

Managing military intervention in democratic transitions¹

The military plays a decisive role in the national politics of several countries undergoing political transitions. Most notably, this has occurred in Thailand and Egypt, where in recent years far from retreating from politics, the military has intervened. In Egypt the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) has effectively governed the country since the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. In a marriage of convenience, the military worked with the elected civilian President Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood until a new constitution was approved in late 2012. However, the honeymoon was short-lived. In July 2013, supported by mass protests, the military essentially overthrew President Morsi, further jeopardising the country's stability by prompting open confrontation between the Brotherhood, its supporters and the armed forces in an increasingly volatile regional environment. The future path of the political transition in Egypt is closely linked to the willingness and capacity of all relevant actors to achieve a minimum level of consensus on basic rules of the game.

The situation in Egypt can be usefully compared with contemporary conditions in Thailand and in Myanmar. In both of these countries, the military retains considerable political power and the trajectory of political transition will depend very much on the willingness of the military to abandon or moderate its role in politics. The army's declaration of martial law in Thailand on 20th May came as rival political factions in a political crisis (that has paralysed the country for six months) failed to reach a working compromise, and it seemed likely that violence would increase. Meanwhile, Indonesia is an excellent example of a country where the military has stepped back from power and allowed civilian political forces to forge ahead with a transition to democracy. Even so, the military remains an important factor in Indonesian politics, as many former military officials are involved in politics, and as many as four former armed forces commanders are either running for president or lead small political parties in the run-up to the July presidential elections. In the latest polls, the popular civilian Governor of Jakarta, Joko Widodo, has a narrowing lead against his closest rival, a former army special forces commander, Prabowo Subianto.

What can we learn from the persistent political role of the military in all these contexts? What are the determining factors of the military's withdrawal from power as an institution? How can the military be engaged to ensure that democratic transition prospers? And is there a role for third-party mediation? To answer these questions, it is important to understand the deep roots of military involvement in politics.

The army's deep roots in politics

The role of the military in the politics of all these countries is deeply embedded in the history of nation building. While the nationalist struggle for independence was initially conceived and led by civilian intellectuals towards the end of the colonial era, the consequent evolution of national armies created a powerful focus of nationalist energy and political power. The common tendency towards factional infighting and disunity at critical points in the national struggle provided the impetus for military leaders to

¹ By **Dr Michael Vatikiotis**, Regional Director for Asia, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and **Mr Romain Grandjean**, Senior Programme Manager for Middle East and North Africa, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

enter the political arena to “save” or “protect” the nation, which has commonly entrenched the narrative of the military as the guardians of the nation and the state.

The role of the army in governing the state has deep roots in both Middle Eastern and Asian societies for quite similar reasons. In traditional Islam, the ruling establishment was divided into two major categories, the “people of the pen” and the “people of the sword”. As a result, the military, whether organised as regular army or mercenary force, was very much a part of the ruling establishment. As noted by P.J. Vatikiotis, both the Abbasids in Baghdad (750–1258) and the Fatimids in Cairo (963–1170) “depended largely on military leaders for administration and for the execution of public policy”.² The legacy in the Middle East that emerged in the post-colonial era, he noted, was that “policy is still made largely by the sanction of organised force, rather than debate.”

This is not dissimilar from the historical role of the army in the pre-colonial kingdoms of Thailand and Burma, where the army was an important pillar of the ruling establishment. Thai kings divided power equally between the treasury (Kromma Khlang) and the Defence ministry (Kalahom).

In Egypt, Indonesia and Myanmar, the army played a key role in leading the national revolutions that secured independence in the modern era. The Free Officers Group formed in Egypt in the mid-1930s brought a group of native Egyptians together to fight for the national cause, eventually unseating the aristocratic elite drawn mainly from families of Turkish origin and from other parts of the Ottoman Empire. Indonesia’s national army was formed in the wake of Sukarno’s bold declaration of independence in 1945. (Interestingly, Egypt was the first country to acknowledge Indonesia’s independence.) It saw itself as a people’s army that, in contrast to civilian nationalist leaders, made no compromises in the fight against Dutch colonial forces. This, according to Meitzner, imbued in the army a sense of entitlement to participate in government and an ingrained disdain for civilian politicians.³ Myanmar’s early nationalist leadership was also military-based. The “Thirty Comrades”, led by Aung San helped the Japanese invade British Burma, then spent time in Japan before returning to help the British expel the Imperial Japanese Army. Soon after independence in 1948, the government was beset by an array of ethnic insurgencies that gave the army a leading role in governing the country, thus strengthening its view that only the army could hold the country together.⁴

In the years following independence, the military in all these countries was privileged because of its nationalist role. Military officers benefitted from nationalisation of colonial assets. Better resourced, the military became more organised and modernised than other institutions. Military officers thus became conscious of their ability to use physical force, but also were often able to shape political platforms and govern the people. In Indonesia, for example, the army’s doctrine is infused with the value of honour and integrity that implicitly sets it apart from fractious, squabbling civilian politicians. In Thailand, the army has used its close association with the monarchy to define for itself a role as guardian of the state. In Burma, like Indonesia, the army spearheaded the nationalist struggle and wrought for itself a privileged position. In both countries, the immediate internal threats to the fledgling nation posed by irredentist and ideological armed conflicts helped greatly to consolidate this military power. In Egypt, the military threw itself into confrontation with Western powers and then costly wars with Israel. The success it claimed bore little relation to events on the battlefield.

