



NOREF Report

Who's who in the new Egypt? A mapping of prominent actors of change

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Summary

Jubilant celebrations followed the announcement of Hosni Mubarak's resignation as president of Egypt. The army has taken control of government, promising fundamental judicial and political reforms, but considering that the army has been the guarantor of the Egyptian regime since 1952, the future is far from certain. In the current dramatic situation, the question arises: who are the actors that have succeeded in bringing down Mubarak's regime, what are their aims, and what support base do they have? This paper provides an overview and assessment of the four groups that have emerged as major political players, and the role they may play in Egypt's ongoing political transition: the many-stranded but disciplined youth movement, the Council of Wise Men (*lajnat al-hukama'*), the National Association for Change, and the Muslim Brothers. The paper also considers the independent Egyptian judges who occupy a crucial position in the current situation.

The picture that emerges is one in which all the opposition actors that have succeeded in assuming a public role gravitate towards the youth movement. Young Egyptians, for all their social, political and cultural differences, have managed to seize the political initiative, not only from the authoritarian state, but from the entire older generation of politicians in Egypt. It is still uncertain how far they

can push their agenda, and for how long they will appear as one united force. All parties with a stake in what happens in Egypt would do well to follow closely this still evolving political group, its means of communication and mobilization, and the figures that have emerged as its informal leaders. The other independent political actor that should be followed closely in the days ahead is the judiciary. For the reform movement's continued success, much will depend on how aggressively the judges confront a military regime that is probably reluctant to bring about radical change.

In conclusion, the formal Egyptian interlocutor of the US and European governments is still a government dominated by the military. However, the radical change towards a more open society has taken place outside of government, where existing forces have shown remarkable pragmatism and constraint (the Muslim Brothers), and new groups have crystallized (youth movements and independent intellectuals willing to take on a political role). Having actively supported and recognized an authoritarian regime for 30 years, US and European politicians now have a unique opportunity to redirect their focus and engage more seriously with real forces of change, even if they do not occupy the formal positions of power.

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Introduction

In a historic moment on Friday 11 February 2011, the mass of demonstrating Egyptians on Tahrir Square exploded in jubilation as it was announced that Hosni Mubarak had resigned as president. The army has taken control of government, but has promised fundamental judicial and political reforms as well as free parliamentary elections after a transition period. In its first statement, the army leadership acknowledges “the legitimate rights of the Egyptian people” and the atmosphere in Cairo is euphoric.¹ Considering that the army has been the guarantor of the Egyptian regime since 1952, the future is far from certain in Egypt. In the current dramatic situation, the question arises: who are the actors that have succeeded in bringing down Mubarak’s regime, what are their aims, and what support base do they have?

This paper provides an overview and assessment of the four groups that have emerged as major public political players during the last days, and the role they may play in Egypt’s ongoing political transition. They are the many-stranded but disciplined youth movement; the Council of Wise Men (lajnat al-hukama’); the National Association for Change; and the Muslim Brothers. In addition, the paper will devote some space to the Egyptian judges, who occupy a crucial position in the current situation. Several established and smaller groups, like the well-known reform movement Kefaya, seem for practical purposes to have been integrated in or superseded by one or more of these movements, and will not be treated separately. Nor will the established and tolerated opposition parties, for reasons stated in the concluding section below. The paper is intended not as an in-depth analysis, but as an overview in order to make sense of the political dynamic in Egypt at present.

¹ As televised live on al-Jazeera Arabic on 10 February 2011.

The youth movement

The youth movement was instrumental in mobilizing the popular demonstrations from 25 January and onwards. It has shown itself to be at once a fluid and highly disciplined body, made up of young Egyptians from the lower to upper middle classes – youths with higher education who are frustrated with the lack of opportunities and political freedom in Egypt. As several groups and environments have come together at Tahrir square, various names for the whole movement seem to circulate among Egyptians, some of whom speak of the “January 25 movement” or “January 25 party”. However, two central milieus associated with it are the 6 April movement and the Facebook site “We are all Khalid Sa’id”.² Their constituencies probably overlap to a great extent.

