

Egypt After Mubarak

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In the weeks since President Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign, on February 11, the same coalition that led the uprising in Tahrir Square has frequently and vigorously taken action to continue the Egyptian revolution. Labor federations, student movements, women's organizations and new liberal-leaning Islamist youth groups have forced out Mubarak's allies at television networks and newspapers, shuttered the hated State Security and police ministries, confiscated police files on dissidents, triggered more cabinet resignations and pursued indictments against perpetrators of police brutality, state corruption and religious bigotry. They have established new political parties, fended off attempts to circumscribe women's rights, expanded the millions-strong independent labor federation, reclaimed university administrations and staged the first truly free elections for university councils, professional syndicates and labor unions in Egypt's modern history. Mubarak is under arrest in a hospital; his sons languish in Tora prison (Cairo's Bastille); and a dozen oligarchs have had their assets seized. And yet, most of the Western press seems not to have noticed these political achievements and social struggles.

Instead, the *New York Times* and Western commentators at Al Jazeera have asked "Is the 'Arab Spring' losing its spring?" and "Could Egypt's revolution be stolen?" Hillary Clinton warned that the revolution could end up a mere "mirage in the desert." The Western press dwelled on the results of the March 19 referendum—in which 77 percent of voters approved a set of hastily written constitutional amendments—to conclude that an old guard alliance of the army and the Muslim Brotherhood had come together to turn back the people's revolution. Prepared largely in secrecy by a committee of army officers and a judge attached to the Muslim Brotherhood, these amendments set the stage for parliamentary elections in September and presidential elections in November. But they did not suspend the emergency decree or limit the overwhelming power of the presidency, as much as opponents had hoped.

It's true that the Muslim Brotherhood and remnants of Mubarak's NDP supported the amendments while liberal, leftist and Christian organizations lobbied against them. But the result can't be read as a signal that three-quarters of the Egyptian people intend to vote for Islamist parties or that they support elements within the army still linked to the Mubarak regime. As Egyptian youth organizer and author Amr Abdelrahman said, "Some within the army misinterpreted the 'yes' vote on the referendum as a vote against protesters and for the army, rather than as a vote celebrating both groups at the same time." In other words, Egyptians were motivated to vote yes for democracy, yes to launch a newly open political system and yes to thank the army for protecting the people from violence.

Indeed, soon after the referendum, public opinion turned strongly and quickly against the tentative alliance between the army and the Muslim Brotherhood. Public protests soared to levels not seen since February 11. Tens of thousands demonstrated and held sit-ins on university campuses; thousands of farmers in the rural south rose up to organize against the repressive tactics of the military council; and even the people of Sharm el-Sheikh (the Red Sea beach resort and location of Mubarak's exile villa) took to the streets to insist that the army hold former regime leaders accountable for their crimes. There was ample evidence of internal dissent within the armed forces, and key youth and liberal leaders within the Brotherhood began talking of moving in new

directions. This post-referendum crisis reopened veins of conflict, but in a good way, pressuring the army to identify with—not against—the revolutionary youth.

That was most clear on April 8 during a huge protest called the Day of Cleansing, which united tens of thousands of women, students and religious groups in Tahrir Square. Demonstrators were enraged that the army had drafted a draconian new law that banned protests and strikes. Rather than lifting the state of emergency, the army seemed to be refortifying it, and there were signs that it was trying to back away from prosecuting Mubarak, his family and his former ministers for corruption, torture and abuse of power. As Gen. Mohamed al-Assar of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces said on April 11, “Officials can be investigated for financial crimes, but political crimes and corruption are not penalized by current Egyptian law so former officials cannot be charged in those ways.”

Ignoring the army’s ban on protests, university students marched from Giza over the Nile bridge, converging with members of labor unions and Muslim sisterhood organizations in Tahrir Square. At the heart of the protest, protected by the crowd, were twenty to thirty young army officers in uniform, defectors. They read a manifesto demanding an end to the emergency decree and calling on the military to stand more clearly on the side of the people. The young officers criticized corruption in the military and appealed for the removal of Mubarak’s cronies from the armed forces, insisting in particular on the ouster of Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, Egypt’s defense minister and the current leader of the ruling military council.

