

## Military wins power game in Egypt – this time round

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' moves to retain power have temporarily worked, but the Brotherhood will regroup

- Ian Black, Middle East editor
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Members of Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces at a press conference in Cairo. Photograph: Khaled Elfiqi/EPA

Half a day is a long time in Egyptian politics. So it was that even as votes were being cast in the second round of the presidential election, the army awarded itself sweeping new powers that will severely limit the scope for Hosni Mubarak's successor.

If Mohamed Morsi, claiming victory on behalf of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), indeed turns out to have won, his presidency will be a far less glittering prize than he and his followers must have hoped and his detractors at home and abroad had feared.

But the quest for dominance by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (Scaf) means their "soft coup" would probably have taken place even if the old regime's Ahmed Shafiq emerged the winner, as many believed he would.

Scaf's manoeuvring adds up to a weak president without a constitution to define his powers or an elected parliament to counterbalance the military, which has been fighting hard to retain its clout since Mubarak was forced to step down in February 2011.

Comparisons with Algeria in 1991 – when the regime cancelled a second round of elections that the Islamists seemed poised to win – may be overblown. But the protagonists of the Egyptian drama are now unmistakably the generals and the Brotherhood. The revolutionaries of Tahrir Square and liberals like Mohamed ElBaradei are standing in the wings and wondering bitterly where it all went wrong.

It will be instructive to listen to the military mood music if Morsi's win is confirmed: any attempt to fix that (another potentially explosive legal case is pending over the status of the FJP) could produce an open revolt by the Brotherhood. And Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, the Scaf head, may well be happy with a weak civilian president who can be blamed when the economy – the elephant in the room of the country's febrile politics – deteriorates further. "In reality," commented the blogger Sandmonkey, "Scaf don't need to make a deal with anyone, because they have all the guns and institutions, so they know that whoever will get in will have to make a deal with them."

Egypt's post-Mubarak politics are often compared to a ride on a rollercoaster, but the more accurate metaphor for now is that they have entered a maze where the generals control all the exits.

International responses could count. Calls were being made on Monday for a "deeply concerned" US to suspend billions of dollars of military aid in protest at Scaf's moves. That makes it likely the handover of power will take place, as pledged, by the end of June – even if that handover is now, as one sarcastic headline put it, "from the military to the military".

So is this the end of Egypt's chapter of the Arab spring? "Back to square one" is the response of many Egyptians. But several important qualifications are in order. Mubarak has gone and will not be succeeded by his son; parliamentary and presidential elections have offered genuine choice for the first time ever. "For better or worse, what we had before won't happen again," said Sandmonkey.

Egyptians may be exhausted and crave stability after 18 months of turmoil. Yet expectations for further change are unlikely to fade away. The generals' manoeuvres are certainly a serious setback and no less so for being predictable. But this is far from the end of the story.

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