The 6 April movement was established in 2008, in sympathy with striking textile workers in the industrial town of al-Mahalla al-Kubra. The movement describes itself thus:

We are a group of Egyptian Youth from different backgrounds, age and trends gathered for a whole year since the renewal of hope in 6 April 2008 in the probability of mass action in Egypt which allowed all kind of youth from different backgrounds, society classes all over Egypt to emerge from the crisis and reach for the democratic future that overcomes the case of occlusion of political and economic prospects that the society is suffering from these days.³

“We are all Khaled Sa’id” (Kullina Khalid Sa’id) is a Facebook group established by Google executive Wael Ghonim (more on him below) who created it as a reaction to the torture and murder of 28-year-old Khalid Said by two policemen in Alexandria in June 2010. Apparently, Said was tortured and murdered because he filmed the two men while they were engaged in selling drugs in a cafe. Photographs of his battered face were circulated on the internet and public outrage followed, as well as the Facebook site which bears his name. The Facebook site

has 464,757 friends as of 4 February 2011.⁴ Wael Ghonim was one of the key organizers of the huge protests on 25 January that started off the Egyptian uprising.

These two groups and twitter accounts close to them have mobilized massively via internet, making and distributing posters, slogans and coordinating demonstrations, as well as providing discussion forums that have featured lively and massively attended online discussions. Until the demonstrations started, internet activism was dismissed as unthreatening by the Egyptian security apparatus, probably on account of the failure of the April 6 movement to mobilize in 2008. However, this kind of activism proved itself to be a formidable mobilizing force during January 2011.

Aims

Prior to the big demonstration on 25 January, the aims of the youth movement were rather general. For example, the “We are all Khaled” Facebook site identifies some basic aims: advocacy of human rights, creating a platform for Egyptians to share their concerns about violations of these rights, and promoting activism in order to ensure that Egyptians are guaranteed respect of their constitutional rights by the authorities. The group explicitly states that it has no political or religious affiliation, and that it is open for all Egyptians regardless of religion, class, political views or country of residence.

Given its lack of a political programme and direction beyond demands for fundamental political reform, the youth movement has until recently been regarded as first and foremost a potent conveyor of dissatisfaction. One long-time observer of Egyptian society interprets it as the revolt of a middle class that is well connected to and informed about global events and frustrated that the rest of the world seems to progress while their own society does not. It is noteworthy in this regard that one of the most important concepts for the demonstrators has been “dignity”.⁵ For the youth, dignity may not be only about the treatment they receive from the police and the political system, but also about the image of Egypt abroad.

2 Robert Dreyfuss, “Who is behind the Egyptian protests?”, *Guardian*, 2 February 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/02/who-is-behind-egyptian-protests>, accessed 16 February 2011.

3 April 6 youth movement on facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=38588398289>, accessed 16 February 2011.

4 We Are All Khalid Sa’id, <http://www.facebook.com/ElShaheed>, accessed 16 February 2011.

5 Interview with Jan Juchelka, The Norwegian Armed Forces School of Intelligence and Language, 6 February 2011.

These characteristics would perhaps make it seem unlikely that the remarkable youth rebellion becomes anything more than a broad protest movement. However, there are signs that it may solidify into a more purposeful movement. Three factors in particular speak for such a development.

First, there is no lack of potential youth leaders who have demonstrated great skill and political acumen recently. Two figures that have already gained some international attention are Ahmad Maher and Asma Mahfuz, both co-founders of the 6 April movement.⁶ A third has made a spectacular entrance in the public arena during the last few days. On 7 February, Wael Ghonim, a Google executive and the person behind the “We are all Khalid Sa’id” web site, appeared on one of Egypt’s most well-known TV programmes. In a remarkable television moment, he single-handedly succeeded in rendering ineffective the regime’s media spin on the demonstrations. Ghonim was arrested and kept in detention for 12 days for his activism. He came almost straight from the prison to the TV studio, and broke down in tears after having delivered an emotional and forceful account of his experience and a moving defence for the demonstrators.