Generally, the military sees itself as the guardian of the state rather than of the government in power, and has managed to sustain this role, either overtly by backing authoritarian rulers, or by periodically intervening to change the political order. The real danger appears when the military’s sense of guardianship evolves into one of ownership of the state. In Egypt, the Free Officers group led by Colonel Gamal Abdel

2 P.J. Vatikiotis (1961) *The Egyptian Army in Politics*, Indiana University Press.

3 Marcus Mietzner (2009) *Military Politics, Islam and the State in Indonesia*, Institute of SE Asian Studies, Singapore, p.38.

4 M.C. Ricklefs, B. Lockhart, A. Lau, P. Reyes, M. Aung-Thwin (2010) *A New History of Southeast Asia*, Palgrave-MacMillan, London, p.368.

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Nasser seized power from the civilian Wafd Government in a coup d'état on 23 July 1952, putting the army in a position of power it has never abandoned, although it has been on the decline since the 1967 debacle.

In the case of Myanmar, the military has effectively governed the country since 1962 and only began a process of stepping back and allowing civilians to lead after the 2010 elections. In Thailand, where the military has launched 18 coups since the 1950s, the military has tended until now to steer clear of actual government, preferring instead to allow appointed premiers or weak civilian political coalitions to govern, while it retains the option to change the political order whenever deemed necessary. The last time was in 2006. In Indonesia, the military strongly supported the authoritarian rule of President Soeharto following an alleged attempted communist takeover in 1965. In reality, Soeharto, although a former general, built a personal power base that drew on military support, but never allowed the army to control the levers of power.

A withdrawal from politics in *trompe l'oeil*

By the end of the 20th century, progressive social and political forces began to pressure these military-dominated political edifices and agitate for reform. With increasing economic growth and investment, the chorus for reform was amplified and encouraged from abroad. Democratic transition, it was argued, necessitated that the army return to the barracks. In many cases, the military pushed back. The last three decades of the 20th century were characterised by harsh crackdowns on dissent, often led by the military establishment. In Thailand, the army fired on students on two occasions in 1973 and 1976, which prompted thousands to join the communist insurgency in the jungle. The Thai army was also responsible for the brutal suppression of student protests in 1992 and used lethal force to end anti-government protests in 2010. Both the 2006 coup and the one just launched in May were bloodless, although restrictions on freedom of speech were imposed.

In Myanmar, the army reacted brutally against students who poured into the streets of Yangon to demand democratic change. After initially agreeing to hold democratic elections in 1990, the army didn't like the result, and so a further crackdown ensued which resulted in a mass exodus of liberal students across the border into Thailand. The Indonesian army used violence to suppress periodic protests that erupted across the country, and most notably fired on protestors in East Timor in 1991. More recently in Egypt, domestic and international human rights organisations condemned the excessive use of lethal force by the security apparatus which committed in August 2013 the “worst mass unlawful killings in Egypt's modern history”.⁵

Yet, despite the liberal backlash against military rule or political dominance, there were also those, especially in business and bureaucratic elite circles, who feared instability in the absence of a strong military presence. For the military itself, it was often more a question of sustaining lucrative economic interests that supplement military budgets and support the wealth of its leadership. Thus in Myanmar, the military retains 25% of seats in the parliament and many of the so-called reformist ministers are either active or recently retired military officers.

In Indonesia, the military has allowed itself to be progressively relegated from the political arena formally, and a battery of laws has been enacted to ensure that military power and privilege is curtailed. One reason for this was the Indonesian army's own frustration with the abuses of power exercised by former

5 Human Rights Watch, Egypt: Security Forces Used Excessive Lethal Force, 19 August 2013.

General Suharto, whose authoritarian rule increasingly alienated younger officers who became interested in a professional service from the mid-1980s. The internalisation of democratic values and the realisation of the strong popular feeling against the regime helped the military to opt for a gradual withdrawal from power. However, despite being subject to civilian scrutiny, the Indonesian military casts a long shadow over political life through the involvement of retired military officers. In Egypt, Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who as Minister of Defence removed President Morsi in July 2013, is running in presidential elections that he is likely to win.

