



Opinion

Mubarak's phantom presidency

As the world watches Egyptian society transform, various interest groups jockey for position in the new political order.

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Opinion



Anti-government protesters say they are more determined than ever to topple President Hosni Mubarak [Reuters]

The "March of Millions" in Cairo marks the spectacular emergence of a new political society in Egypt. This uprising brings together a new coalition of forces, uniting reconfigured elements of the security state with prominent business people, internationalist leaders, and relatively new (or newly reconfigured) mass movements of youth, labour, women's and religious groups. President Hosni Mubarak lost his political power on Friday, January 28.

On that night the Egyptian military let Mubarak's ruling party headquarters burn down and ordered the police brigades attacking protesters to return to their barracks. When the evening call to prayer rang out and no one heeded Mubarak's curfew order, it was clear that the old president been reduced to a phantom authority. In order to understand where Egypt is going, and what shape democracy might take there, we need to set the extraordinarily successful popular mobilisations into their military, economic and social context. What other forces were behind this sudden fall of Mubarak from power? And how will this transitional military-centred government

get along with this millions-strong protest movement?

Many international media commentators – and some academic and political analysts – are having a hard time understanding the complexity of forces driving and responding to these momentous events. This confusion is driven by the binary "good guys versus bad guys" lenses most used to view this uprising. Such perspectives obscure more than they illuminate.

There are three prominent binary models out there and each one carries its own baggage: (1) People versus Dictatorship, a perspective that leads to liberal naïveté and confusion about the active role of military and elites in this uprising; (2) Seculars versus Islamists, a model that leads to a 1980s-style call for "stability" and Islamophobic fears about the containment of the supposedly extremist "Arab street"; or, (3) Old Guard versus Frustrated Youth, a lens which imposes a 1960s-style romance on the protests but cannot begin to explain the structural and institutional dynamics driving the uprising, nor account for the key roles played by many 70-year-old Nasser-era figures.

To map out a more comprehensive view, it may be helpful to identify the moving parts within the military and police institutions of the security state and how clashes within and between these coercive institutions relate to shifting class hierarchies and capital formations. I will also weigh these factors in relation to the breadth of new non-religious social movements and the internationalist or humanitarian identity of certain figures emerging at the centre of the new opposition coalition.

Picking a paradigm

Western commentators, whether liberal, left or conservative, tend to see all forces of coercion in non-democratic states as the hammers of "dictatorship" or as expressions of the will of an authoritarian leader. But each police, military and security institution has its own history, culture, class-allegiances, and, often its own autonomous sources of revenue and support as well. It would take many books to lay this all out in detail; but let me make a brief attempt here. In Egypt, the police forces (al-shurta) are run by the Interior Ministry, which was very close to Mubarak and the Presidency and had become politically co-dependent on him.

But police stations gained relative autonomy during the past decades. In certain police stations this autonomy took the form of the adoption of a militant ideology or moral mission; or some Vice Police stations have taken up drug running; or some ran protection rackets that squeezed local small businesses. The political dependability of the police, from a bottom-up perspective, is not high. Police grew to be quite self-interested and entrepreneurial on a station-by-station level.

In the 1980s, the police faced the growth of "gangs", referred to in Egyptian Arabic as baltagiya. These street organisations had asserted self-rule over Cairo's many informal settlements and slums. Foreigners and the Egyptian bourgeoisie assumed the baltagiya to be Islamists but they were mostly utterly unideological. In the early 1990s the Interior Ministry decided "if you can't beat them, hire them".

So the Interior Ministry and the Central Security Services started outsourcing coercion to these baltagiya, paying them well and training them to use sexualised brutality (from groping to rape) in order to punish and deter female protesters and male detainees alike. During this period, the Interior Ministry also turned the State Security Investigations (SSI - mabahith amn al-dawla) into a monstrous threat, detaining and torturing masses of domestic political dissidents.

Autonomous from the Interior Ministry we have the Central Security Services (Amn al-Markazi). These are the black uniformed, helmeted men that the media refer to as "the police". Central Security was supposed to act as the private army of Mubarak. These are not revolutionary guards or morality brigades like the basiji who repressed the Green Movement protesters in Iran. By contrast, the Amn al-Markazi are low paid and non-ideological.

Moreover, at crucial times, these Central Security brigades have risen up en masse against Mubarak himself to demand better wages and working conditions.

Perhaps if it weren't for the sinister assistance of the brutal *baltagiya*, they would not be a very intimidating force. The look of unenthusiastic resignation in the eyes of *Amn al-Markazi* soldiers as they were kissed and lovingly disarmed by protesters has become one of the most iconic images, so far, of this revolution. The dispelling of Mubarak's authority could be marked to precisely that moment when protesters kissed the cheeks of *Markazi* officers who promptly vanished into puffs of tear gas, never to return.