That night, the military police and the loathed (and supposedly disbanded) State Security forces reacted swiftly and brutally. At least two civilians, reportedly including a young girl, were shot dead. Most of the young officers were hunted down, arrested and disappeared. Assar justified the crackdown, saying, “The military is now the backbone of the nation, and any attack against it is an attempt to destroy the nation’s structure.”

But the next day’s dawn revealed a resolute and undaunted prodemocracy movement. All political forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood, stood in solidarity against the military’s repression. The night’s violence had in fact enhanced the strength and confidence of the revolution’s actors. The new prime minister, anti-corruption crusader Essam Sharaf, threatened to resign and demanded an immediate apology from the military and justice for the victims. The two leading candidates for president, Secretary General of the Arab League Amr Moussa and Nobel laureate Mohamed ElBaradei, also slammed the military and demanded urgent changes.

By the following Sunday, the army had released all civilian detainees without charges and promised to reform and restrain itself. More progressive officers, like Gen. Sami Annan, moved into positions of greater influence. The military was being transformed by the revolution, from within and without, and although its old guard was not giving up without bloodshed, the institution showed signs of lurching toward change.

Most important, the post-referendum crisis triggered the formation of the most exciting organization yet, the Egyptian National Congress, or Egyptian Congress to Defend the Revolution, an umbrella group composed of the 25 January Youth Coalition; the 6 April National Labor Movement (representing midsize factory towns); the League of Progressive Youth (leftists in all parts of Egypt); the Upper Egypt Youth Platform (rural southern organizations); such new parties as the Free Egyptians Party (an antisectionarian party supported by prominent Christian Egyptians); the Democratic Workers Party; the Karama, or Dignity, Party (Nasserist left-nationalists); as well as established, centrist middle-class parties like the Wafd and the Greens. Thousands of delegates from these groups will gather May 7 in Cairo in a meeting funded by wealthy architect and charismatic visionary Mamdouh Hamza. They aim to elect a steering committee to serve as a civilian complement to the military council, draw up a document clarifying the revolution’s remaining objectives, which Hamza describes as a “futuristic vision of social-justice based development,” and begin forging a common slate of candidates for the September parliamentary elections.

Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood has so far declined to join the Congress. During its April 30 Shura council meeting, the old guard of the Brotherhood succeeded in placing one of its own, Muhammad Mursi, as chair of the Freedom and Justice Party, which is committed to contesting 50 percent of the seats in the upcoming elections. The Brotherhood has seemingly tied its fate to an alternative gathering called the National Dialogue, which is mostly made up of elderly Egyptians, including senior military council members and veterans of Mubarak's old ruling party.

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University elections across Egypt in March featured huge levels of mobilization and participation among usually apathetic student populations. Most important, these vigorously contested elections revealed a shift taking place, from a moment when all energies targeted Mubarak and his police state to one characterized by a broad debate about what forms of government and kinds of social policies should govern the new Egypt.

The university elections were also marked by a mix of unprecedented enthusiasm and radical pragmatism—particularly when it came to the role of religion. When puritanical Salafi groups and student sympathizers of conservative Muslim Brotherhood factions entered campuses and tried to re-ignite the old culture wars (pamphleteering and spreading graffiti about the evils of beer, prostitution and liberal democracy), they were seen as humorless harassers of Egypt's new political spaces. As Cairo University's Kholoud Saber, a young woman leader at the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, said, "Students who identified as Salafis and right-wing Brothers who tried to spread propaganda about religious perversion and make trouble with women and Christians were seen as nothing more than agents of the old regime, suspected of being linked to the old SS [State Security]." Saber said that their presence "only increased support for the more progressive and problem-solving candidates."

The rejection of Salafi pamphleteers, however, didn't mean all religious rhetoric was rejected. To the contrary, youth organizations drew on religious discourse and notions of public duty to call attention to issues like student housing, public transportation, the crisis of graduate unemployment, high university fees and the demand to fire corrupt administrators and to keep police and military surveillance off campus. Slogans used by Muslim sister candidates at Cairo University may sound secular to Westerners—"Change yourself then change Egypt" and "Stay positive and vote"—but Egyptians would recognize these words as a reflection of Islamic notions of moral commitment, ethical self-transformation and the duty to participate in the community.

