

BULLETIN

No. 15 (232) • February 14, 2011 • © PISM

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Current Alignment of Political Forces in Egypt

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After almost three weeks of protests, a representation of the demonstrators, who hail from various age groups and various social and religious backgrounds, has yet to emerge. The political opposition is still divided, although some of its segments have already held first talks with Omar Suleiman on systemic reforms. The army's role remains unclear: it enjoys public respect even despite its being deeply rooted, institutionally and economically, in an undemocratic regime. The social rebellion will most likely get politicised by the strongest and fastest-organising oppositionists, but these, probably, will not be the Muslim Brothers.

In the present pattern of political forces several powerful interest groups can be identified, representing the present regime (state institutions, including the army), the political opposition (whether tolerated by the regime or banned) and the demonstrators (non-politicised social groups, young activist, trade unions).

National Democratic Party. The system of power in Egypt rests on two pillars, one political, the other military. The former comprises the ruling party and the government which for the most part comes from that party. The National Democratic Party (NDP, *Al-Hizb al-Watani ad-Dimokrati*) held 96% seats in the recently dissolved 518-member Parliament (consisting of the People's Assembly, or the lower house, and the Shura Council). The party, with close to two million member, affiliates privileged and corrupt politicians who have for years held top positions in the state. Thanks to its well organised structures, the NDP enjoys a measure of support in rural areas, although credible data is not available. The most recent parliamentary elections, in November 2010, were held in perhaps the most blatant violation of democratic principles in the country's modern history. The NDP is headed by President Mubarak, in office since 1981, who was also the commander-in-chief. He exercised the executive power together with the government which he himself appointed. With the country under the Emergency Law since 1981, the president held what was in fact authoritarian power. Since 29 January 2011, the Cabinet has been led by Ahmed Shafik, a former minister for civil aviation and commander of the air force, held in respect by the Egyptian business community. Shafik was known as a politically neutral, uncorrupted representative of the military, but this favourable image got a few blemishes with the acceptance of the prime ministerial position.

Membership of, or close links to, the political establishment is the source of profit for business moguls, a separate pressure group who have also incurred the demonstrators' wrath. The seat of the company owned by Ahmed Ezz, a powerful player in the Egyptian steel industry, controlling 60% of the sector, and an NDP member of parliament, has been several times set on fire during the upheavals. A number of businessmen served as ministers in the cabinet dissolved last January; and there has been an economically influenced rivalry between the army and the financial oligarchy.

Omar Suleiman. The top representative of the government side is now General Omar Suleiman, who came from the army and who is not an NDP member. For quite a long time he has informally run President Mubarak's foreign policy, and as a former intelligence chief he has acquired a wealth of experience (such as supervising anti-terrorist programmes run in Egypt by the US, overseeing military and intelligence contacts with Israel, or mediating between Hamas and Fatah). Prior to the uprising, he was seen as a major candidate for Mubarak's successor, given the respect he commanded from the Egyptian military, the US and some sections of society. The appointment

as vice president on 29 January has eaten into his reputation but did not wreck his chances to play an important role when and if a transformation is set in motion.

The Military. After the resignation of Mubarak the army high command is now in charge of state affairs. With some 850,000 servicemen (including 500,000 in reserve), the army is probably the country's most powerful and most effective institution, even if it partly remains outside civilian control. In addition to budget appropriations, the military derives income from its own businesses in key economic sectors: agriculture, infrastructure, industry, where military companies produce an array of civilian goods, from electronics to foodstuffs. The army is therefore an important employer, which, together with its public-spirited attitude at the time of crises, has earned it a positive image among society. Due to the nature of military-business links in Egypt, major gains go only to the top brass, while the rank-and-file are the first to be hit by budget cutbacks. So it is the generals who would like most to maintain the status quo. The loyalty of the poorly paid lower ranking members of the military is dubious, especially in case tensions escalate steeply. The close links to the Mubarak power system have earned the army primacy among state institutions, while Mubarak could enjoy the support of the military. But under Mubarak's deliberate policy, the profit-boosting generals have lost their political clout. Important roles in further change can be played by two men who come from the army: Chief-of-Staff, General Sami Anan and Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the defence minister and commander-in-chief. The decisions they take will largely influence the army's behaviour.

