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Ahmed Al-Nadeem

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Views: The Military and Politics in Egypt: Towards Understanding the Relationship and Analysing Power Dynamics

Ahmed Al-Nadeem

This article seeks to investigate the factors behind the Egyptian military's expanding political role. This, by definition, implies the need to understand the relationship between the military and governance in Egypt, which can be summarized in the military's desire to consolidate its guardianship role over political decision-making, to preserve its economic projects, and to ensure officers will enjoy perpetual impunity from prosecution. The article traces the main junctures along the trajectory of the army's relationship with successive regimes in Egypt, from 1952 until the present day. It also analyses the determinants of this complicated relationship between the military and politics, seeking to highlight the army's main internal and external strengths and sources of power.

Introduction: The Evolving Political Influence of the Military in Egypt

The military's ascendance to power in Egypt was clearly signified by the Free Officers Movement's coup in 1952, under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Free Officers abolished the monarchy, declared the republic, and dissolved political parties. Many military commanders were appointed by the Free Officers to head ministries and governmental departments, including cultural departments, newspapers, and the television authority. The Free Officer's granted the public sector a larger role in directing the process of economic development. This led to a radical change in the power structure, albeit through the replacement of the old colonial regime's elite with a new military elite.¹

When Sadat came to power in 1970, and following his victory over the many centres of power in the regime, he began loosening the army's grip upon various state institutions. In that, he was aided with the desire to distance himself from the socialist legacy of his predecessor and open new venues with the West, be it on the political or military levels, as he accepted US military aid that accompanied the peace process with Israel.

On the economic front, Egypt's openness towards the West was evident in its economic liberalization policies and the growing role of the private sector, which led to the ascendancy of businessmen with close ties to the president, such as Osman Ahmed Osman. These business elites began competing with military elites over political and economic influence,² especially after the

state began limiting the military elite's influence in civilian life. Roles in Housing and Land Reclamation, for instance, were now no longer shouldered by the army.

During rule of President Hosni Mubarak, the army continued to retreat from the political foreground; a withdrawal that is evident in the complex conflict between the political regime, the military, and security apparatuses, in which each institution sought to have the upper hand over the other two.³ The state downsized its military budget, and Mubarak removed the charismatic, popular, and strong Minister of Defence, Mohamed Abu-Ghazala, in 1989. The latter had begun cultivating what would become a defining feature of the army - autonomy- through major projects including the National Service Projects, beside building housing and hospitals for army officers.⁴ Although the state and business-friendly cabinets have sought to privatize the public sector since the 1990s, they have never attempted to sell the army's economic projects, which remained under the leadership of retired military commanders. These projects retained special legal and auditing privileges not afforded to public or private sector projects.⁵

After Mubarak stepped down following the January 2011 uprising, the army – under the title of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) - returned to the fore of the political arena once again as the provisional ruler of the country. Its influence, however, was curbed by the popular uprising and its aspirations to democratization and a civil state. Although SCAF wanted to add supra-constitutional rules at the time guaranteeing a distinguished position for the army in the political scene, these rules were struck down by the people and the main rival political groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. These rules were seen as a stepping-stone for military guardianship over the elected civilian authority.

Upon Mohamed Morsi's June 2012 ascendancy to the presidency, it appeared as if SCAF had chosen to withdraw from the political scene once again. Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, had removed the Minister of Defence and the Chief of Staff, then appointed the head of the Military Intelligence (and SCAF member) as the new Minister of Defence. Yet the claims of the Muslim Brotherhood at the time – that Morsi managed to put the army in check, winning a victory for the civilian authority - were soon found to be baseless. The army pushed back by marketing itself as a political actor above polarization – a ploy clearly demonstrated by the military's calls for societal dialogue, and its invitations to all actors to make peace and bridge the gaps between each other.⁶ Simultaneously, the Minister of Defence became increasingly visible, through his speeches and public talks.⁷ This led many political actors to find the military's return to the political stage as a natural progression of events, for the sake of fulfilling popular calls for early elections.⁸

The ouster of Morsi on the third of July 2013 was a decisive moment in the history of Egypt. The army returned once more to the stage of power, this time with the support of many groups and segments of society. Bolstered by the demonstrations calling for the army to be given a mandate to fight terrorism, on 26 July 2013, the army, in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior, began waging a war against the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies. At the same time, it opened dialogue with other political groups and parties, and the task of appointing the cabinet was granted to Hazem Al-Biblawy, a member of the Egyptian Social Democratic party.

