Egypt’s democratic farce

Alasdair Hynd¹
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On 23 and 24 May, Egypt conducted its first round of presidential elections since Hosni Mubarak was deposed in February last year. A second round of voting will be held on 16 and 17 June to decide the outcome, since no candidate garnered enough votes in the first-past-the-post system. The two candidates to contest the final round of voting will be the Freedom and Justice Party’s Mohamed Morsi, and the last prime minister to serve under Mubarak’s rule, Ahmed Shafik, who is running as an independent. The Freedom and Justice Party is the political manifestation of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is technically banned from participating in elections and so created a new entity so that it could run. Although the current presidential race, coupled with last year’s parliamentary elections, may seem to be an indication of Egypt’s relatively successful transition from dictatorship to democracy, the reality is very different.

Associated Press noted that the ‘Young, liberal secularists who led the popular rebellion that overthrew long-time leader Hosni Mubarak last year failed to place a candidate in the runoff.’² The most obvious explanation for this is that the ‘young liberal secularists’, prior to the revolution, did not constitute an organised movement, but rather a generally dislocated network of individuals with similar beliefs but with varying tactics and goals. Additionally,

¹ Alasdair Hynd is a PhD student in the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia.

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many of the online activists who organised mass demonstrations self-identified as politically naïve with no previous experience of political organisation. In some cases this could have also meant an individual lack of vision about what sort of system should replace Mubarak once he had been ousted. In contrast, former regime figures like Ahmed Shafik, and pre-existing organised movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, were always going to have the upper hand when it came to post-revolution elections, particularly only a year after Mubarak’s removal – little time for a new movements and parties to gain traction.

There has been much criticism from many presidential hopefuls and their supporters of fraud and other electoral violations in the lead-up to and during the elections. The Carter Center, one of the international organisations authorised to monitor the elections, claims that it was only given official accreditation to observe the electoral process seven days before the vote was to take place,\(^3\) giving its 102 witnesses little time to plan and execute its stated goals. The centre noted that there were restrictions imposed on election witnesses that ‘prevented assessment of critical pre-election phases including voter registration and campaigning.’\(^4\) In its report the Carter Center did not mention the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) by name as the hindrance to the successful completion of its monitoring duties but, in the absence of another organisational power, we can conclude that this is implied. Because of the restrictions placed upon it and other election monitors, the Carter Center reported that it ‘is unable to reach a conclusion about the process as a whole.’\(^5\) This is far from the conclusion that should be drawn in any election held under free and fair conditions.

As well as bureaucratically hindering foreign observers, SCAF has also been charged with arresting activists during May, and many cases of torture have been reported. Protests have been commonplace since April as a result of the exclusion of numerous Egyptian presidential

\(^5\) ‘Carter Center preliminary statement on Egypt’s presidential election’, p 1.
candidates from the official race. The most high profile exclusions included the Muslim Brotherhood’s Khairat al-Shater, and Omar Suleiman, Mubarak’s Intelligence Chief for eighteen years and briefly Egypt’s Vice-President, having been hastily promoted to the position in January 2011 by Mubarak in an attempt to stave off the uprising. The official justification for Shater’s exclusion was that he had been convicted by a military court during Mubarak’s reign, thereby excluding him from holding public office. He could have been permitted to run if he had received a rehabilitation order from SCAF, but none was forthcoming. Thus SCAF had the final say on Shater’s candidacy and decided against his involvement. The argument that Shater was excluded because he is an Islamist is unlikely when we consider the other major exclusion, and the fact that Mohamed Morsi and Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh were still permitted to run.

Unlike Shater, Omar Suleiman was excluded because he failed to collect the necessary 30,000 endorsements from citizens nationwide, although there was speculation he was disqualified for being a high official in Mubarak’s government. Although he is unlikely to have received a large proportion of the vote due to his intimate involvement in the previous regime and his responsibility for systematic torture as Head of Intelligence, Suleiman’s exclusion is troublesome, as other former regime officials (such as Ahmed Shafik) are still allowed to run. A better explanation than SCAF wanting to omit Islamists and former regime officials is that these two men (albeit with varying amounts of support) remain political heavyweights, and so SCAF excluded them to thin out the field of candidates, leaving only weaker, less well-known candidates in the race. A future consequence of this move could be unwillingness by the next president to challenge SCAF’s predominance within the state. This could have dire consequences for the health of Egyptian democracy whilst it is still in its infancy. If the president and parliament are to have their decision making curbed by the military, then we can only conclude that it is a sham democratic process.

Regardless of the outcome of the run-off vote between Morsi and Shafik, the beginning of Egypt’s democracy has already been irreparably tarnished by the role of SCAF. In their role as the ‘transitionary force’ between Mubarak’s dictatorship and pluralistic democracy, the armed forces have ensured that the institutions present under Mubarak have remained in place, and therefore the skeleton that allowed Mubarak to maintain power for so long also remains. The military were successful at pre-empting the revolution from going further than merely removing Mubarak, so that a democratic process has been established, behind which the military will likely be able to dictate Egypt’s affairs with impunity.

Even if the military do gracefully step aside once the outcome of the run-off vote is decided, it will be too late, as the military have already consolidated their position in the post-Mubarak era. SCAF was primarily interested in ensuring that its privileged position within the state structure – as well as the military leaders’ position – was untouched by the political upheaval. The military as an institution receives patronage on a scale unsurpassed within Egypt. It holds many business interests – primarily in manufacturing and tourism – and so a popular revolution was seen as a severe threat to these holdings, particularly as many previous popular revolutions have called for a redistribution of national wealth. Major General Mahmud Nasser even went so far as to warn Egypt’s new parliament not to interfere in the SCAF’s economic interests, whose revenues are estimated to total US$200m per annum.9

Another interest the military wishes to safeguard is the ‘aid’ Egypt receives from the United States to the tune of US$2b a year.10 Most of this aid comes in the form of military hardware and was a consequence of Anwar Sadat’s peace agreement with Israel in 1979. If this support from the US was no longer made available, it is highly doubtful that any Egyptian government would spend anywhere near that amount on maintaining the armed forces, especially when many Egyptians would rather see money spent on tackling a plethora of

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important social issues. In this context, intervening to force Mubarak’s removal and impose itself as the primary transitionary body allowed SCAF to safeguard its economic interests in the manufacturing and tourism industries, as well as ensure, providing American policy remains constant, continued military aid. Secretary of State Clinton indicated as recently as March that US military aid to Egypt would continue, actively intervening to waive legislative conditions that were imposed to ensure Egypt met certain democratic thresholds.11 In short, democracy in Egypt comes secondary to ongoing American interests.

Whether or not Egypt would now be in a more democratic state if SCAF had not intervened to preserve its predominance should be obvious to all observers, as they have severely curbed the political possibilities for Egypt post-revolution. Freedoms have been won by the revolution, but they could not be attained to a greater degree because of the intervention of the military hierarchy. At best, the military could totally step aside once the results of the second round of voting are confirmed. Based on all hitherto actions of SCAF, this is an unlikely scenario. Much more likely is a functioning democratic process, but one where the military holds ultimate authority: a puppet democracy, not unlike the parliament in Jordan, or the previous Egyptian parliament under Mubarak, albeit with a greater number of electoral options. It does seem certain, however, that the armed forces will maintain control of all major decisions facing Egypt in the foreseeable future, therefore preventing a liberal democracy from emerging from the ashes of the revolution.