

Egypt's Crackdown and ElBaradei's Resignation

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Brief Analysis

Despite the vice president's resignation, the dispersal of pro-Morsi protests has received strong support among the security forces and political elite, signaling the potential for more violence in the coming days.

On August 14, Egyptian vice president Mohamed ElBaradei resigned in protest of the transitional government's crackdown on demonstrations supporting former president Muhammad Morsi. Yet far from criticizing the dispersal of the al-Nahda and Rabaa Adawiyya sit-ins, most Egyptian elites -- at least those outside the Muslim Brotherhood -- have focused on criticizing ElBaradei and supporting a tough approach to the crisis.

BACKGROUND

When ElBaradei established a new political party, al-Doustour, in April 2012, many observers predicted that it could play an important role in the future of Egyptian politics. Others remained skeptical, however, despite ElBaradei's reputation as one of the fathers of the 2011 revolution. The party's vague political platform, convoluted ideological orientation, and lack of sophisticated grassroots organization impeded its chances for a successful electoral campaign.

Following the recent uprising against Morsi, the Tamarod (rebellion) movement established the "June 30 Coalition" as an umbrella organization to unite opposition political forces. These forces fought hard to get ElBaradei a leading position in the current transitional government so that he could speak on their behalf. Named vice president in July, ElBaradei was the coalition's sole representative in the interim government.

WAVE OF RESIGNATIONS, BUT NOT FROM GOVERNMENT

In reaction to ElBaradei's decision to step down, a wave of resignations took place, but from al-Doustour Party, not from the government. The party now seems to be collapsing. Even before the crackdown and ElBaradei's resignation, over fifty top al-Doustour officials stepped down because of the vice president's stance against dispersing the sit-ins. Most of these officials were youth leaders, the party's backbone, so their departure is a major blow.

Moreover, the resignations have been accompanied by harsh criticism of ElBaradei. For several days before the crackdown, it was known that he might resign if the government took action against the sit-ins, so officials launched intense behind-the-scenes negotiations to dissuade him. Once those efforts failed and ElBaradei stepped down, mass resignations occurred in al-Dostour branches across the country. When Ahmed Darrag, a prominent party leader and close friend of ElBaradei, announced his resignation on national television alongside former member of parliament Mostafa al-Guindi, both men characterized the vice president's decision as a betrayal of the Egyptian people. Similarly, Mohamed Abdel Hamid, one of the party's founding members and a leader in the Suez branch, claimed that ElBaradei did not stand with the people at a critical historic juncture.

ElBaradei has also faced strong criticism from those who pushed for him to be named vice president. Tamarod cofounder Mahmoud Badr stated, "Your resignation is an escape from your historical national duty, and it is disappointing to see you more worried about your reputation in the international community at the cost of your reputation in Egypt." And fellow cofounder Mohamed Abdel-Aziz stated, "He made a mistake by evading responsibility, and I was among the fierce supporters for his nomination as vice president...But we will not be appeased by anyone at the expense of our nation. ElBaradei made a mistake, but the revolution will continue, and we will defeat terrorism." These strong statements were echoed by several revolutionary figures who support an aggressive crackdown because they regard the Muslim Brotherhood sit-in organizers as violent protesters.

Further criticism came from Ahmed Said, secretary-general of the National Salvation Front (NSF), who explained on national television that the announcement came as a surprise because ElBaradei had not consulted with him in advance. The NSF has become an irrelevant political force in the past few months, and the latest developments appear to have sidelined it even more. ElBaradei's political future in Egypt has seemingly come to an end as well, but it remains uncertain whether al-Dostour will survive the crisis.

SECURITY PERSONNEL STRONGLY BACK THE CRACKDOWN

A ccording to reliable reports, Muslim Brotherhood elements have destroyed over fifty churches, burned down twenty-seven police stations, and attacked public property to express their disapproval of the crackdown. Such behavior has only further damaged the group's image among the non-Brotherhood elite and solidified animosity among the Ministry of Interior (MOI) security forces.

MOI security personnel, who are in sole charge of dealing with the violence, have long harbored acutely negative sentiment toward the Brotherhood and the Morsi government, which they viewed as unsupportive at best, if not openly hostile. This sentiment only increased after the recent deaths of many officers and the mutilation of four senior personnel in the Kerdassa police station. MOI forces now have new instructions to use live ammunition to defend themselves in accordance with the law.

For its part, the military has not been involved in the crackdown or subsequent clashes, deploying its forces only to protect state institutions and public property. The military establishment would never order conscripts to attack fellow Egyptians except in those direct defensive circumstances, if only to avoid testing their willingness to follow such orders. In any case, there is no need for military conscripts to play an active role in the crackdown because the MOI's professional forces are more than willing to do so. To date, no reports have emerged of military personnel leaving their posts in reaction to the latest upheaval.

CONCLUSION

E ven as it spurred a strong Muslim Brotherhood reaction, the government crackdown has shown that the non-Brotherhood elite and the rank-and-file of the security forces support a tough approach. This makes it likely that Egypt will see much more violence before any semblance of order emerges. If the current level of violence continues,

it could derail the timetable for the ongoing political process, which calls for the drafting of a new constitution followed by parliamentary and presidential elections.

Adel El-Adawy is a Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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