



ATTENTION: A soldier in front of a Cairo polling station last November. Calls for reforms have also been heard in the military. **REUTERS/AHMED JADALLAH**

Rank and file Egyptian servicemen see the country's revolution as their own chance to transform

# In Egypt's military, a march for change

BY MARWA AWAD

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**O**n a warm Wednesday morning last October, around 500 Egyptian army officers based at the Air Defence Institute on the outskirts of Alexandria staged a mini revolt.

According to a lieutenant colonel with direct knowledge of the protest, the men were angry about the punishment given to a fellow officer by his superiors. After refusing to train, the officers demanded to meet either Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the head of Egypt's military



MEET AND GREET: Army boss Tantawi (left), in this image taken from Egyptian television in January last year, has tried to reassure the rank and file. **REUTERS/EGYPTIAN STATE TV**

and in effect the country's acting president, or his second in command. They wanted to meet the commanders, they said, to make the case for better treatment.

"Their reasoning was: Egypt is having a revolution and they too have demands," the lieutenant colonel said.

The rebellion, unreported before now and confirmed by three other officers in the unit, lasted several days. As Egyptians were calling for quicker and deeper change – demands directed at the military council that runs the country – at least one part of the country's military was itself split.

The popular protests that ousted Hosni Mubarak last year were rooted in the yawning gap between rich and poor, and the desire to get rid of a leader about to enter his fourth decade in power. The wealth in Egypt was, and is, controlled by a small and often uniformed elite. To most Egyptians, Mubarak, a career officer in the air force, was both symbol and cause of those inequities.

As in the country, so in the barracks. Over the past six months, more than a dozen serving or recently retired mid- and lower-ranking officers have said they and their col-

leagues see Egypt's revolution as their own chance to win better treatment, salaries, and improved conditions and training. They are tired, they said, of a few very top officers becoming rich while the vast majority of officers and ordinary soldiers struggle.

As the military and the Muslim Brotherhood both press their own candidates ahead of the presidential elections scheduled for May and June – former intelligence chief Omar Suleiman entered the race as the army's choice last week and Khairat al-Shater, the Brotherhood's deputy, two weeks ago – the tensions in the lower ranks shed light not only on the country's most powerful institution but on Egypt itself.

"Military ranks struggle like the rest of Egyptians because, like Egyptian society, the wealth of the military is concentrated at the top and does not trickle down. You have to reach a specific rank before wealth is unlocked," one major said.

The military declined to comment on the Alexandria incident or any other allegations in this article. Tantawi, his Chief of Staff Sami Annan and other top commanders have moved to contain the officers' frustra-

tion, holding regular meetings with military units in an attempt to boost morale and assure soldiers that their salaries will be raised and their concerns addressed, military leaders and mid-ranking officers who have attended the meetings said.

That seems to have placated the disgruntled officers, who say they will hold off on pushing their demands further until the ruling military council hands over power to an elected civilian government. But they insist they need real change.

"We have a moral obligation to remain steadfast and support the process," one colonel said, echoing a widely held view. "But when we return to our barracks ... commanders will have to address our demands."

## FACTORIES AND LAND

Numbering at least 468,000 men – officials refuse to give the exact number saying it could hurt national security – Egypt's combined army, air force, air defence command, navy and paramilitaries make up the largest military force in the Arab world. More than half of those in uniform are conscripts.

Senior military officers have dominated Egypt's politics and large chunks of its economy since seizing control in a 1952 coup. Just as Mubarak did, Tantawi presents Egypt's armed forces as a bulwark against the spread of Islamism and potential chaos. The military, one general said, is the "only competent and long-standing institution" capable of maintaining bilateral relationships with other countries. Western diplomats mostly agree with that assessment.

One of the keys to the military's power is its grip on business, which was strengthened after Egypt's 1979 peace deal with Israel. Under that accord, the military had to shrink its forces. But instead of sacking hundreds of thousands of men, commanders opened factories to employ them. Those plants now produce everything from components for ammunition to pots and pans, fire extinguishers, and cutlery. The military also runs banks, tourism operations, farms, water

treatment plants, a petrol station chain, construction firms, and import companies.