The broadcast seems to have electrified large segments of the Egyptian populace. Huge crowds turned out on Tahrir square on Tuesday 8 February, partly in response to his appearance. A Facebook site advocating the appointment of Ghonim as a negotiator on behalf of the youths grew by 50 members per second and reached more than 135,000 members after less than 12 hours.⁷ An academic who took part in a march from Cairo university to Tahrir square the day after the TV programme reports that people stood on balconies cheering for the demonstrators as they walked through the city.⁸

Second, the regime’s strategy of exhausting the demonstrators by dragging its feet and employing the army as a repressive force in recent days has not succeeded.⁹ The hard core of activists at Tahrir square has become ever more determined, and the TV appearance of Wael Ghonim pushed fresh protesters to the square. People who had become rather pessimistic about the prospects for a breakthrough describe Tuesday 8 February as a decisive watershed and experienced new vigour in their activism.

Third, the youth movement has overcome political and religious differences and chosen a group of ten persons to represent the youth vis-à-vis the regime and other political actors. The group consists of young representatives of the 6 April movement, independent protesters, the National Coalition for Change and the Muslim Brothers. The group is remarkably disciplined and has withstood all attempts at divide and rule tactics from the regime. Furthermore, it has presented the regime with a list of concrete and radical demands that has been conveyed to Omar Suleiman via the Council of Wise Men (more on which below).

The demands include the stepping down of Mubarak, the dissolution of Parliament and appointment of a caretaker government composed of independent and popular public figures, an end to the state of emergency, and the formation of independent committees to draft changes to the constitution. The group has consistently refused to accept anything less than these demands and, in the face of regime foot-dragging, it has allied itself with workers, who staged a nationwide strike on 9 February, and expanded its scope of actions in Cairo to include squares in relatively well-off areas like Muhandisin and Duqqi.¹⁰

Based on these three facts, it is reasonable to assume that some of the leading figures among the young people will emerge as public figures that push for acceptance of the youths’ basic demands: an immediate and fundamental change in the Egyptian politi-

6 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Profile of Ahmed Maher,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 1, 2010, <http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/2010/09/01/profile-of-ahmed-maher>; Mona El-naggar, “Equal Rights Takes to the Barricades,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2011, sec. World / Middle East, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/02/world/middleeast/02iht-letter02.html?_r=1. Accessed 16 February 2011.

7 The site is found at <http://www.facebook.com/Authorize.Ghoneim>. Accessed 16 February 2011.

8 Phone interview with Dr. Emad Abdul-Latif, lecturer at Cairo University and member of the 9 March movement, 9 February 2011.

9 Starting 7 February, the army reportedly hindered the delivering of supplies of food and drink to the demonstrators, and it attempted to push them away from parts of Tahrir square. Information provided in phone interview with Egyptian sympathizer who works near the square, 8 February 2011.

10 Al Jazeera English, “The youth of Tahrir,” *Al Jazeera English*, 10 February 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/02/201129214957928702.html>. Accessed 16 February 2011.

cal system that purges it of corruption and concentration of power in the hands of the security sector, and substitutes democracy and an open society for the current authoritarian system – in other words, no mere reform process.

The ability of the youth movement to mobilize broadly should not be underestimated, despite the frequent highlighting of the fact that the young people have no leadership or coherent programme, and that they only represent a small part of Egyptian youth that is technology-savvy and active on the internet. As of 10 February 2011, 60,101 Facebook members sympathize with the April 6 on its Arabic Facebook site, while 651,123 members “like” We are all Khalid Sa’id. Both movements have shown that internet mobilization works for them. Furthermore, they have apparently managed to ally with industrial workers in places like al-Mahalla al-Kubra, as shown by the general strike of 20,000 workers on Wednesday 9 February. The industrial workers are a group that carries great political weight.

