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## The youth of Tahrir Square

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In the centre of Tahrir Square, surrounded by an explosion of art, political expression and communal solidarity that has crossed Egypt's social and economic lines, it's easy to get wrapped up in revolutionary fervor. One can forget that outside the square, from Washington DC to Cairo, elites are hammering out the country's new political order.

Heads have already rolled inside the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), and vice president Omar Suleiman - who appears to have taken over president Hosni Mubarak's job in all but name - has made a series of announcements offering mild concessions to the protesters who set off Egypt's uprising on January 25.

Both moves are aimed at placating the protest movement, which has transformed central Cairo for 15 days into an all-in-one refugee camp, music festival and political rally and has attracted the attention of the entire country and the international media.

But as the violence of January 28 and February 2 fades in memory, businesses re-open, and state television shows members of long-standing but toothless opposition parties meeting face-to-face with Suleiman, the youth who instigated the most significant grassroots political upheaval in modern Arab memory are taking steps to try to prevent their revolution from being sold out.

They say that now, following unproductive meetings between their intermediaries and Suleiman - who on Sunday said Egypt is "not ready for democracy" - they intend to escalate their campaign and expand beyond the square, opening an uncertain new front in the protests.

## **The headquarters tent**

Near the centre of the square on Monday night, behind a stage with a full soundsystem where a man played protest songs on an acoustic guitar to a crowd of hundreds, members of the newly formed Coalition of the Youth of the Revolution gathered. Their new headquarters lies in a large green tent 100 metres to the north, underneath a stuffed and lynched effigy of Mubarak, but many hang around the stage to talk and keep easy access to the microphone.

Here we met Nasser Abdel Hamid, a well-connected 28-year-old from Cairo who is affiliated with Mohamed ElBaradei's National Association for Change. Abdel Hamid is a busy man; with a phone call from the al-Arabiya news network in one hand, he greeted friends and associates with the other. During a lull, we moved away from the packed street the runs through the middle of the square and stepped onto the wide, circular patch of dirt and muddy turf where most of the protesters have set up their tent city.

He spread out newspapers for us to sit on.

"The grounds for negotiations are not acceptable to us," Abdel Hamid said. "We have seen a trend of groups who do not represent public opinion trying to speak on our behalf. But these opposition groups do not represent the public, we do, our demands are their demands."

The six youth groups under the coalition's umbrella have so far refused calls from Suleiman's office to attend negotiations, Abdel Hamid said. They have presented their preconditions to a group of intermediaries, sometimes called the "council of wise men," which includes Arab League chief Amr Moussa, business tycoon Naguib Sawiris, and Amr Hamzawy of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The most significant demand, which still stands, is that Mubarak resigns or delegates his powers to Suleiman, which would begin an immediate transition to new leadership. But before Mubarak leaves office, they say, he must offer up a raft of constitutional amendments, specifically those pertaining to presidential elections, and dissolve both houses of parliament, the People's Assembly and the Shoura Council, which they view as hopelessly corrupt and illegitimately elected.

From there, but before coming to the table, Abdel Hamid said, the protesters must be given guarantees that the country's 30-year-old emergency national security laws will be rescinded and that government officials will be investigated for attacks on demonstrators over the past two weeks, which have left around 300 people dead.

Recently, leaders from old-school Egyptian opposition parties such as the Wafd and Tagammu have met with Suleiman. Though they don't use the word, the talks look very much like negotiations.

Last week, Tagammu vice president Anis el-Bayya told Al Jazeera, during a lull in the rock-throwing street battles on the street below his party's headquarters, that he and other opposition politicians fully supported the youth's revolution. The demands he laid out - dissolution of

parliament, a transfer of power from Mubarak to Suleiman - were the same as those we heard later from the youth coalition.

But it's clear that the coalition lacks trust in Bayya's generation.

"We will not negotiate until (Suleiman) proves to us that he is serious about these reforms, which is not the case at the moment," Abdel Hamid said. "What the opposition groups are doing is a waste of time."

### **Expanding the protests**

Tuesday night, another coalition member associated with ElBaradei, 32-year-old Sally Moor, told us that the day's negotiations between the "wise men" and Suleiman had not been fruitful. Mubarak had reportedly rebuffed the demand to step down or delegate his powers, she said.

Concessions announced by Suleiman earlier in the day – the formation of three committees to oversee reforms, draft constitutional amendments, and investigate violence against protesters – had failed to please the youth.

"How can you trust the regime to monitor the regime?" Moor asked.

The protests will now likely expand, she said. The plan is for demonstrators to begin occupying other critical squares and intersections in nearby Cairo neighborhoods - Dokki, on the Nile's west bank, and Talaat Harb, just east of Tahrir Square. The maneuver will be repeated in cities outside the capital. A large gathering in the square was again being planned for Friday.

Some had suggested the protesters move on the presidential palace in Heliopolis, around 14 kilometers east of central Cairo, but many believe the Republican Guard units defending the site are authorised and willing to shoot protesters, unlike the mainline army conscripts deployed around the square, some of whom have been recalled into active duty after being discharged.

Amr Ezz, a 27-year-old coalition leader and member of the April 6 youth movement - founded in solidarity with striking laborers in the Nile Delta city of Mahalla - told us that the coalition was also pushing for a nationwide strike. On Wednesday, that plan seemed to be going into effect; thousands of workers were reportedly striking in Mahalla, Suez and towns on the outskirts of Cairo.