Invoking change and participation rather than traditionalism and doctrine in this manner, progressive religious student groups helped overturn a culture of apathy on campuses. Thirty percent of student council seats across the country were won by Muslim Brotherhood-linked candidates, among them young men and women from the more liberal branches. Mozn Hassan, youth leader and director of the Nazra for Feminist Studies in Cairo, reported that "although most students in this first free university-council election had not yet organized into distinct parties, almost all candidates who had any link to the NDP...were rejected at the ballot box, and independent candidates associated with liberal organizations or issues won the majority of council seats, even in Alexandria, which is often thought of as a bastion of religious politics."

Seif Edeen El-Bendari, of Cairo University's Economics and Political Science School, who was elected to the office of vice president for social and environmental affairs, spoke with joy and enthusiasm not about any particular ideological issue but about the change among his peers: "Students are now active, ambitious, becoming articulate about politics and getting involved in fixing the system. People want to be aware of their rights and assert them. They might be angry or afraid sometimes, but they are not pessimistic. They own their country now and insist that they will choose who rules Egypt."

This kind of democratic spirit has also infused Egypt's professional syndicates, which between February and April overthrew their old regime leaders. In other countries, professional syndicates can be conservative organizations protecting the privileged; but in Egypt they tend to operate more like Wisconsin's public sector unions, as vigilant protectors of the middle class.

As Mozn Hassan noted, "The March elections in the doctors syndicate, where they threw out the old guard Muslim Brothers as well as Mubarak-linked leaders and where women captured some leadership roles, represented the end of an era when professionals had leaned toward social conservatism." The doctors syndicate also voted to give 3,000 Egyptian pounds to the family of each person killed in the Tahrir demonstrations. In the same period, the Supreme Constitutional Court declared state attempts to freeze syndicate elections unconstitutional; the journalists syndicate dumped its old regime leader and mobilized to end state control and corruption of television and the press; and the lawyers syndicate sent its Mubarak-linked leader on a "permanent holiday" and organized new elections.

The state was also forced to approve the formation of a new independent syndicate for public sector pensioners. This giant organization, representing more than 8.5 million people and asserting control over 435 billion Egyptian pounds in pension funds, immediately became a huge player in revolutionary politics. Moreover, the other professional syndicates came together in late February to form a unified coalition, the March 9 Movement, to mobilize an additional 8 million professionals.

While the middle classes were on the march, the working class was not slowing down either. *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, an Arabic newspaper, published a survey of the strikes happening on a typical midweek workday up and down the Nile in small towns and factory outposts: 350 butane gas distributors demonstrating against the Ministry of Social Solidarity in the town of Takhla; 1,200 bank employees on strike, demanding better wages in Gharbiya; 350 potato chip factory workers striking in Monufiyya; 100 nursing students holding a sit-in to take over the medical syndicate in Beheira; 1,500 villagers in Mahsama protesting the city council's decision to close a subsidized bread bakery; workers at a spinning and weaving factory on strike in Assiut; thirty teachers blocking the education ministry in Alexandria to demand tenure; and 200 tax authority employees occupying the collector's office in Cairo demanding better wages and benefits.

The country's religious organizations have also been rocked by tumult, dissent and reform. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Muslim Brotherhood itself. On March 26, Sameh al-Barqy and Mohamed Effan, leaders of increasingly vocal youth movements within the Muslim Brotherhood, hosted a conference attended by hundreds of influential young movement leaders. The meeting infuriated the old guard who control the organization's Guidance Bureau, as the youth insisted on democracy within the organization and restrictions on the power of anyone over 65. In addition, Barqy stated that "the marginalized status of women in the group is no longer acceptable."

The young people demanded that any party supported by the Muslim Brotherhood have quotas to ensure participation by large numbers of women, Christians and other non-Muslims. In fact, the youth leaders announced that they would reject the Freedom and Justice Party, recently created by the old guard, if it did not implement these reforms and would join other centrist and left parties, like the Nahda (Renaissance Party), a liberal-progressive nationalist group similar to Islamist modernists in Turkey or Tunisia; al-Wasat (the Center), a multicultural, multiconfessional faith-based centrist party; or the new Social Democratic Party, made up of leftists and independent labor organizations. Meanwhile, the sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood, composed of young women who were at the forefront of university organizing and of the Tahrir uprisings, continued to expand their influence among student and labor groups, especially during April's university elections. Their popular appeal rests on a mix of anti-consumerist and anti-elitist messages, combined with demands for the redistribution of social, economic, housing and educational resources.

