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The Second Republic of Tahrir

The ruling military generals in Cairo tried to placate the swelling crowds calling for their ouster today. But as the battles raged, it appears the junta may have already lost the people's trust.

BY ASHRAF KHALIL | NOVEMBER 22, 2011



CAIRO – Tahrir Square is back. For the past four days, protesters opposed to military rule have done battle with Egyptian security forces -- and on Tuesday, Nov. 22, the tide appeared to finally turn in their favor. Buoyed by crowds that exceeded 100,000, the protesters **forced** the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to announce an accelerated transition to civilian rule. But with mistrust between the two sides running high, nobody is celebrating just yet.

"The Armed Forces do not seek power and are ready to leave power immediately through the holding of a popular referendum if necessary," SCAF chairman Field Marshall Mohamed Tantawi said in a televised address. "Some tried to drag us into confrontation ... But we will control ourselves to the maximum. We will never kill a single Egyptian."

Nevertheless, the Health Ministry reported that at least 29 people had died during the latest spasm of unrest -- and Egyptians' growing disenchantment with the SCAF has certainly been on full display. On the night of Nov. 20 in Tahrir Square, a raucous mob enveloped the steps leading to the Omar Makram mosque. About an hour earlier, a combined army and police charge -- backed by waves of tear gas -- had violently cleared the area. The soldiers didn't stay long, pausing only to set fire to the collection of tents in the square.

In the wake of that attack, a pair of senior army officers ventured to the mosque to address the crowds, and apparently negotiate some sort of détente. But the protesters quickly turned on them, and the situation devolved into a frantic rescue. Volunteers from the mosque formed a human chain to stave off the enraged crowds seeking to reach the two officers inside.

One bearded man standing on the steps shouted, "These men are under our protection. Any hand that touches them will be cut off!"

The stand-off eventually was defused and the army officers were hustled out of the building, making their getaway in a waiting ambulance. "It's over. They're gone," said one witness. Then he laughed and turned sarcastic, adding, "They turned over Gilad Shalit. The hostage is free."

It's safe to say that SCAF officials, riding high in February after being embraced by the revolutionary movement intent on toppling Hosni Mubarak's regime,

could never have imagined that army officers would be fleeing from an angry mob in Tahrir just a few months later.

Some, such as prominent activist and **blogger** Hossam el-Hamalawy, presciently argued from Day One against Egyptians putting their faith in the military. "A real democratic Egypt is not necessarily the Egypt that the generals and the United States want to see," Hamalawy told al Jazeera on Feb. 11, the night of Mubarak's resignation. "I do not trust those generals."

But critics like Hamalawy were then swimming against the national tide. Inside and outside Tahrir, the army and SCAF were hailed as heroes, and the country was widely regarded as being in capable and trusted hands.

It has been mostly downhill from there.

Since February, the SCAF has managed to alienate just about every force in the Egyptian political landscape. This collection of senior generals has proven to be arrogant, tone-deaf, secretive, and strangely thin-skinned about any public criticism. As a result, the list of grievances held by the protesters in Tahrir Square has grown long: The universally demanded purge and overhaul of the Interior Ministry proved to be shallow and cosmetic. The trials of Mubarak and his senior lieutenants have been chaotic and, in the eyes of many, insincere. An estimated 12,000 Egyptian civilians **have been sentenced** before non-transparent military trials. Prominent activists such as **Alaa Abdel Fatah** and **Asmaa Mahfouz** have faced charges simply for speaking out against the SCAF. Military censors have guaranteed that SCAF is treated respectfully on state television, which has muted direct criticism of the ruling generals during the current unrest and painted the new Tahrir protesters as fanatics intent on sabotaging the country's democratic transition.

Alaa Al Aswany, author of *The Yacoubian Building* and a longtime political activist, theorized that the career military men who hold power in the SCAF simply didn't have the background or mindset to handle being thrust into a raucous, newly democratic environment like post-Mubarak Egypt.

"You're talking about a military mentality. It's the first time anyone has tried to discuss anything with them," Al Aswany told me, in an interview before the current waves of unrest began. "A normal military general, he's either giving orders or receiving orders and carrying them out. The idea that we can sit down together and I can tell them, 'This decision was wrong,' it's outside of their culture."

These latest waves of public anger serve as a mass acknowledgement that the revolution is only half-finished. What started as a genuine popular uprising on Jan. 25 actually ended 18 days later in a palace coup -- with the regime's military wing tossing the Mubarak cabal overboard in order to preserve their influence.

Now the thousands of angry, mostly young, protesters battling security forces in Tahrir, Alexandria, and **elsewhere** want to press the reset button on the entire endeavor. These new revolutionary cadres are far from unified in their demands. There's definitely no consensus on whether the parliamentary elections -- scheduled to start on Monday, Nov. 28, and continue in three regional rounds through early January -- should be delayed. But there did seem to be universal agreement that the SCAF must accelerate its proposed transitional timetable that would leave it holding executive power through all of 2012.

That demand was granted late on Tuesday, when Tantawi proposed moving the final transition date up by more than eight months, to June 2012. How that offer will be received inside of Tahrir remains an open question -- but it will probably resonate in the world outside of the square, where residents are deeply weary of post-revolutionary uncertainty and eager for any plan that promises a rapid return to something resembling normality. Those planning to insist on Tantawi's immediate departure run the very real risk of being marginalized and vilified.

Tantawi also said he had accepted the resignation of Prime Minister Essam Sharaf's entire government. But Sharaf, who assumed the post with a great deal of credibility among the activists, has long since been dismissed by many here as simply too weak to stand up to the SCAF. There's no talk just yet of who might replace the premier, but there is renewed discussion of some sort of ruling presidential council involving Nobel Laureate and opposition activist Mohammed ElBaradei, a representative from the Muslim Brotherhood, and others.

"Right now, there are no elections," said the secular activist Mohamed Ghoneim, as he emerged coughing from the front lines on Monday night with a gas mask dangling from his neck. "We're back to square one, and anyone who doesn't see this doesn't know these people."

The new revolutionary Tahrir is a very different animal than the original version. It's an angrier and more violent place. The front lines have settled into World War I-style trench warfare, with protesters and combined police and military forces battling for days over the same parcel of asphalt on Mohammed Mahmoud Street, right in front of the former campus of American University in Cairo. It's exhausting to even be near the front lines for very long, amidst the regular *whump* of freshly launched tear gas canisters, the painful burn of the gas, and the very real threat of being trampled in a panicked mass retreat. Tahrir now is uplifting and inspiring in many ways, but also tense and nerve-wracking.

Behind the front lines, the trademark Tahrir organization and community spirit has already taken hold. The volunteer cleanup crews are constantly at work, diligently bagging the enormous amounts of garbage produced by a mass gathering. But there are also new wrinkles appropriate for the Republic of Tahrir's current war footing. Teams of motorcycle couriers stand ready to ferry the wounded straight from the front lines to an array of well-stocked medical clinics. A steady stream of ambulances evacuate the more seriously wounded to local hospitals. Other volunteers form human chains to clear a path for the motorcycles to deliver their injured charges. As new protestors approach the front lines, vinegar-soaked rags and a novel, milky yeast-and-water solution that counteracts the effects of the tear gas are offered.

But unlike January, this isn't a festival; it's a fight. That old revolutionary spirit may be burning bright in Tahrir again, but nobody there would think of holding a concert right now.

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*Ashraf Khalil is a journalist and author of the forthcoming **Liberation Square: Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of a Nation**.*

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JOHANMALMO

5:38 PM ET

November 28, 2011

Well, second times the charm!

Lets hope the second time will be the one then?

viktminskning

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