In Thailand too, progressive democratic change has had an impact. The military permitted civilians to head the defence ministry from the mid-1990s – although the defence bureaucracy is dominated by active officers. The military has also been subject to a degree of scrutiny over its budget, although the army still largely gets what it wants. Then, in 2006, just when everyone thought a coup was no longer possible, the army intervened to replace a civilian government with a military council. There was the same shock and surprise in May 2014, when the military intervened again. In contrast to their Indonesian colleagues, Thai army officers have become more rather than less conservative in recent years, a reflection of the traditional monarchy's concern about impending succession and a decade of political upheaval, which has concentrated power in the hands of a narrow coterie of officers from the King's and Queen's Guard.

This brief historical overview of the military's role in politics shows that both a sense of entitlement and the desire in elite circles (and beyond) for predictable stability explain the surprising longevity of military rule into the second decade of the 20th century. How can this best be managed to ensure the progress of democratic transition? And what agency, if any, can a third party have to influence the military in these contexts?

Traditionally, the military's role in politics has been moderated and influenced by military–military relationships with the West. The reform movement in the Indonesian military was influenced to some extent by the exchange of officer training students with Australia, the United States and, to a lesser extent, Europe. The problem with this influencing factor is that, as military budgets and priorities have diminished in the West, the intensity of institutional exchange and influence has waned. It has also been harder for Western military attachés to engage in contexts like Myanmar, where sanctions and political sentiments against the military-backed government militated against interaction. More generally, many Western donors and bigger powers have felt ambivalent about undercutting security regimes seen as guarding against violent extremism or safeguarding stability in volatile social environments. The desire for democratic progress and a return to the barracks has, in the past, run counter to security considerations. This is also still the case in Egypt, where the dramatic changes initiated on 25 January 2011 did not translate into a paradigm shift: the attitude remains “stability first to allow for democratic reform” rather than “only democracy can bring long-term stability”.

The case for quiet engagement of the military in support of democratic reforms and stability

The case of Egypt is rather pressing. President Mubarak, whose son (a civilian) was being groomed to succeed, had secured a certain degree of autonomy for the presidency from the military. Some observers went so far as to describe this move as a “virtual negation of the Free Officers' state”. The removal of President Mubarak in February 2011 can then be read, as by H. Roberts, as “a renewal of the Free Officers' state”, with the emergence of the SCAF as the dominant political actor and “the reassertion and reclamation by the army of its historical political primacy”, rather than a revolution.⁶

The Egyptian army's bold decision not to shoot at the demonstrators in January 2011 and to oust Mubarak, a former army general himself, was promising and initially bore some resemblance to the 1998 transition in Indonesia where the military played a key role in organising the controlled transfer of power from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one. The nomination of General al-Sisi as Minister of

⁶ Hugh Roberts (2013), “The Revolution that Wasn't”, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 35 No. 17 · 12 September 2013.

Defence by President Morsi in August 2012 was even seen as a possible step towards a lesser role for the military in politics, as al-Sisi had criticised the military's involvement in politics after Mubarak's ouster. Although the SCAF unilaterally reduced the constitutional powers of the president a few days before Morsi was elected, the military did not actually block his election as president.

While the Muslim Brotherhood, like other political forces, certainly had the intention to reduce the role of the army in politics, it also wanted to avoid confrontation. The Islamists who led the drafting process of the 2012 constitution were careful to not jeopardise the armed forces' status, privileges and financial autonomy. However, the more Morsi and his Brothers tried to assert their power and independence, the more they antagonised the security forces and other political adversaries. Controversial projects included new development policies for the Sinai and the Suez Canal, normalising Egypt's relations with the Hamas-led government in Gaza by reopening the Rafah border crossing, and engaging in dialogue with certain tribes in Sinai and Upper Egypt who had long been in conflict with the Egyptian security forces. Fears that all these moves would undermine national security, and thus the army's interests, did not help to build confidence.

The subsequent steps taken by the military in Egypt to manage this chaotic transition since July 2013 resemble the mid-1960s Indonesian scenario when the Communists were identified as a threat to the state, giving the military a free hand to control all institutions. In other words, the path to political stability, let alone democracy, in Egypt may be longer than expected unless the military together with their civilian and Muslim brothers seek rapidly and seriously to reach a social and political consensus to reduce this dangerous polarisation and de-escalate violence.

In Indonesia, the political turmoil (a thousand people died during the riots in 13–15 May 1998) was overcome when both the military and civilians supported an inclusive process of reforms. The military moved quickly to implement its own internal reforms, leaving gradually more space to the civilian political actors to organise themselves and participate in running the country. This process, which was rockier and more internally contested than one would admit today, was facilitated by the absence of a clear internal or external enemy in 1998 and a more conducive regional environment than that in which Egypt finds itself today.

