

Egypt's Political Transition on Track

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Brief Analysis

With the transition plan forging ahead after recent turbulence, Egypt's focus has turned to the upcoming constitutional referendum, which will be followed by parliamentary and presidential elections that may favor emerging centrist movement al-Tayyar al-Hor.

Although Egypt's long-term political trajectory remains uncertain, the transition is still on track. The security forces have been able to establish an environment in which the interim technocratic government can move forward with the political roadmap proposed on July 3. And the Muslim Brotherhood has been decapitated -- many of its top leaders have been arrested and its assets frozen, diluting the group's mobilization efforts and creating internal rifts. These and other developments could pave the way for a rising centrist movement to take the lead in the next elections.

CALM AFTER THE CRACKDOWN

In the wake of recent security actions, the reality of a weakened Brotherhood has brought a sense of calm to the streets. Protests and mass gatherings are scarce, and turnout has been low. The curfew has been shortened, and officials have discussed lifting it entirely. People have slowly returned to work, the stock exchange is back on a normal schedule, and banks have resumed work. In addition, the American University in Cairo has resumed classes, while the Cairo airport and Suez Canal have continued to operate normally.

The political transition has generated enormous support among Arab countries, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait have offered a combined \$12 billion in support for Egypt's fragile economy. And in a recent speech, King Abdullah announced that "the people and government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stood and still stand today with our brothers in Egypt against terrorism, extremism, and sedition, and against whoever is trying to interfere in Egypt's internal affairs and in its determination, power, and legitimate right to deter every spoiler or whoever misleads the people." For its part, the United States has made

clear that it will not cut its \$1.5 billion in annual aid, which still holds substantial symbolic and political importance for the U.S.-Egyptian relationship despite being much smaller than the combined Arab aid.

Taken together, this outside economic and political support has helped curb the economic downturn while enhancing the transition's credibility, allowing officials to keep the July roadmap on track. Last week, the ten-member technical committee tasked with amending the constitution completed its work and presented it to interim president Adly Mansour. The next step will be a broader discussion of the amendments with a fifty-member committee representing the people, followed by a public referendum sometime in November. Internationally monitored parliamentary and presidential elections will then be held.

MURKY PROSPECTS FOR ISLAMIST AND OPPOSITION PARTIES

Although it remains unclear who will win the next parliamentary elections, the latest developments on the ground seem to favor non-Islamist factions. On August 27, interim prime minister Hazem al-Beblawi softened his tone concerning the Brotherhood's dissolution, telling an Egyptian interviewer that "it is better for us to monitor parties and groups in the framework of political action, without dissolving them or having them act in secret." Yet even if the group decides to accept that olive branch, its loss of popularity will almost certainly keep it confined to the margins of political life.

Meanwhile, Salafist groups may not be allowed to run if the draft constitution's proposed ban on religious parties is approved. To avert that outcome, the Nour Party -- Egypt's leading Salafist faction -- announced earlier this week that it will participate in the constitutional review committee. More broadly, the party has sought to establish a basis for including Islamist groups in the next phase of the transition. **As spokesman Nader al-Bakkar told Fikra Forum (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=3620&cpage=1#comment-1045>)** this week, "The Nour Party refused the political segregation of members of [Hosni Mubarak's] National Democratic Party...Now we have to state the same concept regarding calls to segregate the Muslim Brotherhood." At the same time, he noted that the Brotherhood "needs to have a new leadership who understand...the snowballing of their mistakes over the past year." He also made clear that his party does not want to clash with the state; hence, it should be willing to make compromises on its demands in discussing the constitution.

On the non-Islamist front, Mohamed ElBaradei's al-Dostour Party has been collapsing and is unlikely to rebound in the near future. And the National Salvation Front, a coalition of non-Islamist parties, has been largely irrelevant in shaping Egypt's new political trajectory. Several of its leaders -- including some from the Tamarod (rebellion) movement that helped galvanize mass popular opposition to ex-president Muhammad Morsi -- will most likely be weak political forces in future elections.

AN EMERGING CENTRIST PLAYER

As other contenders falter, they could make room for al-Tayyar al-Hor (TH), literally "The Free Current," a strong emerging political movement. This fledgling faction's chances of playing a central role in the future of Egyptian politics would increase if the draft constitution's current provisions are approved as is -- particularly the ban on religious parties, and the new electoral system based exclusively on individual candidates rather than a mixed system with some quotas and group lists. Under these conditions, TH could attract the most votes and become the new political establishment.

The TH movement first came into view during the January 25 protests commemorating the second anniversary of the 2011 revolution. For the most part, however, it operated under the radar until recently, when it was one of the main players behind the June 30 anti-Brotherhood coalition. The movement originally coalesced when several

factions came together to reject the Brotherhood's attempt to change Egypt's identity. TH has even claimed that one of its members came up with the Tamarod idea, though the campaign was announced and administrated by people outside al-Tayyar al-Hor.

Currently, TH has three components:

- **Grassroots organization.** TH claims to have branches in more than half of Egypt's main provinces. It has a bottom-up structure, in contrast to the top-down approach used by rival political movements. According to its leaders, TH depends on key local figures and is deeply rooted in large, respectable families in the farmlands. If true, this would distinguish the movement from Egypt's other non-Islamist factions, which lack sophisticated grassroots networks.
- **A political party.** TH has joined forces with the Egyptian Party and says it will compete in the upcoming elections. Although this party has been largely irrelevant in the past, it could become more influential with TH's backing.
- **A research center.** The movement has established al-Tayyar al-Hor Research Center for Strategic Political and Development Studies in Cairo, headed by former senior intelligence official Maj. Gen. Mohamed Rashad.

TH tends to play down the role of well-recognized personalities, arguing that its strength comes instead from its organizational and mobilizing capabilities. The movement is confident it will do well in the next elections, with one member predicting it will win up to 40 percent of the seats in the next parliament.

As for ideology, TH describes its overarching objectives as nationalist -- the movement wants Egypt to reassume a leading position on the regional and international stage. This includes firm support for a balanced but strong relationship with the United States. TH also wants to carry out high-profile strategic projects such as a canal from Taba to al-Arish. This waterway would run almost parallel to the Suez Canal, but closer to the border with Israel. First proposed in 2003 and extensively studied at the time, the project would be extremely ambitious. The new canal would be much wider and deeper (around eighty meters down compared to twenty-four in the Suez), allowing for the passage of new types of ships that cannot go through the Suez.

It remains to be seen whether TH can establish itself as an umbrella organization that attracts other factions; the alternative is further fragmentation of the political landscape. Large non-Islamist coalitions have been difficult to form due to the diverse ideologies of the movements in question. It is still too early to determine how influential TH will become, but observers would be wise to follow it closely in the months ahead.

CONCLUSION

The rise of new, strong political movements has helped keep Egypt's transition on track. From a mainstream Egyptian perspective, the international community's leverage does not lie in altering the country's political path or mediating between parties; such efforts only undermine bilateral relations and the transition's credibility. Rather, the international community should fully support Egypt's economy and political roadmap, which provides the best way forward in terms of regional stability.

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