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A fresh start in Egypt? Actors, interests, scenarios

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A Fresh Start in Egypt?

Actors, Interests, Scenarios

Muriel Asseburg / Stephan Roll

President Hosni Mubarak's ouster is a historical turning point for Egypt. The assumption of power by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces could bring about a political opening of the country, but this is by no means assured. Egypt's future is not, however, solely dependent on whether the military delivers on its promises in regard to constitutional amendments, free elections, and the transfer of power to a civilian government. The opposition forces must also come forward with concrete visions of what the country's future political system should look like. They must also organise themselves so as to be able to feed their demands into the process. But which interests are the various actors pursuing? How are they organised and how are power relations shaped among them? And what potential scenarios for Egypt's future can be derived from this? One thing is already clear: without broad international support, it will be impossible to manage the transition process. This presents German and European policymakers with the opportunity to support genuine democratisation.

The mass demonstrations in Egypt, which started on 25 January 2011, have dramatically changed the country's political landscape. Mubarak was ousted, the Parliament was dissolved and the leadership of the ruling *National Democratic Party* (NDP) collapsed – a resounding success for the demonstrators, who had been protesting living conditions and the old order across the entire country. On 11 February, the military assumed power. The government, composed almost solely of politicians from the “old regime”, was confirmed in office. A reshuffle, which took place some 10 days later, brought some new faces into the government – but the new cabinet is still

headed by Ahmed Shafiq, the Prime Minister installed by Hosni Mubarak in his last days in office, and cannot be considered inclusive. For at least the next six months, or until free elections are held, the military is to rule Egypt. The military leadership has announced important reforms for the coming months. The state of emergency in effect for the past 30 years shall be lifted – when and if the security situation permits. A constitutional committee created in mid-February has been charged with revising controversial articles of the constitution within ten days. These changes shall then be approved in a referendum. Finally, elections shall be held for both chambers of the

Egyptian parliament as well as the presidency. So far, however, no binding timetable has been announced for the implementation of these measures. Still, a complex process of negotiations has already begun among all relevant groups of actors. But even within the individual groups, political ideas and expectations are neither clearly defined nor uniform.

The Military

Cairo's new centre of power, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, is by no means a new actor on the scene. The chairman of the council, 75-year old Minister of Defence Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, in particular, was considered one of the past president's closest confidants and a hardliner faithful to the regime. The other members of this body – including Chief of Staff Sami Annan, the commanders of the air force, air defence forces, and marines, as well as other high-ranking officers – were also part of the close circle of power around Mubarak.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces is not dedicated to re-establishing the old regime, but rather to protecting the military's prominent political and economic position. Yet it is doubtful whether these efforts could be reconciled with democratic processes. With its 470,000 troops and 480,000 reservists, Egypt has the world's tenth largest army. There are around 400,000 paramilitaries, largely under the control of the Ministry of Interior. In addition, the military is an economic power house with its own businesses, which also produce civilian goods and which often offer lucrative jobs to long-serving generals. Against the backdrop of the country's difficult economic situation, a freely elected civilian leadership could take steps to rein in at least some of the economic activities of the security apparatus.

It can therefore be assumed that the Supreme Council has a considerable interest in guiding the political reconstruction to its own advantage rather than losing

control of the process. There are, however, clear limitations on its actions. First, the current leadership in Cairo is heavily dependent on the USA, which has been providing Egypt with around US\$1.3 billion in military aid each year. For the time being at least, the American government seems to be pushing for political opening in Egypt. It seems unlikely that the US government is prepared to accept a military regime that rules against the will of its people. Second, considerable pressure will also continue to come from the Egyptian people. If political reforms are delayed or fail to materialise, further demonstrations and protests are likely. Such protests would then be aimed directly at the military and its leadership.