The council of wise men (lajnat al-hukama’)

As of 9 February, there is some confusion about this council. There seems to have been at least two, possibly three, such councils, made up of self-declared independent academics and businessmen, who have taken it upon themselves to act as a kind of mediator between the protesters and the regime. Two of them seem to have merged into one, which is composed of personalities closely affiliated with the publishing house and daily newspaper *al-Shuruq*. This section will focus on that council, as it has gained significant public recognition.

Al-Shuruq’s founder, Ibrahim al-Mu’allim, is a member of the council. It is led by the well-known Dr. Ahmad Kamal Abu al-Majd, an 81-year-old jurist and former minister of media and youth. Interestingly, he is a prominent advocate of the Islamic political trend which is called “centrism” (*wasatiyya*). The more liberal strands of the Muslim Brotherhood support this trend, and other Egyptian proponents of it include well-known intellectuals like Fahmi Huwaydi, Tariq al-Bishri and Muhammad Imara. The spokesman for the council is Amr Hamzawy, a relatively young political analyst with the Carnegie Foundation’s Beirut office, who

enjoys widespread popularity in the Arab world for his political analyses in the pan-Arab media. This leadership duo potentially gives the group great legitimacy and credibility.

Aims

The council supports the youth movement, and apparently its demands are identical with those of the movement. In its first statement (published on 2 February) the council lists the following demands:

- that Mubarak vests Omar Suleiman with the power to lead the country in a transitional phase that ends at the same time as the current presidential term, ie, September 2011;
- that Suleiman dissolves the two houses of Parliament and appoints a committee of independent jurists to prepare necessary changes to the constitution;
- appointment of a new administrative government of independent figures “accepted by the people” to run the country during the transition period;
- an end to the state of the emergency (in place since 1981), and prosecution of all those who have attacked or otherwise harmed demonstrators;
- and assurances that the “young demonstrators” all over Egypt will not be subjected to persecution, attacks or infringement of their right to express themselves in the future.¹¹

The council has issued three more statements – the latest appeared on 8 February. Significantly, its language towards the regime and the army has sharpened gradually and the above demands were stated again more forcefully in the fourth statement, after the council had met with representatives of the youth movement who asked them to act as intermediaries between them and the regime. Thus, the determination of the young people described above seems to have affected and emboldened older and established public actors, putting ever more pressure on the regime to engage in meaningful and substantial reforms of the system.

¹¹ “The first statement of the group of Egyptian businessmen and intellectuals regarding the political crisis,” *al-Shuruq portal* (Cairo, February 2, 2011), <http://shorouknews.com/ContentData.aspx?id=384324>. Accessed 16 February 2011.

The National Association for Change

This coalition was created by Muhammad al-Baradei in 2010, when he returned to Egypt to advocate for change introducing himself as a possible candidate for presidential elections in 2011. The association's aims (see below) are centred on constitutional reform to allow democracy to prosper, and the association's spokesmen have repeatedly stressed that it is a broad movement of which al-Baradei is a symbol and not a leader. Almost all opposition groups, including the Muslim Brothers, but with the notable exceptions of the established and tolerated opposition (al-Wafd, Tagammu' and the Nasserist party), joined the Association. In addition to al-Baradei, other prominent figures include Hasan Nafa'a, a professor of political science at Cairo University, and Hamdi Qandil, a popular and independent media figure.