Businesses owned solely by the military are exempt from tax, and often built on the backs of poorly paid conscripts, who make between \$17 and \$28 a month, although they are fed by the army and receive basic medical help. "A conscript goes into the army less for training, and more for working in one of the military factories or business schemes," said Ahmed Naggar, an economic analyst at the Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies.

Khalil Kandil, chairman of the Chamber of Metallurgical Industries, said the armed forces enjoy another big advantage: "Who is asking the military factory to pay back its investments and to pay taxes and to pay for natural gas and electricity? They can keep losing (money) for years."

Opposition politicians and many ordinary Egyptians want the military's budget and economic and land holdings to be made public. But senior military figures want to protect their position and argue that Egypt's new constitution must shield the military from the instability of political change.

Analysts say the military establishment is likely to retain significant powers, no matter who wins the two-round presidential election.

Disentangling the military from Egypt's economy and institutions could take years. Zeinab Abul Magd, economy professor at Oberlin College in the United States, estimates the military controls about a third of the entire economy. Egypt's land planning authority says the armed forces have de facto control over all unused land in Egypt, or about 87 percent of the country. Civilian projects almost always need military consent in case there is a risk to national security.

Retired senior officers often hold powerful positions in civilian institutions; an Egyptian official said this practice will continue.

### AMERICAN DOLLARS

Arab International Optronics (AIO) sits on the outskirts of Cairo, a beautiful gar-

“The armed forces will not allow any interference in its business projects. This is a matter of national security.”

**Mahmud Nasr**

assistant on financial affairs to Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi



PRODUCTION LINE: Businesses such as the Arab International Optronics (AIO) factory which produces solar panels are needed to keep the military competitive, senior officers say.

REUTERS/ASMAA WAGUIH

den at its entrance. The factory, a joint venture between the military, which owns 51 percent of the firm, and France's Thales, was founded in 1987 and makes and upgrades military equipment such as thermal imagers and tanks. It exports to Britain, France, Germany, Libya, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, makes enough money to fund itself, and employs 400 staff, most of them trained abroad. Staff benefits include free transport, free meals and half of the cost of annual haj pilgrimages.

"The company was founded when technology was hard to get from abroad because of political constraints on Egypt," AIO boss

Major General Nabil Amer said in December, referring to limitations on imports and technology set by the 1979 peace deal. "Most of AIO's revenue is spent on military research and the development department."

Military leaders point to businesses like AIO as proof that the \$1.3 billion in military aid Egypt receives every year from the United States is not enough for the country to keep up with rivals such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. Many soldiers feel the U.S. money benefits American arms manufacturers and forces Egypt to buy outdated weaponry. Egypt, they say, needs to be able to make its own money to advance.

Military leaders boast that their businesses help the country. Mahmud Nasr, Tantawi's assistant on financial affairs, said the army has given the state 12 billion Egyptian pounds (\$1.99 billion) since early last year.

"The armed forces will not allow any interference into its business projects. This is a matter of national security," said Nasr.

Now that the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties control the assembly that is drafting a new constitution, the military is determined to protect its role.

"Previously the military budget was subject to specific laws and was not in any constitution," said General Mamdouh Shahrine, who is responsible for legal affairs on the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which has run Egypt since Mubarak's ouster. "But now we want to bring it under the new constitution to ensure stability. By adding budgetary clauses to the constitution, I am simply asserting a reality that has existed for a long time. What is the problem with that?"

The aid rankles civilian leaders as well. In 2009, according to a U.S. embassy cable obtained by WikiLeaks, Egypt's then prime minister Ahmed Nazif met U.S. officials to ask for \$50 million in development funds. But he knew the government was also asking for military funding.

"I sometimes feel like I am competing with Field Marshall Hussein (Tantawi) and he is winning," Nazif, who was given a

suspended jail sentence for corruption after Mubarak fell, told embassy officials.

### **"A SYSTEM OF PATRONAGE"**

The spark for the soldiers' rebellion in Alexandria was a brutal episode in Cairo. On Oct. 9 last year, a group of Coptic Christians converged on Cairo's television station to protest at the burning of a church. In a neighbourhood called Maspero, the protesters clashed with soldiers; about 25 civilians were killed.