The Moderate Opposition

Established opposition parties and movements played only a minor role in the protests of the past weeks. Due to their degree of organisation, however, they are best equipped to successfully position themselves in the negotiations that have begun over the country's future political system and have the greatest chances of electoral success. Basically three different, albeit partially overlapping, groups can be distinguished within the moderate opposition, all of which were advocating – to greater or lesser degrees – for gradual and controlled regime change during Mubarak's rule: smaller parties with a secular orientation, the opposition alliance *National Association for Change* (NAC), and the moderate political arm of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

Secular Parties

In addition to the NDP, which had been ruling the country, there are a total of 23 registered parties in Egypt. The majority of these parties, however, are unknown to large portions of the population. The largest approved opposition party is the national liberal *New Wafd Party*, which received a little over 1 percent of the votes

in the 2005 parliamentary elections. Until the 2010 parliamentary elections, however, it was always seen as a bloc party closely aligned with the regime. In May 2010, the businessman El-Sayyid el-Badawi became the head of the party. Under his leadership, the party is likely to position itself as a proponent of liberal economic values.

Other well known opposition parties include the socialist *National Progressive Unionist Party* ("Tagammu"), the socialist *Arab Democratic Nasserist Party* and the liberal *Al-Ghad* (Tomorrow) Party. The latter party is led by Ayman Nour, who ran against Mubarak in the 2005 presidential elections, collected a remarkable 7 percent of the votes, and was subsequently imprisoned. While Nour is known as a prominent opposition politician, he has been unable to draw broad support since his release in 2009. This can be traced back to campaigns by the regime to discredit him as well as to Nour's polarising personality. In any case, Nour is hardly seen as a potential unifying figure for the spectrum of opposition groups.

National Association for Change

The NAC emerged in early 2010 around Mohamed ElBaradei, the former director of the *International Atomic Energy Agency*. It cannot be ruled out that the group may fall apart and that its various subgroups affiliate themselves with other opposition parties. The NAC is after all a heterogeneous alliance of opposition forces; it includes, for example, many members of the once important opposition movement "Kifaya!" (Arabic for "enough!"). Agreement was reached on just seven core demands on the Mubarak regime. These included, among other things, free presidential elections and the lifting of the state of emergency.

It has become unlikely that ElBaradei will succeed in establishing himself in the presidential elections as a compromise candidate for the various opposition forces. For one thing, he is hardly known across

Egypt. In addition, there has been growing dissatisfaction within the opposition over the last years about his limited presence in the country and about his reserved behaviour. ElBaradei was thus excluded from the negotiations held in the second week of February between the opposition and Mubarak's Vice President Omar Suleiman. Furthermore, other prominent individuals have since emerged, who could prove attractive candidates for the opposition. These include the chemist and Nobel Prize winner Ahmed Zewail as well as the current Secretary-General of the *Arab League* and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Amr Moussa. The latter, in particular, is afforded good chances at the presidency by many observers. Moussa is seen as a popular figure and could also attract former NDP voters. To date, it is unclear what position the Muslim Brotherhood would take vis-à-vis a Moussa candidacy.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood is currently the largest and best-organised opposition force, though not a legally sanctioned party. In the early 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood renounced violence. It has since made use of the few opportunities for political participation offered within the existing order. Since the mid 1980s, it has participated in elections and since the mid 1990s it has been committed to party pluralism, freedom of opinion and the principles of democratic transfer of power. Prior to the massive electoral fraud perpetrated in November/December 2010, representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood formed the largest opposition group in parliament. During the 2005-2010 legislative period, they controlled around one-fifth of the seats, making constructive use of their presence to strengthen the work and control functions of the parliament.

At the same time, the group's political representatives definitely have a range of different priorities. The conservative wing, which has been represented since January

2010 by Supreme Guide Mohammed Badie, acts in a reserved and cautious manner. Until now, it has primarily placed emphasis on cooperation with the regime and the necessity of strengthening work at the grassroots level. The wing that follows a progressive reformist course is also open to cooperation with other opposition powers – including secular groups – as in the case of the *Kifaya!* movement or the NAC. This wing is led by representatives such as Essam el-Erian, the Brotherhood's spokesman and chief of its political bureau, and Abdel Moneim Abou el-Fotouh, a (former) long time member of the Guidance Council. Mohammed Akif, who acted as Supreme Guide from 2004 until 2010, is also part of this wing. In 2004, he presented a progressive programme and stimulated intense debates about the Brotherhood's orientation and focus. This wing aspires to a civilian state with an Islamic frame of reference comparable with Turkey under the AKP government.