Evolving military power

The Armed Forces of the Arab Republic of Egypt are quite unrelated to the *Markazi* or police and see themselves as a distinct kind of state altogether. One could say that Egypt is still a "military dictatorship" (if one must use that term) since this is still the same regime that the Free Officers' Revolution installed in the 1950s. But the military has been marginalised since Egyptian President Anwar Sadat signed the Camp David Accords with Israel and the United States. Since 1977, the military has not been allowed to fight anyone. Instead, the generals have been given huge aid payoffs by the US. They have been granted concessions to run shopping malls in Egypt, develop gated cities in the desert and beach resorts on the coasts. And they are encouraged to sit around in cheap social clubs.

These buy-offs have shaped them into an incredibly organised interest group of nationalist businessmen. They are attracted to foreign investment, but their loyalties are economically and symbolically embedded in national territory. As we can see when examining any other case in the region (Pakistan, Iraq, the Gulf), US military-aid money does not buy loyalty to America; it just buys resentment. In recent years, the Egyptian military has felt collectively a growing sense of national duty, and has developed a sense of embittered shame for what it considers its "neutered masculinity": its sense that it was not standing up for the nation's people.

The nationalistic Armed Forces want to restore their honour and they are disgusted by police corruption and *baltagiya* brutality. And it seems that the military, now as "national capitalists", have seen themselves as the blood rivals of the neoliberal "crony capitalists" associated with Hosni Mubarak's son Gamal who have privatised anything they can get their hands on and sold the country's assets off to China, the US, and Persian Gulf capital.

Thus we can see why in the first stage of this revolution, on Friday January 28, we saw a very quick "coup" of the military against the police and Central Security, and disappearance of Gamal Mubarak (the son) and of the detested Interior Minister, Habib el-Adly. However, the military is also split by some internal contradictions. Within the Armed Forces there are two elite sub-branches, the Presidential Guard and the Air Force. These remained closer to Mubarak while the broader military turned against him.

This explains why you can had the contradictory display of the General Chief of the Armed Forces, Muhammad Tantawi, wading in among the protesters to show support on January 30, while at the same time, the chief of the Air Force was named Mubarak's new Prime Minister and sent planes to strafe the same protesters. This also explains why the Presidential Guard protected the Radio/Television Building and fought against protesters on January 28 rather than siding with them.

The Vice President, Omar Soleiman, named on January 29, was formerly the head of the Intelligence Services (*al-mukhabarat*). This is also a branch of the military (not of the police). Intelligence is in charge of externally-oriented secret operations, detentions and interrogations (and, thus, torture and renditions of non-Egyptians). Although since Soleiman's *mukhabarat* did not detain and torture as many Egyptian dissidents in the domestic context, they are less hated than the *mubahith*.

The Intelligence Services (*mukhabarat*) are in a particularly decisive position as a "swing vote". As I understand it, the Intelligence Services loathed Gamal Mubarak and the "crony capitalist" faction, but are obsessed with stability

and have long, intimate relationships with the CIA and the American military. The rise of the military, and within it, the Intelligence Services, explains why all of Gamal Mubarak's business cronies were thrown out of the cabinet on Friday, January 28, and why Soleiman was made interim VP (and functions in fact as Acting President).

Cementing a new order

This revolution or regime change would be complete at the moment when anti-Mubarak tendencies in the military consolidate their position and reassure the Intelligence Services and the Air Force that they can confidently open up to the new popular movements and those parties coalesced around opposition leader ElBaradei. This is what an optimistic reader might judge to be what Obama and Clinton describe as an "orderly transition".

On Monday, January 31, we saw Naguib Sawiris, perhaps Egypt's richest businessman and the iconic leader of the developmentalist "nationalist capital" faction in Egypt, joining the protesters and demanding the exit of Mubarak. During the past decade, Sawiris and his allies had become threatened by Mubarak-and-son's extreme neoliberalism and their favoring of Western, European and Chinese investors over national businessmen. Because their investments overlap with those of the military, these prominent Egyptian businessmen have interests literally embedded in the land, resources and development projects of the nation. They have become exasperated by the corruption of Mubarak's inner circle.

Paralleling the return of organized national(ist) capital associated with the military and ranged against the police (a process that also occurred during the struggle with British colonialism in the 1930s-50s) there has been a return of very powerful and vastly organized labor movements, principally among youth. 2009 and 2010 were marked by mass national strikes, nationwide sit-ins, and visible labor protests often in the same locations that spawned this 2011 uprising. And the rural areas have been rising up against the government's efforts to evict small farmers from their lands, opposing the regime's attempts to re-create the vast landowner fiefdoms that defined the countryside during the Ottoman and British Colonial periods.