Aims

The Association has formulated a petition consisting of the following demands:

1. Ending the state of emergency.
2. Ensuring judicial oversight over the entire election process.
3. Allowing local and international civil society groups to monitor elections.
4. Allowing equal access to media for all candidates, particularly during presidential elections.
5. Giving Egyptians living abroad the right to vote at Egyptian embassies and consulates.
6. Ensuring the right to run for president (without arbitrary restrictions) in accordance with Egypt's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as limiting the president's service to two terms.
7. Voting with the National ID. Achieving some of these procedures and guarantees necessitates the amendment of articles 76, 77, and 88 of the constitution as soon as possible.¹²

While originally formulated in 2010 with the presidential elections in mind, these demands resonate to a great degree with the demands put

forward by the youth movement. Al-Baradei has also been a public supporter of the youths, although he is criticized for not engaging properly with them – he has visited Tahrir square only once, on 30 January. Nevertheless, the Association has at least one representative in the youth coalition headquartered on al-Tahrir square. This representative states that al-Baradei's role is not to directly head a political movement, but to employ his international standing in the service of the youths by publicly supporting them, negotiating on their behalf and securing external support for them.

In line with this strategy, al-Baradei has not been among the most visible forces within Egypt during the last week. Instead, he has actively sought out pan-Arab and international media, such as BBC Arabic and Der Spiegel, and urged Mubarak to step down through such international channels.¹³

The Muslim Brothers (MB)

The scope of this report precludes a general overview of the MB as a political organization and its role in Egyptian political life.¹⁴ Instead, it will focus on its behaviour during the demonstrations and the signals it has sent out.

The MB was slow to join the demonstrations. This may be explained both by the organization's inherent cautious behaviour in Egyptian politics and its fear that early involvement would have led the authorities to crack down hard on both the MB and the demonstrators in general. This calculation proved to be correct, as both President Mubarak and vice President Omar Suleiman have tried (unsuccessfully) to portray the demonstrations as fiendish plots by the MB and other Islamist organizations to destabilize Egypt.

However, the MB's pragmatism might also have caused it to lose popularity among the young and to widen the already existing gap between its age-

¹² <http://www.taghyeer.net/>; English translation at <http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/2010/09/22/national-association-for-change>.

¹³ See the BBC Arabic interview at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wU01WXFHNqY>; and Spiegel Online, "Transition in Egypt: ElBaradei Wants to Negotiate with the Army," *Spiegel Online*, February 5, 2011, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,743762,00.html>.

¹⁴ For an overview see Bjørn Olav Utvik and Truls H. Tønnessen (2008), *Islamist Movements in the Middle East: Challenging the Autocrats*, Oslo: University of Oslo, 2008, http://www.ps.au.dk/fileadmin/site_files/filer_statskundskab/subsites/cir/pdf-filer/p3.PDF; and *Movement background*, Carnegie, <http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/2010/09/16/background>.

ing leadership and its younger activists. Young MB demonstrators at Tahrir square reportedly reacted with astonishment and dismay when they heard that the MB leadership had entered into separate talks with Omar Suleiman during the first days of February. The leadership has apparently felt the need to justify its attempts to negotiate with the regime, as it has posted several statements on its website explaining that its aim in entering into talks was guided solely by the wish to speed up the political transition process and did not in any way mean that it abandoned the revolution.

In any case, nothing seems to have come out of these talks, and the MB has employed an increasingly confrontational stance towards the regime of Omar Suleiman, powerfully stating its complete solidarity with the protest movements and the young people at Tahrir square.

Aims

The ultimate aim of the Muslim Brothers is, needless to say, the establishment of an Islamic state. This is a cliché, and a meaningless one at that, because there are many different interpretations of what an “Islamic state” should look like. In the MB case, it has become increasingly clear during the last ten years or so that their aim is a democratic state in which power is transferred peacefully by means of regularly conducted elections, and within a robust system of checks and balances. They have stayed true to this aim both in their discourse and in their internal political practices.

It should be noted here that there are at least three main tendencies within the MB: the old guard, which remains conservative in all senses of the word and who do not advocate political reforms strongly; a younger layer of cadres in their 50s who have increasingly become relatively liberal socially speaking and very vocal about the need for democracy and constructive political engagement; and a large group of middle-ground members who are socially conservative but advocate political participation and democratization.