The dilemmas of the military were reflected in its attitude taken during the unrest. On the one hand, the army said it would not use force against protesters, but on the other, it denied protection to the anti-government demonstrators against an attack by their opponents, were some were probably in the employ of the special services run by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The army is by no means impartial. It wants to keep as much of its privileges as possible, but can hardly afford losing the respect of the Egyptian people. The presence of Marshall Tantawi and the enthusiastic welcome given to him by Tahrir Square demonstrators during the Cairo protests seem to indicate that the army is getting ready for the forthcoming changes, and that it enjoys the public's trust. Scenarios in which the military retains at least economic influence are not unrealistic.

Another possibility is a long-term *de facto* coup d'état, which might come if the army decides not to give power to civilian rule — even if in such case the army would lose foreign support. The US has supplied Egypt with \$1.3bn worth of military aid annually, and it keeps close military-intelligence contacts with the army through an expanded military section of its Cairo Embassy. And yet, the incoherent reaction and ineffective diplomacy of the United States during the protests reveal how limited its influence on the army is and how little it knows about the army's interests.

Official Opposition. Sitting in Parliament have been those opposition parties which the government has recognised, but which in practice are totally marginalised, the most important being: Wafd, national-liberal (6 seats); Tagammu, socialist (5 seats), Al-Ghad, liberal-democratic (1 seat).

The Muslim Brotherhood, banned back in 1954, had one representative in Parliament, officially recognised as "unaffiliated". Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, the parties Wafd and Al-Ghad have taken part in the protests since the beginning (25 January). In a later period, most of the official opposition parties and the Muslim Brotherhood agreed that Mohamed ElBaradei would represent their demands in talks with the authorities. But given their participation in previous elections (meaning a form of collaboration with the regime), their image may suffer and the ranks of their supporters may thin out during the process of transition.

Muslim Brotherhood. A similar fate befalls the Muslim Brotherhood, the opposition's strongest party led by Supreme Guide Muhammad Badi. Its programme includes across-the-board reforms, many of which coincide with the programmes of other opposition parties, except for the demand for democratic reforms in line with Muslim law. The high level of support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which won 20% in the 2005 election, reflects its grassroots community work and the image of a party resistant to corruption. It should be noted that it was the oppressive regime which generated part of the support for the Muslim Brotherhood, and this support will likely weaken in a pluralistic environment. The organisation is informally split into three segments: conservatives (controlling the central and local authorities of the Brotherhood, as well as its finances), pragmatists and reformers, many of whom have joined the protesters. It is not inconceivable that the reformers (embracing a moderate religious programme) and some pragmatists could leave the Brotherhood and join new opposition groups. Actually, such a process has already been going on informally (e.g., Mustafa al-Naggar, a close collaborator of ElBaradei, comes from the Brotherhood).

Unofficial and Unaffiliated Opposition. Among the most important representatives of the unofficial and unaffiliated opposition are coalitions of reformers (Kefaya – Egyptian Movement for Change) groups of young activists (April 6 Movement, We Are All Khaled Said), the Wise Men,

worker organisations and others.

Established in 2004 and compared with the Polish Solidarity movement, Kefaya (“enough” in Arabic) has been a coalition of several hundred intellectuals from various political, social and religious backgrounds, whose common demands included an end to Mubarak’s rule, Constitutional reform, fight against corruption and the lifting of Emergency Law. This coalition was joined by members of Wafd, the Nasserist Party, Muslim Brotherhood reformers, etc. At least some part of Kefaya then entered into a coalition with the National Association for Change, established in 2010. Its leader, Mohamed ElBaradei, the former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), managed to form an umbrella organisation of the main opposition parties (including Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Ghad and others), thus mobilising anti-government forces anew. The Association was repeating Kefaya’s demands, but its focus was on democratising the electoral process. The participation of particular opposition parties in the Association has been fluctuating and uncertain, often based on declarations made by individuals. Even though closely collaborating today, Kefaya and ElBaradei’s movement may potentially split later on, given their loose organisational nature and the emerging indications of lack of support for ElBaradei. Although he managed to unite many of Egypt’s political forces, ElBaradei is not universally supported by either society or the army, and he has no experience in domestic politics.

