to end their sit-in.

Fears erupted that the few protesters remaining in the square could be targeted by either thugs or security forces in an attempt to clear the square.

Meanwhile, Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar Ahmed el-Tayyeb has appealed to the protesters outside the Cabinet headquarters to give the newly appointed Government time to work and attend to the country's economic needs.

El-Tayyeb, in a press release, urged the protesters to give el-Ganzouri's Government the opportunity to "proceed with its responsibilities", calling on them to "put Egypt's interests first".

Quick read

US Senator calls on SCAF Chief

SENATOR John Kerry, the head of the Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee, yesterday said the US administration welcomes the results of the first round of Egypt's first post-revolution parliamentary elections, adding that Washington is in favour of the right of Egyptian voters to choose their civil leaders without any restrictions.

Kerry, who met earlier yesterday with the Chairman of the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, and newly appointed Prime Minister Kamal el-Ganzouri, said the United States wholeheartedly welcomes democratisation in Egypt.

The US Senator later visited the premises of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party in Moqattam, eastern Cairo, after meeting with Tantawi and el-Ganzouri. There, he met with officials from the Islamist party that is expected to win the majority in the first post-Hosni Mubarak parliament.

The US administration has previously outlined its readiness to co-operate with Islamists in Egypt if they manage to win a majority in parliament.

Diplomacy to restore Gaza calm

EGYPT'S Ambassador to the Palestinian Authority said yesterday that Cairo is working to restore calm in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel, after violence escalated following an Israeli attack on a top Palestinian activist.

Ambassador Yasser Othman told the Middle East News Agency: "Egypt is trying to stop Israeli violations and attacks and reinstate a ceasefire, which Israel annulled when it assassinated Essam and Sobhi Batash."

Othman said Egypt is "completely opposed to Israeli violations and operations in the Gaza Strip", adding that Cairo is in contact with all the parties concerned to prevent a deterioration in the situation in Gaza and protect the Palestinian people's rights.

Presidential hopeful files case at ICC

PRESIDENTIAL hopeful Abdullah al-Ashaal said yesterday he had filed a suit at the Rome-based International Criminal Court (ICC) against police officers allegedly involved in killing young people during last month's protests in Tahrir Square.

Al-Ashaal, one of more than 10 candidates who have said they will run in a presidential race that is likely to take place in mid-2012, said that he had approached the ICC about trying the police officers behind the shooting of more than 30 people.

Former chief of staff quits presidential race

FORMER Chief of Staff General Magdi Hatatta said yesterday that after reviewing the current political situation he has decided not to run in the forthcoming presidential elections.

Hatatta, however, called on the people to vote for candidates who will serve their interests and work for Egypt's welfare after the January 25 Revolution, the official Middle East News Agency (MENA) reported.

Weather

Cairo	..... 20	10
Alexandria	..... 20	13
Mersa Matruh	..... 19	14
Sharm el-Sheikh	..... 23	15
Hurghada	..... 21	13
Aswan	..... 24	10
Luxor	..... 23	08
Port Said	..... 19	14
Suez	..... 20	07
Taba	..... 17	03
Siwa	..... 20	06

World weather on Page 4

Nobel winner blasts lack of support for Yemen uprising

OSLO (AFP) - The international community has not provided enough support for the uprising in Yemen, "Arab Spring" activist Tawakkol Karman lamented after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo yesterday.

The activist who spent months camped out in Sanaa's Change Square and helped push 33-year-ruler Ali Abdullah Saleh to agree to step down early next year said the struggle for democracy in her country "did not get the international understanding, support or attention of the other revolutions in the region."

"This should haunt the world's conscience," said the 32-year-old mother of three in her speech after

becoming the youngest person to ever win the Peace Prize and the first Arab woman to receive a Nobel in any category.

An English translation of her speech given in Arabic called on the Nobel Peace Prize, which has told us a lot about the virtues of democracy and good governance, to support people struggling for freedom.

She hinted the West should not fear that the "Arab Spring" uprisings that have swept through the Middle East with demands for democracy will lead to instability and extremism, saying that "all of that is just hard labour during the birth of democracy which requires support and assistance, not fear and caution."

Her comments came as Yemen's national unity government, led by the opposition, was sworn in yesterday to lead Yemen for a three-month transition period until Saleh formally steps down in February.

Karman shared the 2011 honour with Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Liberian "peace warrior" Leymah Gbowee for their "struggle for human rights in general and the struggle of women for equality and peace in particular," in the words of Nobel Committee Chairman Thorbjorn Jagland.

They each received a gold medal, diploma and a third of the 10 million Swedish kronor (\$1.48 million, 1.08 million euros) prize money.



Smiling Tawakkol: The 2011 Nobel Peace Prize laureates, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (R), Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee (L) and Yemeni activist Tawakkol Karman (C) posing with their medals and certificates during the Nobel Peace Prize award ceremony at the City Hall in Oslo yesterday.

CBE Governor: Foreign reserves safe

Staff report

EGYPT'S foreign reserves are still in the safe area, Governor of the Central Bank of Egypt (CBE) Farouk el-Oqda told reporters yesterday, stressing the need for restoring security and stability as a 'key to push the nation's economy forward'.

Emerging from a meeting with Prime Minister Kamal el-Ganzouri, el-Oqda added that the parliamentary elections were the first step towards stability that

would help economy, production and investment.

"The foreign reserves stay at \$20.2 billion. This is still within safe limits," el-Oqda was quoted as saying by the official Middle East News Agency (MENA).

The CBE unexpectedly raised interest rates two weeks ago for the first time in more than two years. The institution was forced to act after using its foreign reserves to defend the local currency, which has been weakened by street violence and political chaos in the country.

The ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) late in November renewed the term of el-Oqda for further four years. The governor has held the post since December 2003.

Meanwhile, Egypt's inflation accelerated on rising food prices in November to reach an annual rate of 9.1 from 7.1 per cent in October, figures on a state website showed yesterday.

The urban consumer price index for November was 120.4 versus 119.2 in October and 110.4 in November

2010, Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS) said.

Food and beverage costs, the biggest component in the consumer price index, increased at an annual rate of 11.6 per cent in November, compared with 8.7 per cent a month earlier.

Last month, Egypt's central bank said that the risk of higher inflation prompted it to raise benchmark interest rates for the first time in three years, even as the economy slows.

Foreign reserves have plunged from US\$36 billion at the end of 2010 to about \$20 billion at the end of November in the wake of the uprising that unseated former President Hosni Mubarak. Subsequent political turmoil sent some investors and tourists packing.

The data showed that the urban consumer price index increased due to rising prices of commodities, such as those of butane gas cylinders, which rose at an annual rate of 38 per cent. Tobacco rose by 41 per cent.