Ezz said that the protest movement leaders in Tahrir, not the Wafd and Tagammu politicians meeting with Suleiman, had the most power and resonance with the people.

"On the ground parties have no tangible power," he said. "People here have no faith in old opposition figures who talk and talk but have done nothing for the people."

Ahmed Douma, a 22-year-old coalition representative for the Justice and Freedom party, echoed Ezz's statement.

"The people who were capable of achieving this revolution can prevent it from being stolen," Douma said. "Influence is proportional to power on the streets, and I think that the people are more powerful than the political parties ... The opposition can appear on TV and discuss details of negotiations, but people will not respond to them like they do to us."

Such steadfast optimism will be necessary if the coalition hopes to succeed. Its demand for Mubarak to step down immediately increasingly looks like it may be considered a dead letter among policymakers in the United States, whose \$1.55bn in annual assistance to Egypt awards great influence in the negotiation process.

The recent lack of public enthusiasm for Mubarak's departure from president Barack Obama and secretary of state Hillary Clinton won reproach from a collection of Washington-based analysts, the Working Group on Egypt, which said this week that policy makers risked condoning "an inadequate and possibly fraudulent transition."

### **A mixed roster**

The youth coalition officially includes six groups: April 6, Justice and Freedom, and the ElBaradei affiliates, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Democratic Front party, and independents.

Though it's not always a businesslike affair - since the coalition was announced, some members have left and the leadership has expanded from 10 members to 14 - the diverse alliance exhibits admirable message discipline. Their demands and preconditions are uniform, and nobody suggests relaxing their line.

There is also a sense of natural camaraderie. As we asked 26-year-old Mohamed Abbas, a representative for the Brotherhood, whether his constituents had explicit religious interest they wanted to promote during the transition, Moor, who is a Christian, joked that she wasn't afraid of them.

The Brotherhood and the ElBaradei supporters are two of the coalition's more intriguing faces.

ElBaradei is a lightning rod. He is a darling of the West, but his own assistants acknowledge the wide criticism he suffers within Egypt, from Mubarak supporters as well as the square's most liberal protesters.

They say he is out of touch with the Egyptian people; some say he has lived out of the country for too long, others criticize him for failing to visit the square and spend enough time among the people (he came once on January 30, made a speech, and left). Few say they'd support him for president.

But his supporters say that's not his role. They argue that ElBaradei was one of the few Egyptian figures in recent years to make public demands for constitutional change, a repeal of the emergency laws, and free and fair elections.

"Even as the supporters of Baradei, we know he does not have a role on the ground here," said Abdel Rahman Samir, a 26-year-old ElBaradei affiliate on the coalition. "These events are larger than him, let us be honest."

But Samir said ElBaradei "broke the fear barrier" in 2010 by launching a campaign - supported by the Brotherhood - that gathered hundreds of thousands of signatures from Egyptians supporting his ideas for change. ElBaradei may not lead a transitional government or even head a committee, but his stature as a Nobel laureate and former head of the United Nations' nuclear watchdog means that he can participate effectively in other ways, Samir said.

"We are trying to keep Baradei as our last playing card," he said. "Anyone who gets involved in the game of politics at this moment will squabble with political parties and dirty his name. He should keep his distance and wait until the scene is clean ... He can push for youth rights externally, he can negotiate with the regime, he can hold conferences for youth."

On the other end of the spectrum is the conservative Muslim Brotherhood, a wide-reaching social movement that is technically banned but still considered - at least for now - to be the most organized political opposition group in Egypt. Though the Brotherhood's raison d'etre is to bring Egyptian society in line with Islamic principles, it has in the past decade allied itself closely with liberal opposition groups and helped push their pro-democracy, anti-repression agenda.

The Brotherhood has also been at pains to downplay its role in the protests. Before January 25, it publicly declared it would not officially join the demonstrations. Even so, the government still sought to roll out a by-now familiar canard, telling reporters that the Brotherhood had fomented the unrest and was responsible for hurling Molotovs from rooftops during the worst fighting, though it was clear the petrol bombs were coming from Mubarak supporters.

"The government uses the Brotherhood as a tool to scare people," Abbas, one of the two Brotherhood representatives on the coalition, told us.

At the end of the day, the coalition members set aside their ideologies; there's no use fighting for a slice of the pie when the pie doesn't yet exist, he said.

In an article about the protest movement, young Brotherhood member and blogger Abdelrahman Ayyash wrote that it is "impossible" to characterize the demonstrations as Islamic.

"Clearly, the Muslim Brotherhood would be honored if they were a part of forcing Mubarak to step down, but the truth is that the Egyptian youth made the first move, and the 'traditional' opposition followed the movement of the youth and participated in the protests and gave them very powerful support," Ayyash wrote.

He said that while Brotherhood members are present in the square supplying protesters with medicine and food, the group's slogans - such as "Islam is the solution" - are nowhere to be found.

"You will know what it means when you see the leftist artist standing beside the Muslim Brotherhood activist and chanting against the Mubarak regime," he wrote. "It is the first protest in the history of Egypt that gathers every colour of the political spectrum for one goal: the departure of Mubarak and his regime."

"Of course (the Brotherhood) would like to see Egypt as a civil society but based on religion," Abbas told us. "But first it's the Egyptian people's right to choose."

If the Brotherhood isn't the top choice, he said, they're still happy to be involved in the system.