The power balance between the two wings is currently unclear. On the one hand, internal discussions about the draft programme presented in early 2007 showed that the conservative wing was unable to assert its ideas. The document included elements of theocratic order as well as a number of extremely conservative positions – demands were made, for example, to introduce corporal punishment, to establish a council of religious scholars with potentially far-reaching competencies and to bar women and Copts from high office. The draft met with such strong criticism from reformers within the movement as well as experts that its passage was no longer pursued. On the other hand, conservative representatives posted gains between 2008 and 2010 as leadership positions were filled through internal elections. Different approaches also became apparent in the past weeks. While the former “party chairman” in the People's Assembly, Saad al-Katatni, was prepared to enter into negotiations with Vice President Suleiman without the precondition of Mubarak's immediate resig-

nation, this concession was vehemently criticised by the reformers, who rejected it as helping to stabilise the regime.

In the short term, the individual groups and parties across the spectrum of the moderate opposition aspire to effect a political opening towards a democratic system. Among other things, they agree on the need for free elections and a lifting of the state of emergency. In light of the fragmented party landscape, it is conceivable that there will be fusions of smaller groups or at least joint electoral lists. Over the medium and long term, however, the objectives of the different actors are likely to be highly divergent. Already at this point it is doubtful whether there is consensus within the moderate opposition regarding the required constitutional amendments. This concerns, for example, the contentious question of how to address Article 5 of the constitution, which prohibits political involvement based on a religious frame of reference. In the future, a high degree of variance can also be expected in approaches to economic and social policy. In principle, however, the larger opposition parties are proponents of economic liberalisation and a free market economy – unlike the military, which will cling to elements of a state-centred economic structure.

The Revolutionaries

The revolutionary group of actors has developed over the past three years. It is largely composed of well-educated young Egyptians organised primarily through Facebook groups and has been the driving force of the protests against the regime. Six groups joined together in the “Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution”, an alliance established during the demonstrations:

- ▶ the “April 6 Youth Movement”, a Facebook group that was created in 2008 to support worker protests in the industrial city al-Mahalla al-Kubra;
- ▶ the Facebook group “We are all Khaled Said”, which formed in mid-2010 in pro-

- test to the murder of the young Said by policemen in Alexandria;
- ▶ the Facebook group “Justice and Freedom”;
- ▶ the youth campaign in support of Mohamed ElBaradei;
- ▶ the youth organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood;
- ▶ the youth organisation of the liberal *Democratic Front Party*.

The coalition agreed on a 14-person representative body, which includes prominent activists such as engineer Ahmed Maher, founder of the “April 6 Youth Movement” and the Google marketing manager Wael Ghoneim, who initiated the “We are all Khaled Said” group. The youth organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood is also part of the revolutionary movement; it took part in the demonstrations on Tahrir Square and has two representatives on the representative body. The Brotherhood’s youth movement does not have – at least in its overwhelming majority – fundamentalist views, but rather represents young and modern people with Islamic identity. These young people do not search for new ideologies. Rather, they aspire to greater freedom, social justice and a modern, and at the same time appropriate way of life – they envision a political system that unites democracy, social justice and Islam.

The revolutionaries therefore have quite diverse political, ideological and religious backgrounds. These different contexts, however, did not play a decisive role during the protests. They all called for a radical break with the Mubarak era and a completely fresh start. During initial negotiations between the opposition and the regime in the second week of February, it became clear that the revolutionaries were considerably less ready to accept compromises than the representatives of the moderate opposition. In contrast to the latter, the revolutionaries rejected holding talks prior to the resignation of Mubarak.

To date, the decentralised organisational structure and the lack of leadership figures has been to the advantage of the revolution-

aries as it hampered the regime’s efforts in taking action against the activists. In the negotiation process that is now starting, however, this advantage will likely become a disadvantage. For the separate groups must first develop leadership structures and agree on programmes in order to be prepared to put forth their interests effectively – and achieve electoral success.