After the ex-Minister of Defence Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took over the presidency in 2014, the army started tightening its grip on the state. Military commanders were appointed to many senior public positions and the army was given a wider scope for its economic activities.⁹ The sustainability of the army's political pre-eminence was ensured, very clearly and evidently, by the constitutional amendments of April 2019, which mandated the army's guardianship over the civil state. The amendments also confirmed the distinguished position of the military vis-à-vis other ministries, by allowing the military to approve the appointment of the minister of defence, in addition to giving it the mandate to prosecute civilians in military tribunals.

Determinants of the Military-Civilian State Relationship

The current relationship between the military and civilian state can be understood through an emphasis upon several prominent aspects of it: the ongoing consolidation of the army's economic empire; its far-reaching control over political decisions in the state; and the ability of military leaders and personnel to maintain impunity for all past violations.

Preserving the Economic Empire

During a seminar in 2012 concerning the post-revolution Parliament's demands for the military's economic activities to fall under parliamentary oversight – as such activities are funded by public money - General Mahmoud Nasr (the deputy Minister of Defence for Financial Affairs and SCAF member), said:

“This is not the state's money. It is the revenue of the Ministry of Defence from its projects. We will fight for our projects and this is a battle that we will not walk away from. This is the sweat and blood we shed for 30 years. We will not leave it to anyone to destroy. We will not allow others to come even close to the projects of the Armed Forces. This is hard work and we pay taxes for it. Anybody touching upon this subject is trespassing upon Egyptian National Security”.¹⁰

In spite of the vulgarity of the general's words, it indeed demonstrates the military's view of its economic projects. Through these projects, the military exploits its substantial mandates and capabilities into pure economic profit.¹¹ This is apparent in the use of vast stretches of desert land-controlled by the army for national security reasons - for the accrual of financial gain. It is also evident in the army's broad mandate in selling and running these lands, and amassing financial revenue in return.

The roots of the Egyptian military's economic empire can be traced to the army's need to continue providing for its personnel within a framework of shrinking financial resources. Decreasing state military expenditures since the 1979 peace treaty with Israel, combined with the global financial crisis of the mid-1980s, rendered it imperative for the military to seek extra income opportunities, together with bolstering its drive to become economically autonomous.

Year	Defence and National Security share in the state budget (in billion EGP)
2005/2006	15.62
2006/2007	17.32
2007/2008	19.19
2008/2009	21.76
2009/2010	22.83
2010/2011	25.39
2011/2012	25.47
2012/2013	27.52
2013/2014	30.94
2014/2015	39.27
2015/2016	43.27
2016/2017	47.13
2017/2018	51.86
2018/2019	59.36

(The development of Defence and National Security share in the budget, from 2005 to 2019)¹²

The army's entry into the market can be definitively signified by its establishment of the National Service Projects Organization (NSPO) through presidential decree 32/1979. The Organization aimed to provide partial self-sufficiency in the Armed Forces, and to provide for the local market as well.¹³ NSPO owns no less than 21 companies, working in various civilian sectors, from construction and land reclamation, to food production, cement, fertilizers, hotel services and security services, beside the Wataniya petrol stations spread across the country.

As the army competes with the private sector – seeking to monopolise the market with its companies holding an overstated share in the sector - it is also indubitably running a parallel economy, through which it can accumulate fortunes while maintaining its autonomy from any elected civilian authority.¹⁴

Military Guardianship over Political Decision-Making

After its ascent to the political stage in the post-January 2011 era, the army sought - at every possible opportunity - to solidify its exceptional position in Egypt's political landscape. By virtue of this elevated status, the army would be guaranteed guardianship over other political actors and clout over political decisions; or at a minimum it would be autonomous from any civilian authority and immune from interventions in its military and financial affairs.

The military's political strategy is made apparent by the latest round of constitutional amendments – especially Article 200 – that were pushed forward by the House of Representatives and went out to referendum in April 2019. Article 200 pertains to the function of the Armed Forces within the governance system. The article adds important tasks, under the title of “Protection of the constitution, democracy, and preservation of the pillars of the state and its civilian character,” which legitimates the military's role as a main player in governance. With the addition of Article 200, protecting national security is not the military's only role, it now also possesses guardianship over the state, currently and in the future. In other words, the military is now legally sanctioned to intervene in politics, even able to stage coups against elected regimes, under pretexts such as protecting the constitution, democracy and the civilian state. The military's constitutional guardianship is eerily reminiscent of the status of the military in other states, most notably Turkey until recently.

