Egypt's New Cabinet:

Will New Faces Generate Change?

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Brief Analysis

For the seventh time since President Hosni Mubarak took office twenty-three years ago, a new Egyptian cabinet has been sworn in. The ceremony took place on July 14, 2004, with the aim of addressing the tremendous challenges posed by a deteriorating economy and by growing internal and external pressure for political reform. Toward that end, the regime appointed technocrats and entrepreneurs in the hope of alleviating some of the country's chronic problems. Although the cabinet consists of many new faces -- fourteen freshly appointed ministers out of a total of thirty-four -- its potential role in stimulating specific policy changes remains unclear.

Key New Faces

Among the most significant personnel changes was the appointment of Ahmed Nazif as the new prime minister. Previously, Nazif served as minister of technology and telecommunications (1999-2004) and managed the cabinet's Information and Support Center (1989-1998). The fifty-two-year-old prime minister has a doctorate in computer engineering from McGill University in Canada and has taught for many years at Cairo University.

The foreign affairs portfolio was given to prominent career diplomat Ahmed Abul-Gheit. Ambassador Abul-Gheit is known as a cautious diplomat who has been in the inner circles of Egyptian diplomacy for more than two decades. Previously, he served as Egypt's permanent representative to the UN and as head of Amr Moussa's office during the latter's term as minister of foreign affairs. Abul-Gheit may share some of Moussa's personal dynamism, though he is unlikely to be as much of a hardliner when it comes to foreign policy.

Many of the faces on the cabinet are not new. Twenty ministers remain from the previous body, including those who retained their previous portfolios (e.g., the powerful veteran ministers of defense and interior) and a few who simply changed their portfolios. Yet, the new cabinet also includes nontraditional appointments such as prominent businessmen Ahmed Maghrabi (minister of tourism) and Rashid Mohamed Rashid (minister of foreign trade and industry). Clearly, President Mubarak hopes that the more youthful and technocratic additions will project a more energetic image.

The New Cabinet and Political Reform

Many are asking whether the restructured cabinet will be able to solve some of Egypt's major economic and social problems. These skeptics speculate that the country's problems may be rooted in a political system that does not allow qualified officials to freely implement needed reforms. In other words, they ask, does Egypt need new technocrats or simply a better political system that enables the officials already in place to carry out their duties more effectively?

In one minor change that the regime likely views as a political reform, the new ministers were slightly younger than their predecessors. The regime's goal was to create a cabinet in which the majority of ministers were under sixty years of age. In addition, some presidential directives were issued permitting more contact with political parties -- most of which are currently either co-opted or under tight control from the state. No mention has been made of

measures that would liberalize the political system, such as amending the constitution, abolishing the emergency law, instituting freedom of the press, permitting freedom of assembly (including rallies and strikes), and allowing citizens to create political parties. Many had hoped that political reforms of this sort would be part of the new prime minister's agenda. Instead, the government's focus remains fixed on the traditional yet vague mission of continuing economic reform, fighting poverty, and decreasing unemployment.

Implications for Succession

No clear presidential successors to Mubarak have emerged in the current government. Given the increased political involvement of the president's son, Gamal, many have begun to speculate in earnest about his political future. Both the president and Gamal have denied that they are aiming to create a Syrian-style "republican monarchy." Nevertheless, much attention has been devoted to the implications of the new cabinet for Gamal. First, two members of the "old guard" were removed from the cabinet. Two key figures in the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) -- Youssef Waly and Safawat al-Sherif, vice president and secretary-general of the party, respectively -- lost their powerful agriculture and information portfolios after having served in them for more than two decades. Curtailing the power of the old guard and replacing them with younger figures who are friendlier to Gamal will almost certainly empower him and increase his influence on the cabinet. Moreover, seven of the new ministers are members of the influential NDP Policy Committee, which is chaired by Gamal. Hence, even if some of the new cabinet members do not support his ascension, they are not in a strong enough position to challenge him. The new cabinet could therefore represent a means of bolstering Gamal's authority.

Egypt and Syria

Observers of Egyptian politics often draw a parallel between Syria and Egypt with regard to the issue of succession. The Syrian precedent of having Bashar al-Asad succeed his father, Hafiz al-Asad, as president has led many to believe that the same scenario could take place in Egypt. After all, both countries have authoritarian regimes, and both cases involve sons of veteran rulers becoming increasingly involved in public life.

It is equally instructive to look at the differences between the two regimes, however. These lie primarily in the sectarian and tribal origin of the rulers and their relation to the state apparatus. When Hafiz al-Asad died in 2000, certain conditions had to be fulfilled in order to maintain the status quo in Syria. The most important of these was to maintain the hegemony of deceased president's clan and sect (i.e., the Alawi). The best way to preserve this hegemony was to have a new president from the same clan. Indeed, this powerful clan had a vital interest in having one of their own members become the new president, and a consensus therefore emerged around Bashar. In contrast, Egypt's leadership does not come from a minority group that controls the state and its resources, but rather from the Sunni majority.

Another difference between Syria and Egypt is that the Egyptian version of authoritarianism is milder than the Syrian one. This allows for a small degree of criticism and opposition whereby some voices in Egypt have openly expressed their concern about the country turning into a presidential or republican monarchy. In Syria, such criticism is unthinkable, whereas in Egypt, it has already taken place and is putting a small, though significant, burden on any attempt to pass the presidency from father to son. Hence, in order for Gamal to succeed his father, he would need robust organizational skills to win over a team of supporters within the high echelons of the administration and society. He would also need significant charisma to convince them that he is the best leader for Egypt. Unlike in Syria, then, the son of the Egyptian president would have to do a great deal of work before being accepted as a viable alternative, thus giving an element of merit to his ascension.

Amid the differences between Syria and Egypt, there are some important similarities. Most notably, both Hafiz al-Asad and Hosni Mubarak emerged from their respective military establishments. Any future Egyptian leader will

require the support of the military. This was the case after the tragic death of President Anwar Sadat and the ascension of Mubarak, who had full support from the military. Indeed, all three of Egypt's leaders over the past half-century have come from the military. What remains to be seen is whether the military would endorse Gamal. In any case, the role of the military will loom larger than the support of a technocratic and less powerful Egyptian cabinet.

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