Two Scenarios

From today’s perspective, there seem to be essentially two possible development paths. Either the military will focus on maintaining its prominent political and economic position, garnished with some of the trappings of a façade democracy – which over the medium term is likely to lead to new protests and uprisings. Or a “moderated transition” will occur and lead to a sustained and comprehensive political opening of the country.

Military Regime

In this scenario, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces attempts to prevent a genuine opening of the system; it delays the announced reforms and safeguards the military’s privileges. At the same time, it allows for the processes and institutions of a façade democracy. However, even if the international community were to support the military, it would no longer be able to rule against the people’s will over the long term. Such an approach would after all result in large parts of the opposition – particularly representatives of the NAC, the Muslim Brotherhood and the revolutionaries, which have a considerable mobilisation potential – withdrawing their support for the military council. The consequence would be a new wave of protests and strikes, which would dramatically aggravate the country’s economic crisis. If the protests were violently suppressed, radicalisation could be expected. This scenario does not promise stability.

Far-Reaching Political Opening

The positive scenario of a thorough opening requires that the politically relevant actors agree on how the transitional process should be organised and carried out. This necessitates the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces keeping its promises of reform, which is by no means a given. Still, in light of the limitations on the military's room for manoeuvre mentioned above, the Supreme Council could allow for comprehensive opening of the political system while at the same time attempting to champion closely aligned politicians. An example of a potential presidential candidate from the military leadership would be Ahmed Shafiq, the current Prime Minister and a former commander of the Egyptian Air Force. He could attempt to collect the support of the remnants of the NDP and lead them in elections under a new party name.

Whether or not a transition is actually being initiated will soon become apparent based on two important milestones: that the state of emergency be lifted and that an initial constitutional amendment process take place enabling elections for all political offices based on real competition. In principle, it is now less complicated to change the constitution than it was before the military took power. However, it is not yet assured that the new constitutional committee will succeed in drawing up proposals acceptable to the military, the opposition and the revolutionaries. In this regard it is surely positive that the committee embraces independent experts as well as jurists who have close ties to political Islam. A constitutional revision that leaves Article 5 untouched would not represent a real step forward towards establishing a more inclusive system as it would imply that the Muslim Brotherhood would continue to be barred from forming a political party. When the state's institutions have received democratic legitimacy, a more far-reaching constitutional revision, which addresses questions about the future system of government, will have to follow.

Regardless of whether the decision ultimately is made in favour of a presidential or parliamentary system, the legislative and judicial branches of government will be institutionally strengthened and the office of the president weakened.

In any case, a political opening would have implications for the real power balance in Egypt – with a shift benefiting the moderate opposition. The extent to which an opposition candidate can assert himself in the first presidential elections against a representative of the “old regime” will depend primarily on whether or not the opposition succeeds in agreeing on a candidate. The Muslim Brotherhood is unlikely to enter one of its own candidates into the race. In free parliamentary elections, the current regime party, the NDP, will in all probability suffer severe losses. At the same time it is by no means a done deal that the Muslim Brotherhood will automatically emerge victorious. While the Brotherhood is currently the largest and best-organised opposition force, there are two factors which play a role. First, the Brotherhood's political arm would have to establish a political party. In mid-February 2011, the group's leadership announced that it would take this step as soon as it became legally possible. In this context, it is quite likely that the movement will split over disputes regarding the political programme. Currently, it is unclear which of the Brotherhood's wings would then end up leading the new political party. It is obvious, however, that the party will only have chances at electoral success if it offers a programme that extends well beyond slogans such as “Islam is the solution” and addresses the concrete needs of the people. Also, the party will only achieve long-term support among voters if it can point to tangible progress in social and economic spheres as well as in terms of good governance.

Second, in a competitive environment other forces besides the Muslim Brotherhood will also form or register parties and develop their potential. In the past, those

parts of the electorate that wanted to vote against the regime had hardly any other choice than supporting the Islamists. It is likely that the Brotherhood will now lose this special status. The protests have already demonstrated that the Muslim Brotherhood has lost its de facto “monopoly on opposition”.

