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Egyptian Youths Drive the Revolt Against Mubarak

By **DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK** and **MICHAEL SLACKMAN**

For decades, Egypt's authoritarian president, Hosni Mubarak, played a clever game with his political opponents.

He tolerated a tiny and toothless opposition of liberal intellectuals whose vain electoral campaigns created the facade of a democratic process. And he demonized the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood as a group of violent extremists who posed a threat that he used to justify his police state.

But this enduring and, many here say, all too comfortable relationship was upended this week by the emergence of an unpredictable third force, the leaderless tens of thousands of young Egyptians who turned out to demand an end to Mr. Mubarak's 30-year rule.

Now the older opponents are rushing to catch up.

"It was the young people who took the initiative and set the date and decided to go," Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said Wednesday with some surprise during a telephone interview from his office in Vienna, shortly before rushing home to Cairo to join the revolt.

Dr. ElBaradei, a Nobel prize winner, has been the public face of an effort to reinvigorate and unite Egypt's fractious and ineffective opposition since he plunged into his home country's politics nearly a year ago, and he said the youth movement had accomplished that on its own. "Young people are impatient," he said. "Frankly, I didn't think the people were ready."

But their readiness — tens of thousands have braved tear gas, rubber bullets and security police officers notorious for torture — has threatened to upstage or displace the traditional opposition groups.

Many of the tiny, legally recognized political parties — more than 20 in total, with scarcely a parlor full of grass-roots supporters among them — are leaping to embrace the new movement for change but lack credibility with the young people in the street.

Even the Muslim Brotherhood may have grown too protective of its own institutions and position to capitalize on the new youth movement, say some analysts and former members. The Brotherhood remains the organization in Egypt with the largest base of support outside the government, but it can no longer claim to be the only entity that can turn masses of people out into the streets.

“The Brotherhood is no longer the most effective player in the political arena,” said Emad Shahin, an Egyptian scholar now at the [University of Notre Dame](#). “If you look at the Tunisian uprising, it’s a youth uprising. It is the youth that knows how to use the media, Internet, [Facebook](#), so there are other players now.”

Dr. ElBaradei, for his part, has struggled for nearly a year to unite the opposition under his umbrella group, the National Association for Change. But some have mocked him as a globe-trotting dilettante who spends much of his time abroad instead of on the barricades.

He has said in interviews that he never presented himself as a political savior, and that Egyptians would have to make their own revolution. Now, he said, the youth movement “will give them the self-confidence they needed, to know that the change will happen through you and not through one person — you are the driving force.”

And Dr. ElBaradei argued that by upsetting the old relationship between Mr. Mubarak and the Brotherhood, the youth movement posed a new challenge to United States policy makers as well.

“For years,” he said, “the West has bought Mr. Mubarak’s demonization of the Muslim Brotherhood lock, stock and barrel, the idea that the only alternative here are these demons called the Muslim Brotherhood who are the equivalent of [Al Qaeda](#).”

He added: “I am pretty sure that any freely and fairly elected government in Egypt will be a moderate one, but America is really pushing Egypt and pushing the whole Arab world into radicalization with this inept policy of supporting repression.”

The roots of the uprising that filled Egypt’s streets this week arguably stretch back to before the Tunisian revolt, which many protesters cited as the catalyst. Almost three years ago, on April 6, 2008, the [Egyptian government crushed a strike](#) by a group of textile workers in the industrial city of Mahalla, and in response a group of young activists who connected through Facebook and other social networking Web sites formed the April 6th Youth Movement in solidarity with the strikers.

Their early efforts to call a general strike were a bust. But over time their leaderless online

network and others that sprang up around it — like the networks that helped propel the Tunisian revolution — were uniquely difficult for the Egyptian security police to pinpoint or wipe out. It was an online rallying cry for a show of opposition to tyranny, corruption and torture that brought so many to the streets on Tuesday and Wednesday, unexpectedly vaulting the online youth movement to the forefront as the most effective independent political force in Egypt.

“It would be criminal for any political party to claim credit for the mini-Intifada we had yesterday,” said Hossam el-Hamalawy, a blogger and activist.

Mr. Mubarak’s government, though, is so far sticking to a familiar script. Against all evidence, his interior minister immediately laid blame for Wednesday’s unrest at the foot of the government’s age-old foe, the Muslim Brotherhood.

This time, though, the Brotherhood disclaimed responsibility, saying it was only one part of Dr. ElBaradei’s umbrella group. “People took part in the protests in a spontaneous way, and there is no way to tell who belonged to what,” said Gamal Nassar, a media adviser for the Brotherhood, noting the near-total absence of any group’s signs or slogans, including the Brotherhood’s.

“Everyone is suffering from social problems, unemployment, inflation, corruption and oppression,” he said. “So what everyone is calling for is real change.”

The Brotherhood operates a large network of schools and charities that make up for the many failings of government social services. Some analysts charge that the institutional inertia may make the Brotherhood slow to rock the Egyptian ship of state.

“The Brotherhood has been very silent,” said Amr Hamzawy, research director at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. “It is not a movement that can benefit from what has been happening and get people out in the street.”

Nor, Dr. ElBaradei argued, does the Muslim Brotherhood merit the fear its name evokes in the West. Its membership embraces large numbers of professors, lawyers and other professionals as well as followers who benefit from its charities. It has not committed or condoned acts of violence since the uprising against the British-backed Egyptian monarchy six decades ago, and it has endorsed his call for a pluralistic civil democracy.

“They are a religiously conservative group, no question about it, but they also represent about 20 percent of the Egyptian people,” he said. “And how can you exclude 20 percent of the Egyptian people?”

Dr. ElBaradei, with his international prestige, is a difficult critic for Mr. Mubarak's government to jail, harass or besmirch, as it has many of his predecessors. And Dr. ElBaradei eases concerns about Islamists by putting a secular, liberal and familiar face on the opposition.

But he has been increasingly outspoken in his criticism of the West. He was stunned, he said, by the reaction of Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) to the Egyptian protests. In a statement after Tuesday's clashes, she urged restraint but described the Egyptian government as "stable" and "looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people."

"'Stability' is a very pernicious word," he said. "Stability at the expense of 30 years of martial law, rigged elections?" He added, "If they come later and say, as they did in Tunis, 'We respect the will of the Tunisian people,' it will be a little late in the day."

Mona El-Naggar contributed reporting from Cairo.