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Discontented Within Egypt Face Power of Old Elites

By ANTHONY SHADID

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CAIRO — It was proclaimed as “the Friday of departure,” but neither the demonstrators who proved their staying power as a force for change nor their nemesis, President [Hosni Mubarak](#), left. Now a prolonged collision is shaping up between a staggering but entrenched old guard and an outpouring of [Egypt](#)’s discontented over how fast and how deep the changes will be.

In a contest of image, perception and power, the rebellion pits those disenfranchised by Mr. Mubarak’s government against a still formidable array built around the military and security apparatus and a fabulously wealthy clique enriched by connections with the governing party.

Both revolt and reaction have offered their narrative — change and chaos — with the Information Ministry fanning popular discontent over an uprising that has devastated Egypt’s economy. But a revolution is not a referendum, and in an 11-day battle that has seen momentum shift almost by the day, each faces the resilience of the other.

Even as it sheds some of its support, the government remains determined not to surrender what it deems its prestige. Mr. Mubarak’s leadership is one symbol of that, but even if he leaves, the old guard may well dig in to obstruct open elections and true civilian rule. The

government retains a monopoly on armed violence, the state's arsenal in its hands. But despite organizers' own lurking fears, the uprising has proved its ability to turn out thousands into the streets, in a remarkable show of steadfastness that has left the government no option but to engage it. "There are a lot of Fridays left," said Tayssir Ibrahim, a protester in Tahrir Square here.

Egypt's revolution is far from decided, but the country will never be the same. As the government begins to fall back on itself, inciting fears of foreigners, mobilizing provocateurs and cracking down on its opposition, it faces an ever fiercer revolutionary fervor, with ever more sweeping demands.

"It's in the streets now," said Omar Ghoneim, a businessman. "It's the people of Egypt protesting. We have no future. Either we die, or this regime goes completely."

Since a group of officers led by Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew the monarchy in 1952, its corpulent king leaving behind a vast collection of pornography, the government has sought to claim the mantle of peasants and workers. Especially in the past decade, it has shed that pretense, concentrating its power around the military — long beyond criticism in the Egyptian media — as well as the loathed Interior Ministry, a governing party skilled in patronage and a clique of the very wealthy, many loyal to Mr. Mubarak's son, Gamal.

Since the revolt, the military has surged to the forefront, emerging as the pivotal player in politics it long sought to manage behind the scenes. The beneficiary of nearly \$40 billion in American aid during Mr. Mubarak's rule, its interests span the gamut of economic life — from the military industry to businesses like road and housing construction, consumer goods and resort management. Even leading opposition leaders, like [Mohamed ElBaradei](#), have acknowledged that the military will have a key role in a transition.

The protesters' demands have grown, in part, in a reflection of the way the state's other pillars are staggering. The police have collapsed, only gingerly returning to the streets, and unlike a week ago, its forces made no attempt on Friday to block the protesters' way.

"Its security apparatus is not an immediate player," said Khaled Fahmy, a professor at the American University of Cairo who was at the protests on Friday.

More striking is the way the government has begun shedding the business elite that surrounded it only months ago. Officials have announced the freezing of assets and a prohibition on travel for [Ahmed Ezz](#), a hated steel magnate and leading member of the governing party, and for Rashid Mohammed Rashid, a former minister of trade and industry, Ahmed el-Maghraby, a former housing minister, and Zuheir Garana, a former minister of tourism. (The travel ban meant little for Mr. Rashid; he was in Dubai when the announcement was made.)

“We decided on eliminating all businessmen,” Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq said Friday of his cabinet in [an interview with Al Arabiya](#), an Arabic satellite channel, in a gesture toward protesters who have made Mr. Ezz a symbol of everything corrupt about the state.

“Scapegoats,” Ali Moussa, a leading businessman in Egypt and former chairman of the Cairo Chamber of Commerce, said of the ministers (though not Mr. Ezz).

“It’s a sign of weakness, a well-known game that happens all the time,” he added.

A dirtier struggle has played out in the streets, where the vision of protesters has collided so viscerally with the oldest tactics of an authoritarian state that, as Mr. Shafiq made clear, has begun retrenching itself. The military police have arrested 30 human rights activists, and an office of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) was raided Friday. Government supporters, some wielding machetes, kitchen knives and a Cairene version of a shank, attacked scores of foreign journalists.

The protesters tried to offer a counterpoint to the government’s aggressive image on Friday, in what seemed a growing struggle to define the way that people would be led in the transition. “We’re sorry for any inconvenience we’re causing you,” guards said as they frisked people.

What is so striking about Egypt’s tumult is the ardor that protesters have brought to an idea of community. In some ways, Egypt’s revolution has already happened.

In a country made miserable by the petty humiliations of authority, Egyptians were welcomed to the square with boisterous greetings. “Thank God for your safety,” men organized as guards declared. “Welcome, heroes!” others cried. “Come on and join the square.” Most poignantly, they simply chanted, “These are the Egyptian people.”

Throughout the day, by accident or intention, tens of thousands of people seemed determined to disprove every cliché that the elite has offered to justify its repression of a people that Mr. Mubarak, as recently as an interview on Thursday, insisted would descend into chaos without him.

No one pushed unduly as they waited to pass concertina wire strung by the military across the entrance. They waited as men prayed, bowing their heads on Egyptian flags that served as prayer rugs. The menacing harassment of women was nowhere to be seen. Volunteers ferried in bread, cheese, honey, juice and milk, along with medicine, some of which was provided by a pharmacist who gave a 20 percent discount for the cause.

Guards at the barricades wore helmets — actually, kitchen bowls converted for a fight — that bore the slogan “The government of the revolution.”

“God is great,” people chanted, “and the revolution is growing.”

In a way, the contest has begun to pit two perceptions of power: sanctioned or imposed.

Protester after protester made the point that the government's prestige was broken, most remarkably by the young men in Tahrir Square who for two days fought off government supporters once routinely deployed to intimidate voters in sham elections and small crowds of protesters. "Heroes," they called the young men.

"The people are stubborn now," said Nasser el-Sherif, a 24-year-old student, sitting near a grandmother, Um Ibrahim Abdel-Mohsin, who had ferried rocks to the barricades for two days. "You want to beat us up? We'll kick you out, and it's our right."

"We're not compromising our freedom anymore," Mr. Sherif added.

Near him was scrawled graffiti. "Victory is with the patient," it said.