The army says soldiers were also killed in the violence. The lieutenant colonel with direct knowledge of the rebellion at the Air Defence Institute said one officer and 22 soldiers died. Those who survived were seriously injured and some were disabled, according to a source at the military judiciary. Among other things Air Defence Institute officers demanded was financial compensation for the families of those dead.

Money has long been the cause of frustration in the lower ranks of Egypt's military.

"The army is the richest institution in Egypt, yet a large group of officers feel disenfranchised," said a retired general in Cairo. The wealth, he said, "is concentrated in about 15 percent of the army's officer corps, upper ranks, who remain loyal through a system of patronage."

Elite officers can make millions of dollars, according to junior officers, get access to special clubs and seaside resorts and retire into cushy corporate jobs or political positions. A low- to mid-level officer gets about 2,500 pounds (\$414) a month before bonuses, about the same as a Cairo taxi driver.

There are also problems with training, which four senior officers said was evident in the poor handling of tanks and armoured personnel carriers on the streets during last year's protests. At Maspero, inexperienced soldiers in charge of armoured carriers injured protesters inadvertently, one recently retired general responsible for devising training systems for the military said.

The protesters in Alexandria also wanted the chain of command to be decentralised,



FLASHPOINT: A protester injured during a clash with riot police in Cairo last October. **REUTERS/MOHAMED ABD EL-GHANY**

so they could respond more immediately in a crisis.

Low-level officers say the high command has allowed all those grievances to fester.

The unspoken rule, said the lieutenant colonel, dictates that soldiers "stay away from politics or organised religion, don't outshine your commander, don't think about improving the system."

After attending an operation on Jan. 17 that combined units of the three main branches of Egypt's Second Field Army - air defence, air force and infantry - Tantawi defended the military's training methods, and promised salary increases. "What we saw today in the drill of the accuracy of fire and efficiency in performance reflects the high capacity the armed forces have achieved."

### **"TIME TO SPEAK OUT"**

To get its way in the new Egypt, the military will need to rely on the Islamist parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which now control parliament. It has kept up a strong intelligence network to ensure the Brotherhood does not infiltrate military

ranks, according to mid-ranking officers. While most soldiers and officers are religious, the military does not allow religious organisations to set up within its ranks.

Leaders of the Brotherhood have stressed the need to work with the military. But the Brotherhood's decision to enter the presidential race worries the military leadership. Senior Brotherhood figures have also said they will amend the new constitution before the end of the current parliamentary period.

In the army-run International Medical Centre where former president Mubarak has been held during his trial, a major's cell phone rings with the melody of a popular song that honours the people who died in Tahrir Square last year. "My country, my country, I love you my country," the lyrics go.

"When you are in the seat of power for so long, you cease to have a vision to make things better," the major says.

Officers with knowledge of the military council say it could be reshuffled after the election. But don't expect a revolution. "It is like an in-house replacement, like what happens on a board of directors who offer



VICTORY? Ahmed Shouman, a soldier, flashes a victory sign as he joins protesters in Tahrir Square in Cairo last November. REUTERS/MOHAMED ABD EL-GHANY

their CEO a retirement package,” the general said.

Could mid- and low-ranking officers attempt a takeover? Insiders doubt it.

“You must remember that at the end of the day, the army is patriotic,” said the colonel. “Many of the rank and file refuse to rebel because they feel the country depends on them and they are the last institution standing. They want change but they would rather wait until a civilian government is formed.”

Last year, as the protests gathered pace, Ahmed Shouman, a Cairo-based major, handed in his weapons and joined the

crowds demanding an end to Mubarak’s rule. Shouman was tried for quitting his army unit without permission, found guilty but then pardoned.

He returned to Tahrir Square last November. “It is time we spoke out against the wrong and corrupt,” he told Reuters then. “We must stop being afraid. The military council does not represent the rest of the army. I call on the military council to step down.”

Shouman was re-arrested two months ago for “actions that harmed the armed forces” including talking to the media and

criticising the military. A military court sentenced him last week to six years in prison.

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