The two last tendencies can be expected to capitalize on what is going on currently. Tellingly, in its statement about the current situation posted to its website on 9 February, the MB writes:

Some have spread the false rumour that we want to establish a religious state like the one in Iran. We have repeated from the very beginning that we do not aim for power, the presidency or any positions whatsoever, and that we do not strive to achieve a majority in Parliament. What we want is comprehensive reform in the political, economic, social, scientific, education and media fields (...). The state we wish for is a civil, democratic state with an Islamic reference, where the people is the source of power and holder of sovereignty.¹⁵

It should be noted that this statement was issued first in Arabic on 9 February and has not appeared in English yet (10 February), which suggests that it is intended for an Egyptian, and not a foreign, audience. It is difficult to state more clearly the MB's wish to participate in a broad movement of popular solidarity. Clearly, the MB wants to contribute to creating a state where it and other movements are able to participate freely in politics, as opposed to the situation over the last half century or so.

Lastly, it is important to note that the youth movement's committee of ten who act as representatives of the various tendencies among the demonstrators includes two young Muslim Brothers, one of whom is Muhammad Abbas. Notwithstanding this fact, and the fact that several young Islamist activists are present among the demonstrators, Islamist slogans have been conspicuously absent from the demonstrations so far. The young Muslim Brothers are apparently just as concerned about presenting a common front as are all the other youth activists.

The independent judges

Law will be one of the main battlegrounds in the struggle for a new Egypt. Already, demonstrators and those supporting them have highlighted the need to amend specific parts of the constitution. Changes have been demanded, inter alia, to articles 76 (which outlines requirements to stand for presidential

¹⁵ The Muslim Brothers, “Press statement of the Muslim Brothers on the sixteenth day of the blessed popular revolution,” February 9, 2011, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?artid=78899&secid=212>. Accessed 16 February 2011.

elections), 179 (which enables the state to suspend citizens' individual rights) and 88 (which hampers judges' ability to oversee parliamentary elections).

Accordingly, Egypt's legal experts will have an important role in the days ahead. Importantly, there already exists a strong reformist and independent-minded tendency within the Egyptian judiciary, even if the judges have not occupied centre stage during the past three weeks' demonstrations. What are the forces within the judiciary that might gain a prominent role in the near future?

The judicial apparatus is widely respected among Egyptians. In particular, a large group of independent-minded judges who were central in the judges' club in the 1990s and 2000s enjoy great credibility among informed Egyptians. The reason for this is that these judges have consistently struggled against the executive's attempt at arrogating to itself ever more power at the cost of the judiciary and people's basic rights as citizens. This struggle came to a head in 2006-2007, when the regime pushed through the constitutional reforms that are now one of the central issues in the demonstrations. The judges, in particular Ahmad Makki, Hisham al-Bastawisi and Mahmud al-Khudayri, fought vigorously against the amendments, at great personal and professional costs.

Aims

In relation to what is presently taking place in Egypt, the independent judges' traditional positions are somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, they have never been a driving force for democratization or popular political participation as such. Their main concern has been to protect the integrity of the judiciary and to defend the principles of liberal constitutionalism, including people's right to basic freedoms.¹⁶ On the other hand, they are a natural ally in the people's struggle against an authoritarian order, since they have clearly tried to defend the citizenry from a predatory state.

Ahmad Makki, one of the prominent independent judges, and Ahmad Kamal Abu al-Majd, the leader of the Council of Wise Men, are two of the 10-member strong and newly formed committee

that will revise the constitution.¹⁷ (Update 15 February: This committee is now defunct, and another one has been appointed by the military council. Its head is Tariq al-Bishri, a retired judge and centrist Islamist whose writings have inspired the more progressive strands of the Muslim Brothers.) Another independent judge, Hisham al-Bastawisi, assumed a prominent role on Friday 11 February, when he was interviewed at length live on Al-Jazeera during demonstrations in Alexandria before the announcement of Mubarak's resignation. Al-Bastawisi has progressive credentials, having stressed the importance of including more women in the judiciary, fighting corruption and revising the constitution.¹⁸

Previously, the independent Egyptian judges have taken care to frame their activism in strictly legal terms, avoiding direct participation in politics. However, in the time ahead it is reasonable to assume that legal questions will be one of the core issues in the struggle between the military regime now in place and the popular reform movement. The judges may well turn out to be one of the movement's most important cards, and their position and relations with the regime and different reform actors should be followed closely.