In Myanmar, where the military effectively ruled using martial law until 2011, there has been a voluntary move towards civilian rule. The military junta unveiled a seven-step roadmap to a "modern, developed and democratic nation" in 2003. At the time, no one really believed this would lead to any kind of democratic transition. Then, after elections that were criticised for being rigged in 2011, the military gave way to a government and a parliament based on a constitutional rather than martial basis. This was probably the result of a careful calculation that measured and controlled political openness was the best way to preserve the military's powerful economic interests in the face of a changing regional context. Isolation simply wasn't a viable option, and with China and India representing increasingly intrusive border challenges, Myanmar's army needed to balance the strategic equation with functioning relations with the US and Europe.

As Mary Callaghan observes, since its inauguration in July 2011, the government of President Thein Sein, himself a former general, has "acted like a government, not a high command".⁷ Indeed, contrary to popular expectation and speculation in the international community, extraordinary changes in the realm of political pluralism, media freedom and moves towards dialogue to end decades of civil war with ethnic minorities have all evolved at speed since 2011. The military has said very little on this except that it now takes orders from the Thein Sein government and will defend the 2008 constitution that preserves its potential veto should things go too far against its interests.

In Egypt, by designating the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation, i.e. the enemy of the state, the likelihood of a gradual military withdrawal from politics is reduced while the escalation of violence strengthens the narratives of hardliners on both sides and undermines any reformist agenda. Yet without

⁷ Mary Callaghan (2012) "The Generals loosen their grip", *Journal of Democracy*, October, 23(4), p.4.

bold economic and political reforms, Egypt will most probably continue to decline despite the ongoing generous financial support it receives from Gulf countries. The high popular expectations spurred by both uprisings of 25 January 2011 and 30 June 2013 will remain unmet as long as the military and its adversaries play a zero-sum game, convinced that they can break each other in a war of attrition. Although not equals, neither the military nor the Brotherhood will go away, and they will have to find a *modus vivendi* to co-exist along with other political forces.

In a context of absence of trust, as in Egypt between the current authorities and the opposition, local or external third parties can often play a constructive role in mediating. Yet by framing the situation in Egypt as a war against terrorism, the military-installed interim government has opted for a security approach and officially ruled out any dialogue or negotiations with the Muslim Brotherhood. To date, all local, regional and international mediation efforts have been unsuccessful. Attempts to get the parties to release some pressure by agreeing on confidence-building measures (e.g. freeing detainees, or refraining from protesting) have not succeeded. Unless the parties reach a minimum level of consensus on the basic rules of the game and on a common vision of Egypt's future, it will be extremely difficult to achieve mutual concessions.

In Indonesia, a number of informal closed-door meetings ('seminars') convened by the army, and including civil society, helped to advance the political transition in an inclusive way. Meanwhile, in the very polarised Egyptian context, nurtured by non-ethical local media, the environment is not conducive to a public dialogue process: short-term political costs would rapidly be perceived to outweigh the long-term benefits. However, acceptable third parties could potentially help local stakeholders to open and maintain informal and stable channels of communication, as well as offering quiet space and deniability to explore non-violent political options.

Such low-key interactions would allow the parties to listen and better understand the narrative and perceptions of their foes, and help them to reassess their respective strategies. Although it is probably too early to expect the parties to undertake gradual internal reforms, they may reach an understanding that one way to preserve their own internal cohesion is by building stable political institutions through civil-military cooperation, rather than confrontation and mutual exclusion. This would probably move the political transition forward and mitigate the risk of returning the country to 1954. In private, some pro-military supporters acknowledge that the Muslim Brotherhood is not "eradicable," while their opponents similarly recognise that they do not want the military to disappear. Such acknowledgements could eventually lead to more substantial discussions if courageous actors were provided with a quiet space to engage by trusted third parties.

In all these contexts where the military remains a determining factor in political transitions, a certain degree of engagement and dialogue in which all stakeholders are involved can assist the transition and help to prevent violent confrontation. In some contexts, like Myanmar, engagement has been possible because the military remains involved in government. It was engagement and dialogue with military members of parliament that enabled President Thein Sein to persuade the military to accept democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy into mainstream politics. The military is now part of the peace process launched by Thein Sein's government to end decades of armed conflict with Myanmar's ethnic minorities.

However, in Thailand and in Indonesia, the military often hides its political actions behind a veneer of civilian supremacy. The protracted political crisis in Thailand has seen loud calls for military intervention from anti-government protestors, which were resisted for as long as possible. Now that the army has

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stepped in, it will be hard to keep up the appearance of simply maintaining security unless the conflicting parties use the breathing space to reach an agreement and move towards elections. In Egypt, mitigating the current failure to uphold the guarantee of pluralism and of human rights contained in the 2014 constitution would require a certain degree of quiet engagement and dialogue, in which all influential actors need to be involved.