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Dialogue of the Deaf

Meet the men who could sell out the protesters in Tahrir Square.

BY SAMER SHEHATA | FEBRUARY 8, 2011



Revolutions make strange bedfellows. On Feb. 6, Egyptian state television broadcast images of the "national dialogue" between Gen. Omar Suleiman, the newly appointed vice president and former head of General Intelligence, and opposition party representatives, a meeting described as a government effort to resolve the current standoff between Hosni Mubarak's regime and the thousands of pro-democracy protesters calling for his resignation.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the meeting failed to represent the full spectrum of national opinion in Egypt. Suleiman, one of the leading figures in the *ancien régime*, is also considered by some to be America's man in Cairo. As Mubarak's longtime point person handling Egypt's role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Egyptian "mediation" efforts between the Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas, Suleiman is known to share many of Washington's views about the dangers of increasing Iranian hegemony in the region, as well as its biases against Islamist groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the

Muslim Brotherhood.

The representatives of the opposition also cannot claim to speak for the masses that have taken to the streets to demand Mubarak's ouster. The parties that agreed to meet with Suleiman were drawn from the "legal" opposition -- widely viewed as ineffective or co-opted by the regime -- independent intellectuals, and the banned but tolerated Muslim Brotherhood.

This dialogue shows that time is not necessarily on the protesters' side. Some Egyptians are already complaining about the disruption of everyday life caused by the anti-Mubarak demonstrations. And the gathering raised fears that familiar faces of Egyptian politics could potentially co-opt the nascent revolution's energy for less-than-revolutionary purposes.

The Muslim Brotherhood may be the largest organized opposition group in the country, but it has not been the leading force behind the protests that have rocked Egypt over the last two weeks -- as much as the government has attempted to paint them as a bogeyman for a Western audience. The mere fact that the newly appointed vice president met with Brotherhood representatives, among other opposition and independent figures, is an explicit recognition of the group's standing and political legitimacy, and a monumental sea change from decades of Egyptian government pronouncements about the group and its activities. As recently as Feb. 3, in an interview with ABC reporter Christiane Amanpour, Mubarak once again blamed the Brotherhood for the violence in Cairo.

One month ago, no one could have imagined Suleiman negotiating politely with leading Brotherhood figures Mohamed Saad al-Katatny and Mohamed Morsy. Katatny, who was elected as a parliamentarian from the Upper Egypt governorate of al-Minya, headed the group's parliamentary bloc from 2005 to 2010. He holds a Ph.D. in natural sciences from a German university and often serves as the Brotherhood's interlocutor with Western audiences. He attended a conference I organized on Islamist politics at Georgetown University in March 2007, briefly met Rep. Steny Hoyer at a reception at the U.S. ambassador's residence in Cairo, and also attended President Barack Obama's June 2009 speech at Cairo University.

Morsy is an influential member of the group's leadership, and served as a parliamentarian between 2000 and 2005. He holds a Ph.D. in engineering from a U.S. university and was detained by Egyptian police immediately after the Brotherhood announced its intention to participate in the Jan. 28 "Day of Rage" protests.

But the Brotherhood was not the only group in the meeting with Suleiman. To Suleiman's right sat Hossam Badrawi, the newly appointed head of Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP), whose Cairo headquarters were torched by the protesters as a symbol of the regime. Badrawi is considered one of the most progressive members of the ruling party -- but a figure with close ties to Gamal Mubarak. Badrawi was previously a member of NDP's Policies Secretariat, the party's influential policymaking body, and he served as an elected member of parliament from 2000 to 2005 from Cairo's Qasr Al Nil district. He is a medical doctor and professor of medicine at Cairo University and hails from a respected aristocratic family.

The recently elected head of the liberal Wafd Party El Sayyid al-Badawi, sat next to Badrawi. Like the Brotherhood, the Wafd, Egypt's oldest political party, did not participate in the initial Jan. 25 demonstrations. And like the Brotherhood -- despite calls by Mohamed ElBaradei and others to boycott the elections -- the Wafd participated in the initial balloting in

Egypt's farcical November 2010 parliamentary vote. Badawi is a wealthy businessman -- owner of a pharmaceutical company and a satellite television station, and part owner of *al-Dustour* newspaper, a leading independent daily.

Many suspected Badawi of cooperating with the regime after he purchased *al-Dustour* several months ago, immediately before the 2010 parliamentary elections. Badawi immediately fired the paper's prominent editor, Ibrahim Eissa -- who is widely admired for his fiery and irreverent attacks on the president and the ruling party. Many believed that Badawi's acquisition of the paper and the immediate ouster of Eissa were part of a deal with the regime to silence government critics ahead of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections.

Next to Badawi sat Naguib Sawiris, Egypt's richest tycoon. Sawiris owns Mobinil, Egypt's first mobile phone company; his telecommunications interests also extend to Algeria, North Korea, Italy, and until recently, Iraq. Sawiris is Egypt's most prominent Coptic businessman, a liberal who is also widely known for his philanthropic activities. Sawiris is believed to have had cordial relations with regime figures, including Gamal Mubarak. After the meeting, Sawiris endorsed the idea of Mubarak staying on as president until the end of his term in September 2011.

Rifaat El Said, head of the leftist Tagammu party, sat to Suleiman's left. Opponents of the Mubarak regime treat Said with suspicion because he was appointed by the president to Egypt's upper house of parliament. Under his leadership Tagammu has also refused to vigorously oppose the regime. In December, after the absurdly fraudulent first round of parliamentary elections, both the Wafd and the Muslim Brotherhood declared they would boycott runoff elections -- but Said insisted his party participate, which led to calls for his removal. It is widely known that Said despises the Brotherhood more than the regime, which may have played a part in his decision.

Others at the meeting included a motley crew of political personalities: Wafd Party General-Secretary Mounir Abdel Nour; former Wafd Party head Mahmoud Abaza; Yehya al-Gamal, a prominent and highly respected constitutional scholar and former Cairo University professor; Ragab Himaida, a shady "opposition" parliamentarian from downtown Cairo who is suspected of having links to the security services and former NDP Chairman Safwat El Sherif; and Mohamed Abdellah, a French-trained economist, longtime NDP member and parliamentarian, and former president of Alexandria University.

Of course, some very important individuals and groups were absent from the "national dialogue" because they either were not invited or refused to attend. The most notable absence was ElBaradei, though some reports indicated that his group, the National Association for Change, had a representative in the meeting. Even more importantly, representatives from the various youth groups and activists who organized the original Jan. 25 demonstrations -- including the April 6 Movement -- were conspicuously absent.

After the immense upheaval that Egypt has undergone in the past two weeks, it was striking to see that the meeting was still composed of the same old faces, trying to cut a deal as if the protesters in Tahrir Square hardly existed. In a movement dubbed "the youth revolution," the youth were strikingly absent at the dialogue. As a result, their demands -- most prominently, the immediate departure of Mubarak from power -- were largely excluded from discussion.

One cannot help but conclude that the "national dialogue" is little more than a regime tactic to co-opt the more moderate

opposition parties, while leaving the youth protesters out in the cold. It is part of a wider, multi-faceted strategy that includes coercion, violence, fear, information censorship, propaganda, economic disruption, and the restriction of food and supplies coming into Tahrir Square.

The fear of those who support the protesters who have gathered across Egypt over the past two weeks is that old political faces and tired opposition leaders might be willing to accept the crumbs offered up by the Mubarak regime, allowing it to survive another week, month, or even longer. Such a development would further fracture the opposition movement, already showing signs of divisions. And it increases the danger that this incipient revolt could fall short of the fundamentally new kind of politics that Egyptians deserve.

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