Concluding analysis

The picture that emerges from this overview is one in which all opposition actors that have succeeded in assuming a public role gravitate towards the youth movement. This is a fact whose significance extends far beyond the emergence of young people as new players on the Arab political scene, which has been dominated by middle-aged and elderly men until now.

Young Egyptians, for all their social, political and cultural differences, have managed to unite in setting a radical political agenda – and the older, more established players on the scene who have managed to assume a meaningful role have conformed to this

¹⁶ Bruce K. Rutherford, *Egypt after Mubarak: Liberalism, Islam, and Democracy in the Arab World* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 235.

¹⁷ Al-Shuruq, "The text of President Mubarak's decision to form a committee to study and suggest revisions of some constitutional and judicial provisions," *al-Shuruq portal* (Cairo, February 8, 2011), <http://www.shorouknews.com/ContentData.aspx?id=386754>. Accessed 16 February 2011.

¹⁸ Huda Abu Bakr, "Justice Hisham al-Bastawisi: Appointment of female judges is a necessary step to reform the judiciary," *al-Dustur al-Asli* (Cairo, March 11, 2010), <http://dostor.org/politics/egypt/10/march/10/9025>. Accessed 16 February 2011.

agenda. The council of wise men, Muhammad al-Baradei's National Association for Change and the Muslim Brothers have all embraced the demands of the young people, and these associations have allowed themselves to be used by the young people to further their demands, rather than the other way around.

In contrast, the established and tolerated opposition (Wafd, Tagammu' and the Nasserist party), which is already tainted by its toothless opposition during the Mubarak era, have rendered themselves irrelevant by ignoring the young Egyptians and engaging in separate talks with the regime. The Muslim Brothers probably put their credibility with the young people at risk by their own separate talks with Omar Suleiman, but their opposition credentials are too established for them to lose their opposition *bona fides*.

It is apt to describe the uprising of young people that began on 25 January as not only a revolt against a fossilized regime, but against a whole generation of political actors who have failed to achieve much, regardless of whether they were in position or in opposition.¹⁹ What we are witnessing is the young population seizing the political initiative, not only from the authoritarian state, but from the entire older generation of politicians in Egypt.

It is still uncertain how far they can push their agenda, and for how long they will appear as one united force. What seems clear, however, is that this heterogeneous group of activists is determined to make their mark on Egyptian politics in the future. All parties with a stake in what happens in Egypt would do well to follow closely this still evolving political group, its means of communication and mobilization, and the figures that have emerged as its informal leaders.

The other independent political actor that should be followed closely in the days ahead is the judiciary. Traditionally loath to enter the political game, independent-minded judges have at their disposal some of the most important tools for creating a liberal and democratic political order in Egypt, and so they are bound to become a political actor. For the reform movement's continued success, much will depend on how aggressively the judges confront a military regime that is probably reluctant to bring about radical change.

In conclusion, the formal Egyptian interlocutor of the US and European governments is still a government dominated by the military. However, the radical change towards a more open society has taken place outside of government, where existing forces have shown remarkable pragmatism and constraint (the Muslim Brothers), and new groups have crystallized (youth movements and independent intellectuals willing to take on a political role). Having actively supported and recognized an authoritarian regime for 30 years, in the current murky situation US and European politicians now have a unique opportunity to redirect their focus and engage more seriously with real forces of change, even if they do not occupy the formal positions of power.

¹⁹ This is the interpretation of an Egyptian academic and former journalist who has supported the demonstrators in Cairo with food, drink and medicine throughout the demonstrations, phone interview, 7 February 2011.