

Egypt's Interim Cabinet: Challenges and Expectations

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Brief Analysis

Cairo's formation of a new cabinet marks the first step toward transition to an elected government.

Egypt's new interim cabinet held its first official session on July 21, and the mere fact that a new government is in place will plant the first seeds of stability. Yet this cabinet is unique from a historical perspective, as its agenda has already been established by the military with the agreement of all political forces except the Muslim Brotherhood: namely, to oversee the rapid political transition to an elected government. In the past, especially under Hosni Mubarak, the cabinet's agenda was shaped by the presidency, but current interim president Adly Mansour is a pure figurehead without any political agenda or leverage. Instead, the military has set a defined transitional roadmap and will make sure the civilians in the cabinet follow it. All ministers understand the parameters under which they are allowed to operate and will not deviate from them.

RETURN OF THE OLD GUARD

The cabinet's makeup does not carry an overwhelming revolutionary flavor, as no youth leaders are among the appointees. At this stage, however, such an approach makes sense given the transitional government's temporary nature and the need for experienced technocrats. The appointees have been well received by the international community; as Secretary of State John Kerry put it, "I know a number of them personally, and I know they are extremely competent people."

Yet the new cabinet has one major drawback: the reemergence of the old guard, who hold several prominent seats on the thirty-five-member body. New foreign minister Nabil Fahmy was Egypt's ambassador in Washington from 1999 to 2008 and was responsible for Gamal Mubarak's succession portfolio. Minister of Local Development Adel Labib was the governor of Alexandria and Beheira under Hosni Mubarak. Minister of Information Dorreya Sharaf al-Din was on the policy committee of Mubarak's now-dissolved National Democratic Party. Minister of Transportation Ibrahim al-Demeri held the same post during the Mubarak era and had to resign in 2002 after a tragic train accident. Minister of Housing Ibrahim Mehleb served as the government-appointed head of the public Arab Contractors

company for a decade during the Mubarak era. Minister of Agriculture Ayman Abu Hadid was part of Mubarak's last cabinet reshuffle during the eighteen-day uprising. Minister of Planning Ashraf al-Araby headed the technical advisory office of Mubarak-era minister Fayza Aboul Naga from 2006 until 2011. In addition to Defense Minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi (a senior military intelligence officer during the Mubarak era), two former military generals on the cabinet had close ties to the Mubarak regime: Minister of Civil Aviation Abdel Aziz Fadel and Minister of Military Production Reda Mahmoud Hafez Muhammad. The latter was a member of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which governed after Mubarak's fall.

At the same time, the cabinet also includes an unprecedented number of women and Christians (three of each). And the majority of the appointees are technocrats without political party affiliations; only eight ministers have such ties, and they have all resigned or frozen their party memberships. Moreover, the four parties in question have diverse ideological orientations (e.g., the Nasserist Karama Party and the social-democrat Constitution Party), compared to former prime minister Hisham Qandil's cabinet, in which members with party affiliations mostly originated from the Muslim Brotherhood's political arm.

Finally, the new cabinet has ten holdovers from Qandil's cabinet, among them Minister of Tourism Hisham Zazou, who resigned when former president Muhammad Morsi appointed al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah member Adel al-Khayat as governor of Luxor. More interesting is the decision to retain Minister of Electricity Ahmed Imam, who faced much criticism before the June 30 uprising due to regular power outages. Strangely enough, the Muslim Brotherhood claims that Imam's retention is evidence of a larger conspiracy against them -- an argument that makes little sense given that he was a Brotherhood appointee under Morsi.

ROLE OF THE NEW CABINET

During a long interview before the first official meeting of the transitional cabinet, new prime minister Hazem al-Beblawi emphasized the need to bridge the gap of political polarization by fostering a broader understanding between all political forces. These efforts will be spearheaded by Mohammad Amin el-Mahdi, who will serve as Minister of Transitional Justice and National Reconciliation. The Muslim Brotherhood has decided not to recognize the ongoing political transition, so it will be important to reach out to the group -- especially to second-tier Brotherhood leaders -- and include it in the process. Yet such inclusion cannot occur if the group resorts to acts of violence and terror.

Beblawi's most important role will be on the economic portfolio, as he is a renowned economist. His political network is limited, and he depended heavily on others to recommend people for ministerial posts. His deputies will be more influential in the decisionmaking process, especially those dealing with the security portfolio.

General Sisi, the first deputy prime minister and defense minister, is the main behind-the-scenes powerbroker, but he will not act alone -- Deputy Prime Minister Ziad Bahaa Eldin will play a key part as well. Under the previous government, Bahaa Eldin turned down an offer to be Qandil's deputy, believing that his role would be superficial and that he would have no impact on the decisionmaking process. His acceptance of the position earlier this month indicates a firm belief that he can help stabilize the economy and join the inner decisionmaking circle. Together with the new finance minister, World Bank veteran Ahmed Galal, Bahaa Eldin will play a critical role in setting the economic agenda for the transitional period.

This agenda includes putting Egypt on the path toward economic reforms required to secure an International Monetary Fund loan in the future. But as Planning Minister Araby noted, "The time is not appropriate to begin new negotiations with the IMF." Prime Minister Belbawi explained that his current cabinet will lay the economic foundation for future governments by attracting domestic and foreign investments, leaving the task of major reform initiatives to the next elected administration. The transitional phase is projected to last nine months, with

parliamentary elections slated for January 2014 and a presidential election in March.

Given that only a handful of ministers will be able to shape the transition, the interim cabinet is, in a sense, symbolic. The majority of the appointees will largely be confined to running their own ministries in autonomous fashion. Foreign Minister Fahmy will not reorient Egyptian policy or undertake any groundbreaking initiatives. As he explained during a recent press conference, "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is giving top priority to explaining the goals of the June 30 revolution." He also noted that Egypt will reevaluate the decision to cut ties with Syria and engage in dialogue to overcome its differences with Ethiopia. Fahmy will play a secondary role behind Vice President Mohamed ElBaradei, who is also reaching out to the international community and is in charge of the foreign policy portfolio.

Meanwhile, Local Development Minister Labib will name new governors in the near future to fill the vacant posts formerly occupied by Brotherhood appointees. And the Minister of Supply, Muhammad Abu Shadi, indicated that Egypt will resume wheat imports from Ukraine, Romania, and Russia. His predecessor, Bassem Ouda, had halted those imports, forcing the country to rely on its domestic harvest.

Overall, the challenges are enormous for the new ministers, and expectations are high. For the interim cabinet to succeed, Cairo must uphold the transitional roadmap by writing a consensus-based constitution and handing power to an elected government as soon as possible. More important, it will be critical to bring the Muslim Brotherhood on board, since alienating the group would be a strategic mistake for Egypt's democratic transition.

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

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