In 2008 we saw the 100,000 strong April 6 Youth Movement emerge, leading a national general strike. And in 2008 and just in December 2010 we saw the first independent public sector unions emerge. Then just on January 30, 2011, clusters of unions from most major industrial towns gathered to form an Independent Trade Union Federation. These movements are organized by new leftist political parties that have no relation to the Muslim Brotherhood, nor are they connected to the past generation of Nasserism.

They do not identify against Islam, of course, and do not make an issue of policing the secular-religious divide. Their interest in protecting national manufacturing and agricultural smallholdings, and in demanding public investment in national economic development dovetails with some of the interests of the new nationalist capital alliance.

Thus behind the scenes of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Facebook-driven protest waves, there are huge structural and economic forces and institutional realignments at work. Egypt's population is officially recorded at 81 million but in reality goes well beyond 100 million since some parents do not register all their children to shield them from serving in the Amn Al-Markazi or army. With the burgeoning youth population now becoming well-organized, these social and internet-coordinated movements are becoming very important.

They can be grouped into three trends. One group of new movements are organized by and around international norms and organizations, and so may tend toward a secular, globalizing set of perspectives and discourses.

A second group is organized through the very active and assertive legal culture and independent judicial institutions in Egypt. This strong legal culture is certainly not a "Western human rights" import. Lawyers, judges and millions of litigants – men and women, working-class, farmers, and elite – have kept alive the judicial system and have a long unbroken history of resisting authoritarianism and staking rights claims of all sorts.

A third group of new social movements represents the intersection of internationalist NGOs, judicial-rights groups and the new leftist, feminist, rural and worker social movements. The latter group critiques the universalism of UN and NGO secular discourses, and draws upon the power of Egypt's legal and labor activism, but also has its own innovative strategies and solutions – many of which have been on prominent display on the streets this week.

Egyptian internationalism

One final element to examine here is the critical, and often overlooked role that Egypt has played in United Nations and humanitarian organizations, and how this history is coming back to enliven domestic politics and offer legitimacy and leadership at this time. Muhammad ElBaradei, the former director of the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency, has emerged as the consensus choice of the United Democratic Front in Egypt, which is asking him to serve as interim president, and to preside over a national process of consensus building and constitution drafting. In the 2000s, ElBaradei bravely led the IAEA and was credited with confirming that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and that Iran was not developing a nuclear weapons program.

He won the Nobel Prize for upholding international law against a new wave of wars of aggression and for essentially stopping the momentum for war against Iran. He is no radical and not Egypt's Gandhi; but he is no pushover or puppet of the US, either. For much of the week, standing at his side at the protests has been Egyptian actor Khaled Abou Naga, who has appeared in several Egyptian and American films, and who serves as Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF. This may be much more a UN-humanitarian led revolution than a Muslim Brotherhood uprising. This is a very twenty-first century regime change – simultaneously local and international.

It is a good time to remind ourselves that the first-ever United Nations military-humanitarian peacekeeping intervention, the UN Emergency Force, was created with the joint support of Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and US President Dwight D. Eisenhower (both military men, of course) in 1960 to keep the peace in Gaza and to stop the former colonial powers and Israel from invading Egypt in order to retake the Suez Canal and resubordinate Egypt.

Then in the 1990s, Egypt's Boutros Boutros-Ghali served as the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Boutros-Ghali articulated new UN doctrines of state-building and militarized humanitarian intervention. But he got fired for making the mistake of insisting that international human rights and humanitarian law needed to be applied neutrally and universally, rather than only at the convenience of the Security Council powers.

Yet Egypt's relationship to the UN continues. Notably, 'Aida Seif Ad-Dawla, one of the most articulate, brave and creative leaders of the new generation of Egyptian social movements and feminist NGOs, is a candidate for the high office of UN Rapporteur on Torture. Egyptians have a long history for investing in and supporting international law, humanitarian norms and human rights.

Egyptian internationalism insists on the equal application of human rights principles and humanitarian laws of war even in the face of superpower pressure. In this context, ElBaradei's emergence as a leader makes perfect sense. Although this internationalist dimension of Egypt's "local" uprising is utterly ignored by most self-conscious liberal commentators who assume that international means "the West" and that Egypt's protesters are driven by the politics of the belly rather than matters of principle.

Mubarak is already out of power. The new cabinet is composed of chiefs of Intelligence, Air Force and the prison authority, as well as one International Labor Organization official. This group embodies a hard-core "stability coalition" that will work to bring together the interests of new military, national capital and labor, all the while reassuring the United States.

Yes, this is a reshuffling of the cabinet, but one which reflects a very significant change in political direction. But none of it will count as a democratic transition until the vast new coalition of local social movements and

internationalist Egyptians break into this circle and insist on setting the terms and agenda for transition.

I would bet that even the hard-line leaders of the new cabinet will be unable to resist plugging into the willpower of these popular uprisings, one hundred million Egyptians strong.

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