The trend of an increasing caretaking role for the military becomes even more apparent in the formation of the National Defence Council, which is the most senior entity mandated with guaranteeing state security. According to law 21/2014 issued by interim President Adly Mansour, army generals are still the majority-membership of this council.¹⁵ Besides the President, the Prime Minister, the Parliament Speaker, the General Intelligence Speaker, and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Finance, and Interior– being at least in theory civilians – the other 14 members of the Council are military commanders.¹⁶ This means that decisions regarding any civil protests in the future will be issued from the standpoint of being a threat to national security.¹⁷

If we survey the structure of the political authority in Egypt, we will find that there is a predominance of military commanders occupying senior public positions. In addition to their assumed posts at the ministries of Defence and Military Production, we see retired officers as ministers of Civil Aviation, Local Development, and sometimes Transportations; overall, retired military commanders often occupy deputy minister and senior director positions across numerous ministries. The military's political primacy is rendered even starker when it comes to the governorates; 19 governors out of 27 are retired army and police generals,¹⁸ besides their deputies and aides.

Another aspect of the constitutional amendments that underscores the future autonomy and independence sought by the military is Article 234. After the amendments, the article cedes perpetual authority to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) in appointing the Minister of Defence; in other words, the appointment is to always be made by the decision of SCAF. Prior to the amendments, the article stipulated that SCAF's appointment of the Minister of Defence was applicable for two presidential terms only. The article guarantees a unique position for the Minister of Defence, and for the military in any governance system to come, regardless of its nature.

Officials' Immunity and their Impunity from Civilian Recourse

One of the prominent determinants of the future relationship between the military and any elected authority is the military's immunity from trials in civilian courts. Any prosecution, related to the military in any way, is to remain a purely military affair. On 10 May 2011, the head of SCAF Field

Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, in his role as interim president at the time, issued a decree published in the Official Gazette. According to the decree, military officers are exempted from summons to civilian courts in illegal profiteering cases. Military tribunals became the sole authority mandated to investigate these crimes, even if the investigations were to begin only after the officer's retirement.¹⁹ This article is a patent manifestation of the military's keenness to maintain immunity for its commanders and officers against any civilian accountability measures for past crimes.

After Morsi assumed the presidency and removed Tantawi as the Minister of Defence and General Sami Anan as the Chief of Staff in August 2012, he honoured them both with the Order of the Nile medal, and they were also hired as presidential counsels. This was an implicit message to the army that nobody will be prosecuted for any human rights violations committed during the transitional period.²⁰

The military ousted Morsi in July 2013 and returned to power through then Minister of Defence Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Although he went on to relentlessly seize all executive, legislative and judicial power; this did not satiate the army. On the 16th of July 2018, the House of Representatives issued a law on "The treatment of senior Armed Forces officers." The law bans the nomination of senior officers to the Presidency during their lifetimes, by having them on call for military service throughout the entirety of their lives. And significantly for the military's solidification of future power, the law also prohibits judicial investigations against officers for any act committed during the time when the constitution was not in effect until the first session of the Parliament was convened, except through special authorization by SCAF. The law also granted diplomatic immunity to senior officers while they are traveling abroad. All these actions and measures are a manifestation of the military's persistence in ensuring its leaders are protected from prosecution: in the future, and locally and internationally.²¹

Analysis of the Military's Sources of Power

The January 2011 revolution was followed by protests disavowing military rule; nevertheless, the military returned strongly to the fore of the political stage only one year after a civilian government came to power. The military removed the head of that civilian government, and redeployed its control over the entire political stage – a stage where the military assumed an independent and highly influential political role while civilians were cast into minor roles or marginalized. To fully comprehend the part the military plays in Egypt's political life,²² it is necessary to understand the military's sources of power.

Non-military Dynamics: Weak Civilian Actors and International Concerns

When the army forcibly removed President Mohamed Morsi from power in July 2013, it did so in a context of acute and widespread political polarization, growing insecurity, and a deteriorating economy. This led to public demands for the army to step in; and a green light was given – at least a regional one, primarily from the Gulf states - for Morsi's removal.

Steadfast public support is a fundamental source of power for the military. As observers note, President Sisi's popularity declined after his decision to transfer sovereignty of the Red Sea Islands Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia; it also declined after the imposition of harsh economic policies – including currency devaluation – that led to a steep hike in the prices of goods and services. Nevertheless, the military still has strong public support, with many citizens preferring that the military remain in power, largely due to fears that any movement or protest could lead to the fate of neighbouring countries like Libya, Yemen, or Syria.

This discourse – that an empowered military is necessary to maintain national security and stability - is supported by the government of the current president. The government continually feeds this discourse through various media channels; a process that has become particularly amplified after the General Intelligence took over many private sector television channels and newspapers. These media outlets are used by the state authorities to disseminate certain messages to the public, including messages about issues related to the army.²³ At the same time, the state uses these media outlets to silence certain messages, or prevent them from reaching the public.