Repercussions for Israel

The second scenario raises concerns in Israel, in particular, as well as among its Western allies. This is understandable. After all, the peace that has existed between Israel and Egypt since 1979 has remained a cold peace. It has never translated into a rapprochement on the grassroots level. This is due, on the one hand, to the lack of progress in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians as well as its other neighbours, and, on the other hand, to the Egyptian regime’s use of anti-Israel resentment as a valve for releasing pressure.

It is therefore clear that the emergence of any government more representative than the Mubarak regime will lead to a cooling of relations between both countries’ leaders. As a result, it can be expected in the mid term that cooperation and trade agreements with Israel regarding the supply of natural gas and other affairs will be re-negotiated. A more representative Egyptian government is also unlikely to maintain the blockade of the Gaza Strip to the same extent. But even if a new Egyptian government signals more solidarity with the people of Gaza and the Palestinian Hamas, it will ultimately look to its own interests and keep its distance. No Egyptian government is interested in taking on the responsibilities of the occupying power in or for Gaza. And a spill-over of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or increase in Iran’s influence in Egypt would hardly be considered beneficial by decision makers in Cairo.

Even if the Muslim Brotherhood were to take part in a future government, it is not to be expected that the peace treaty with

Israel will be suspended, that Israel’s borders will be threatened, or that the Suez Canal will be sealed off. After all, any government will work to pursue Egypt’s national interests – and the revenues that the country collects as a result of tourism, the Suez Canal, and its good relations with the West all play a crucial role for the nation’s budget. Not least due to these considerations, the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership made it clear early in the revolt that they would abide by all international agreements, i.e. including the peace treaty with Israel. It holds true for the Muslim Brotherhood as well as for other opposition actors that popularity among voters depends primarily on tangible successes in the social and economic spheres, not on the anti-Israel tirades that some of its members are certainly delivering. In the end, socio-economic progress will prove impossible without a good relationship with the West and stability in the region.

Implications for German and European Policymakers

In principle, the Egyptian revolt carries with it a great opportunity for a transition to a more representative political system, which would allow for sustained stability, balanced development, and a viable peace with Israel. For these reasons, German and European policymakers should wholeheartedly support the democratisation process.

Of course Egyptian ownership of the process is key. It is currently impossible to foresee, however, whether the military leadership in Cairo is really prepared to pursue fundamental regime change – that is, whether it allows the country a fresh start or goes for a continuation of the old system in new dressings. German and European cooperation with the current Egyptian leadership should for this reason be conditional.

On the one hand, this means that clear and attractive incentives should be provided. In this sense, it is exactly right to

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offer Egypt a comprehensive “transformation partnership”. In this context, priority should not be placed on increasing development cooperation or expanding the activities of the political foundations – even though both will be useful and welcome. Similarly, the support announced by the German Government in the framework of a “North Africa Democratisation Fund” will be helpful and should benefit efforts towards judicial reform, support of political parties, media training, and the holding of fair and transparent elections.

Foremost efforts, however, should be aimed at further opening European markets to exports from Egypt (agricultural and fisheries products) and eliminating EU subsidies for such goods. Furthermore, scholarship programmes should be expanded for Egyptian students and trainees in Germany and other EU states, as well as in Egypt. A marked increase in the number of work and residence permits for young Egyptians in Europe is also urgently needed – not least in order to stem irregular migration. Only through such drastic measures can Egypt be helped to meet the demands that originally set the protests in motion – offering young people professional prospects, jobs, affordable foodstuffs, and more social justice.

The hasty steps introduced by the Egyptian government such as a rise across the board in state employees' salaries and an increase in public sector employment do not address these problems and cannot be financed over the medium term. Rather, comprehensive economic and social reform is needed. This includes not only a restructuring of the subsidy and handout systems, the huge bureaucracy and the state enterprise sector, but also fundamental reform in the educational system. Germany and the EU should accompany these reforms – against the backdrop of their experiences in Eastern Europe – with technical and financial support.

On the other hand, such support should only be given if there is tangible progress in the political transition process. In this con-

text, it is important to continually monitor the implementation of the announced reforms. This would include, for instance, all political and societal forces being represented in an, as yet unformed, transitional government or in a round table dialogue with the leadership, a binding and credible timetable particularly for constitutional reforms and elections, the lifting of the state of emergency, and the release of political prisoners.