

Egyptian Regime Begins US-Backed Talks With Opposition Parties

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The Obama administration has backed negotiations between the Mubarak regime and several Egyptian opposition parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Vice President Omar Suleiman, who led the discussions, which began yesterday, is now being groomed by Washington and its allies to head a military-dominated “transitional” government tasked with disorienting and, if necessary, crushing the mass uprising of Egyptian workers and young people.

Suleiman met with representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood, who repudiated previous pledges not to enter into talks with the government until Mubarak resigned. According to the Guardian, the Islamists absurdly declared that they “did not regard the meeting as negotiations but as an opportunity to hear the government’s position.” Suleiman also spoke with members of several political parties such as Wafd and Tagammu that were afforded semi-legal status and a small number of parliamentary seats under Mubarak’s dictatorship. Also included was a committee supposedly representing pro-democracy youth groups, independent legal experts and businessman Naguib Sawiris.

Mohammed ElBaradei, the former head of the UN nuclear weapons inspection program, said he had not been invited to the talks. However, a member of his National Association for Change group participated who was described by Al Jazeera as ElBaradei’s representative.

Suleiman afterwards released a statement, insisting there was a “consensus” among all involved for a “commitment to constitutional legitimacy.” The vice president pledged to confront the dangers of the “lack of security for the populace, disturbances to daily life, paralysis of public services, suspension of education at universities and schools, logistical delays in the delivery of essential goods to the population, and attempts at foreign intervention into purely Egyptian affairs and breaches of security by foreign elements working to undermine stability in implementation of their plots.”

Having slandered the anti-regime protest movement, Suleiman outlined a series of threadbare sops, including a pledge to form a committee comprised of “members of the judicial authority and a number of political figures” that is to spend a month considering possible constitutional and legislative amendments. Another bureau is also to consider complaints about the detention of political prisoners.

The vice president said that media and communications would be “liberalised” but stressed that the state of emergency—continuously in operation ever since Mubarak assumed power in 1981—would only be lifted “based on the security situation and an end to the threats to the security of society.”

The beginning of negotiations marks a further step towards the establishment of an interim government dominated by the military and Omar Suleiman, longtime security chief and trusted ally of the US and Israel, along with a civilian fig leaf of such figures as ElBaradei.

Egyptian state television reported Saturday the leadership of Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) collectively resigned, including the president's son Gamal Mubarak who had been head of the party's "policies bureau." Hossam Badrawi, a so-called "liberal voice" within the ruling party, was appointed the new secretary-general.

The Obama administration has rushed to endorse the Mubarak regime's manoeuvres. On Saturday, the US envoy to Egypt, Frank Wisner, declared his support for Mubarak remaining in power until September. "We need to get a national consensus around the preconditions for the next step forward," he told the Munich Security Conference. "The president must stay in office to steer those changes. I believe that President Mubarak's continued leadership is critical... He has given 60 years of his life to the service of his country, this is an ideal moment for him to show the way forward."

The US State Department subsequently distanced itself from Wisner's panegyric to Mubarak, claiming that Obama's man in Cairo was speaking in a personal capacity only. Wisner's remarks point to the sympathy the dictator still enjoys within sections of the US political establishment.

The Obama administration appears to have lost confidence in Mubarak's ability to maintain control and is now clearly looking to Vice President Suleiman to play the leading role. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, also appearing at the Munich Security Conference on Saturday, declared that Suleiman was Egypt's head of government. "There are forces at work in any society, and particularly one that is facing these kinds of challenges, that will try to derail or overtake the process to pursue their own specific agenda—which is why I think it's important to support the transition process announced by the Egyptian government, actually headed now by Vice President Omar Suleiman [and] an orderly establishment of the elections that are scheduled for September."

Clinton's reference to social forces at work attempting to "derail or overtake the process" provide a telling insight into the fear in Washington that the anti-Mubarak movement will trigger the emergence of an independent movement of the Egyptian working class and even a social revolution.

Class issues are coming to the foreground in Egypt, and found reflection in Clinton's adamant defence of the Egyptian capitalist state. "It is also important to support the institutions of the state," the Secretary of State emphasised. "There are respected institutions that are functioning and effective within Egypt that need to be maintained. The army is a respected institution. The business sector, particularly the banking sector. There are many different parts of the society that will be essential for the kind of peaceful, orderly transition that we are all hoping for."

A "transition" regime that rests on the military and is amenable to the banks—this, in a nutshell, constitutes the Obama administration's strategy in Egypt.

There is much discussion in the American media over the "threat" posed by the Muslim Brotherhood. In reality, however, the middle-class Islamist organisation poses no danger to Washington's manoeuvres. In the period after World War II, US imperialism promoted the

Muslim Brotherhood as a counterweight to socialist and secular nationalist influences in the population. During the anti-Mubarak uprising, the organisation first outright opposed the movement of young students and workers, and only later participated in the demonstrations with the express purpose of encouraging Mubarak to concede some “reforms.” Now the Brotherhood has stressed its support for various bourgeois liberal forces, including Mohammed ElBaradei.

ElBaradei in turn is preparing for office. The American media has already begun its process of massaging and cajoling into line the likely civilian face of an interim government worked out between Washington, Suleiman and the Egyptian military command. Appearing on MSNBC’s “Meet the Press” yesterday, ElBaradei was asked whether Egypt should preserve its treaty with Israel. “I think so,” he replied, before making some perfunctory remarks about the Palestinians’ right to establish an independent state. MSNBC host David Gregory quickly interrupted to chastise ElBaradei, declaring that viewers “will hear equivocation, and there will be great fear about a potential leader of Egypt saying that the peace treaty is not rock solid with Israel.”

Meanwhile, mass demonstrations continued yesterday in Cairo and Egypt’s other major urban centres. Protestors declared Sunday a “day of martyrs” and commemorated those murdered by the Mubarak regime’s police and provocateurs.

Suleiman told protestors, “We can say only go home. We want to have normal life. We don’t want anybody in the streets. Go to work. Bring back once again the tourists. Go to the normal life. Save the economy of the country.”

The military last night attempted to advance its line against demonstrators outside the Egyptian Museum, near Tahrir Square. Soldiers fired warning shots into the air and arrested three young people who were among those who refused to move back. The Guardian reported, “There are concerns that demands by the military to remove barricades blocking roads are a move towards breaking up the demonstration.”

Workers and youth urgently need to build new organisations of struggle—factory, workplace, and neighbourhood councils—to advance their independent interests.

In Tunisia, weeks after President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was forced to flee the country and a so-called National Unity government was put in place, clashes between the government and the population continue. On Saturday, at least two people were killed and 17 injured after police shot into a group of protesters outside a police station in the northern city of El Kef. “About 1,000 people gathered in a protest in front of El Kef’s police station to demand the dismissal of the head of the police in the city for power abuse while exercising his duties,” a source told Reuters. In a separate incident, a man died after being hit by a tear gas grenade in clashes in Kebili, about 400 kilometres south of the capital Tunis. Police clashed with protesters who reportedly opposed the appointment of a new regional governor.

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