Another important source of power for the military is the ongoing political schisms between political groups, especially between secular and Islamist groups;²⁴ a schism that deepened between the start of revolution in January 2011 and Morsi's ouster on 30 June 2013. This division led to chaos, skirmishing, mutual accusations, and a refusal to compromise, within a context rife with substantial security and economy crises. At the same time, it tarnished the image of politicians in the eyes of the public; who accordingly viewed these vying political parties as obstinately refusing to come to consensus and leave aside their personal differences. Amid this general dysfunction, the military appears as a rational and steadfast patriotic entity working for the good of the people.

Historical legitimacy is another source of power upon which the military is heavily reliant. Historical legitimacy is drawn from the military's purported role in defending the nation from Israeli threats, and from threats of armed groups within Egypt and abroad. This legitimacy was further bolstered by the current state of regional instability; marked by the appearance of numerous transnational militant groups influencing the situation in Egypt, either through ISIS or other extremist groups in Libya. The military has maintained this legitimacy regardless of its strategy for confronting these threats; its strategy is mostly reliant on security-oriented solutions as opposed to political or economic solutions, which leads to more violence instead of containment.

And finally, regional and international support is a significant source of power for the military. It can be seen in the continuation of military and financial support from the US and Gulf states. It can also be seen in the flourishing diplomatic relations and new arms deals with influential states in the European Union, including France. Joint military trainings and drills are another manifestation of its regional and international support, as is Egypt's membership in the coalition operating in the Yemen war.

The sustained regional and international support for the Egyptian army can be understood in light of the army's portrayal of itself as a protector: a protector of the Arab Gulf countries from Iranian threats and a protector of the region from the militant Islamist threat. Egypt is also seen to act as a buffer between Europe and terrorism or refugees, and as a regional anchor for the security

of Israel. Moreover, the military benefits from the desire of Western allies to avoid closer relations between Egypt and Russia.

The Military's Internal Dynamics: Cohesion and Autonomy

The factors underpinning the military's power and autonomy are its nationalistic ideology, its cohesion in the face of recurrent political storms, and its expansive economic empire.

The nationalistic ideology, or nationalism, upon which the military is based underlies its power and autonomy. Being neither a sectarian nor religious ideology, nationalism has aided the military in withstanding many developments potentially undermining it; including cooperation with Israel concerning the situation in Sinai and Egypt's transfer of two strategic islands' sovereignty to Saudi Arabia. These issues did certainly cast a shadow on the 'nationalistic army' concept, which includes the historical regard of Israel as an enemy threatening national security, and a rigid, unforgiving position vis-à-vis issues of sovereignty.

The army's cohesion is another of its sources of power on the internal front, irrespective of its huge number of conscripts. The army's cohesion has withstood many political upheavals: beginning with January 2011 revolution, the ouster of Morsi, the ceding of the two Red Sea islands' sovereignty, and former military Chief of Staff Sami Anan's bid to run for presidency (he's in prison now). Nonetheless, these developments did not influence the army's internal cohesion. Unlike other Arab armies – including the Syrian and Libyan- the Egyptian military did not witness any substantial splits or fissures.

And finally, the Egyptian military's economic empire is a crucial source of its power. The military's economic projects and its perpetual expansion in civilian sectors guarantee the loyalty of officers and commanders, who take a share of the spoils. This economic empire also guarantees the military's autonomy from any elected civilian authority.

Conclusion

In spite of the military's at times tumultuous relationship with successive regimes, it has always remained a resilient player in Egyptian politics. The military's prominent position in Egypt's political landscape is due to the country's strategic geographical position, regional threats and balances of power, and the fragility of civilian governments and local political actors.

The relationship between the army and politics can be understood within the context of its relentless aspiration to broaden and deepen its economic empire, its wish to sustain its guardianship role over political decision-making (regardless of the elected government in power), and its desire to have impunity for its commanders and officers- for any human rights abuses committed in the past, present, and indefinite future- through immunity from judicial accountability.

The astute navigation of civilian-military relations will be required of any elected civilian authority to come, and any movement seeking change and genuine democratization with the ability to dictate full civilian oversight over the army. This requires a deep understanding of the limitations and issues regarding the army's relationship to politics and a sound analysis of its sources of power,

in addition to the study of comparable national experiences in which states managed to circumscribe the role of the military and limit its influence on politics, as was achieved in Turkey,²⁵ Indonesia, and Chile.

A political actor's capability is directly proportional to its ability to examine the overarching political stage, inside and outside Egypt, and to genuinely perceive all opportunities and challenges. This actor must be capable of understanding the true extent and limitations of the power and influence of all other political actors, and it must also be capable of harnessing all potential forces toward fulfilling the goal of democratization within the framework of a civilian state. In this ideal civilian state, the army would be an executive body under civilian control, fulfilling its intrinsic role of defending national security and ensuring the integrity of the state's borders.

About the Author

Ahmed Al-Nadeem is an Egyptian researcher and human rights defender.

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