The anti-government demonstrations were organised by young activists of the informal groups, the April 6 Movement, We Are All Khaled Said, both of which maintain loose links with Kefaya and ElBaradei’s Association. Their characteristic feature has been the political mobilisation of young people — some 53% of Egypt’s population is accounted for by under-25-year-olds — and use of electronic social media (Facebook, Twitter) for communication and organisation.

In response to the steadily increasing scale of the protests, the unclear pattern of the opposition groups and the diversity of the demonstrators, an ad hoc Council of Wise Men was formed, comprising probably nine widely respected Egyptian persons, with the goal of overcoming the divisions and reaching an agreement. The impulse to its emergence was provided by the so-called “Letter to the Egyptians” by Ahmed Zewail, the Egyptian Nobel-winning chemist, calling for a peaceful transition, Constitutional reform, free elections and a government of national unity. The Wise Men’s negotiators are led by Professor Ahmed Kamal Aboul Magd and the Coptic businessman Naguib Sawiris. Each of the trio may potentially play an important role in systemic transformation, but the best known of the Wise Men is Amru Musa, secretary general of the Arab League, and former Egyptian foreign minister. He has been indicated as the leader who could win the support of the military (he has the experience holding a high-level state position) and the opposition (he criticised the Mubarak government and demanded changes in the Constitution).

Problems and Scenarios. The continuing protests have been giving encouragement and confidence to increasing sections of the society. The demonstrators were joined by trade unionists, previously tightly controlled by the authorities — indicating that fear of the regime’s might had been on the decline, and support for anti-government movements on the rise. Initial negotiations with the political opposition did not produce any results. The problem was that the applicable law could not be adapted in such a way as to meet the demonstrator’s demands. Under the country’s Constitution, if Mubarak went, the presidential duties would be taken over by the head of the People’s Assembly who, within 60 days, should convene a new election (Article 84 of the Egyptian Constitution) in accordance with the electoral by-laws, currently in force. Running for presidency was only allowed for leaders of parties present in Parliament and for those who have won the support of at least 250 members of the People’s Assembly, Shura Council and regional councils (Article 76). With such conditions in force, most opposition and independent candidates were excluded, providing the government with a pretext to argue that Mubarak must stay as president and that he also wants a pluralistic election.

Possible scenarios for the future will reflect the relationships between two sides: on the one hand, the interest groups benefiting from the present system (some officers, NDP politicians and local councils, business moguls, functionaries and officials) and on the other, the demonstrating masses and the political opposition. The clout of either side depends on their internal consolidation. The opposition must show capacity to unite around a single group (most likely the Wise Men), while the strength of the regime will depend on its ability to persuade the military about the need to keep the status quo.

In the process of transformation, a conflict of interests will surface between the army, whose strong position depends on the wide prerogatives of the president (who is linked to the army), and the democratic opposition, seeking to weaken the powers of the president and to strengthen the legislature and the judiciary. With Mubarak’s resignation on 11 February deeper systemic changes seem unavoidable. The rational decision for the army is then to act as an intermediary and,

in this way, retain influence under the new system — rather than turning against the mobilised society. Some decisions of the Military Council who runs the affairs of the state have already been welcomed lukewarmly in the society, e.g. the decision to rule for at least 6 months until the new parliamentary elections are held. If and when systemic change comes, the problem will emerge of the absence of an organised political representation which could enter the elections as a credible representative of society. As matters stand, the existing political parties fail to reflect the public sentiments in full.

The two extreme scenarios — survival of an army-backed authoritarian regime in its present shape and the rules of an Islamic party — are least likely to materialise. Under another scenario, the conflict's prolongation, intensification of demonstrations and absence of society's consolidated representation would combine to toughen the position of the forces of the regime: the army with part of the political elites.