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Change has also swept Egypt's Sufi, Salafi and Christian organizations. Sufism represents a broad category of Islamic cultural, social and spiritual practices. It also draws on local and syncretic traditions, including forms of mysticism, the honoring of saints, meditation, chanting and collective celebration. Sufi guilds, or *turuq*, provide a range of services in small towns and in poorer urban areas. Identified with the "vulgar" practices of Egypt's popular classes and with the "impurity" of mixed cultural influences, Sufism was targeted by Mubarak's state for repression and aggressive co-optation. The state took over appointment of its top sheiks (religious scholars) and *murshids* (guides), banned certain religious practices and policed or canceled rituals and celebrations (*moulids*) with large working-class constituents.

In the post-Mubarak era, these elites have desperately tried to hold on to power. On March 25, state-appointed leader Mohamed al-Shahawi, head of the International Sufi Council, and Mohamed Alaa Abul Azayem, founder of the new Sufi-leaning Tahrir Party, met with the state-appointed leader, Grand Sheikh Dr. Ahmed Al-Tayeb of Cairo's Al-Azhar University. The trio made an organizational commitment to the stability of the state and set about crafting a common religious agenda for the upcoming elections. But their meeting only exposed how alienated they have become from the masses of Sufis in small towns and slum neighborhoods, who often serve as the front lines in protests and strikes.

The Sufi grassroots are not interested in reaffirming state stability or the conservative social agendas of the old guard leaders appointed by the Mubarak regime. On March 29, several hundred Sufi disciples organized a march from Hussein Mosque, near al-Azhar in Cairo, down to Tahrir Square. The demonstration was joined by a few dozen members of the much-abused Shiite community and its leader, Mohamed El-Derini. They demanded that the army protect Sufis from Salafi attacks and shrine demolitions. But the march was stopped by state-appointed Sufi leaders, reflecting the widening internal divisions between the rank and file and the regime-linked leadership.

Undeterred, thousands of Sufis marched on April 15 from the mosque of Al-Sayyid Ahmad Al-Badawi to the main square in the city of Tanta to protest the increasing militancy of right-wing Salafi organizations. Salafis see themselves as puritans, purging Islam of any unorthodoxies and restoring the divine order of society by putting people in their proper place. Salafis have recently taken over certain rogue military factions, such as special-ops "Unit 777," set up their own militias and are working to influence student and youth opinion. They were behind the rise in attacks on Coptic Christians, particularly in Alexandria.

Of course, Salafis see gender and sexual dissidents and liberals as apostates. But they direct a special degree of ire against Muslims themselves, attacking Sufi shrines as hubs of vulgarity and religious deviation and demonizing working women as prostitutes. But Salafis in Egypt, unlike in Pakistan, pose no threat of winning elections or controlling territory. Instead they seem to be only pushing public sentiment to the left and away from religious "culture war" politics altogether, as labor, student and religious progressives have joined in opposition to the Salafi puritanism and violence.

In Egypt's revolutionary times, it seems that a contemporary religious organization's degree of success is directly proportional not to its insistence on purity but to its generation of an inclusive community that can channel the energies of student, syndicate and worker organizations. The strong showing by liberals and leftists (secular and religious) in university and syndicate elections and the contentious transformations led by youth within the armed forces and within Islamist organizations suggest that if postrevolution political parties, or the military regime itself, should reclaim religious doctrine as the core of the Egyptian nation-state, they will seem anachronistic and, in the end, unsustainable.

Rather than abandon hope and write off the revolution as captured by conservative Muslim Brothers and aging army officers, Egypt's young people are continuing to generate new social

policy platforms and organizing strategies. Through this process they are reinventing notions of security and nation, faith and progressivism, and are creating new frameworks for twenty-first-century democracy, not just for Egypt, not just for the Middle East, but perhaps for the world.

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