

# Fayza Abul Naga Presses Inquiry Against U.S. in Egypt

Contributed by DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK  
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Egyptian Official Vexes Ruling Generals and U.S. by Pressing Investigation

Fayza Abul Naga

CAIRO — She is a holdover from the Mubarak era, a friend of the former first lady and the driving force behind the indictment of 16 Americans in a criminal investigation that threatens to undermine the decades-old alliance between Egypt and the United States. Now Fayza Abul Naga, 61, is defying even Egypt's military rulers. With \$1.5 billion in annual American aid hanging in the balance, Egypt's top military officer and de facto chief executive is asking Ms. Abul Naga to moderate her tone. But she has become more caustic than ever, issuing her own warnings for Washington to back off. If the United States is not careful, she says, it may push Egypt closer to Iran.

"Every country has pressure cards in the political field," she said this week, according to the state newspaper Al Ahram. "Egypt is no exception."

When Ms. Abul Naga, the minister of planning and international cooperation, requested the investigation into foreign financing of nonprofit groups here, she was widely perceived as a mere agent of the ruling generals. At least two of the generals even hinted that the investigation might reveal the "foreign hands" they blamed for stirring up street protests. But as her case has escalated, officials in Cairo and Washington say she has been acting independently to exploit an emerging power vacuum as the military council's power erodes.

Now the supposedly all-powerful generals appear afraid of a backlash if they interfere in her campaign, which has tapped into a deep reservoir of anti-American sentiment.

Over the weekend, Egypt's military ruler, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, publicly called for strengthening relations with the United States and, according to news agency reports, privately urged Ms. Abul Naga and other cabinet officials to moderate their tone. But this week Ms. Abul Naga unloaded as never before.

On Tuesday, state media reported that she had told prosecutors in closed-door testimony in October that the United States had poured money into federally financed nonprofits that promote political organizing — the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute and Freedom House — in an effort to sow chaos, thwart the development of a strong and democratic Egypt and turn the revolution to the interests of the United States and Israel.

The Republican Institute served the "right wing" agenda of its namesake party, she charged, while the Freedom House was a tool of the "Jewish lobby."

With her vocal support, the case has only gained momentum. In addition to the indictments, the prosecuting judges have issued a travel ban trapping more than a half-dozen Americans in Egypt. Three, including the son of the secretary of transportation, have sought shelter at the American Embassy for fear of arrest.

Although Ms. Abul Naga's comments this week only aggravated the tensions between the United States and Egypt, it was unclear who might intercede.

With a transfer of power to a civilian president promised within just four months, almost everyone in the Egyptian government, including the 19 members of the ruling military council, appears preoccupied with his or her own personal fate after the generals leave power, American and Egyptian officials say. Some have reason to fear that they could face trials for corruption or charges related to the crackdowns, as former President Hosni Mubarak and many of his lieutenants already have. But others are eager to preserve their positions, buttress their institutions or seek elected offices in the new government.

Ms. Abul Naga declined repeated requests for comment.

"This is a country of separate islands now," said Mohamed Anwar el-Sadat, the nephew of former President Anwar el-Sadat and a newly elected lawmaker who recently called Ms. Abul Naga to testify before a parliamentary committee. "The Foreign Ministry, the Justice Ministry, the Parliament, the generals of the military

council — everyone is his own island.”

The ruling generals were “surprised” by the actions against the American groups, Mr. Sadat said, recounting what he said were conversations with top military officials. “They had not been informed, and they believed the timing was wrong,” he said. “But she knows that Tantawi is only in charge while the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces is there. His time is over, so her time is over.”

Signs abound that the military’s authority is fading fast. Civilian judges have for the first time begun to rule against the military council. The police hesitate to use force or even take action for fear of retribution, and earlier this month their diffidence contributed the deaths of more than 70 soccer fans in a riot in Port Said, a parliamentary inquiry found.

Lawmakers, in turn, are moving to dismiss the interior minister, but no one yet knows whether Parliament or the military can claim that power. The Muslim Brotherhood, whose party dominates Parliament, abandoned its policy of avoiding confrontation with the military to call for the dissolution of the entire military-appointed cabinet — including Ms. Abul Naga — to make room for it to form a coalition government. But it is unclear whether even a new cabinet can last more than four months, beyond the promised vote for president.

“Power is in a very fluid state right now,” one American diplomat said, speaking anonymously under diplomatic protocol. “American pressure scares them less than the mob in the street demanding the execution of Tantawi.”

The diplomat added, “It means society is really coming apart at the seams.”

Already many here say that Ms. Abul Naga’s campaign against the Americans has made her all but untouchable — if not potentially electable — in the next stage of Egypt’s transition. “She is a hero,” Mr. Sadat said archly.

Ms. Abul Naga’s leading role in the crackdown is surprising, some old friends say, because she spent many happy years in the West. She speaks fondly of living in New York as one of the closest aides to Boutros Boutros-Ghali, then the secretary general of the United Nations, who recruited her from the Egyptian foreign service. She later worked for years in Geneva, as Egypt’s representative to the United Nations office there, and to the Human Rights Council.

She was also aware that as recently as 2010 Egypt had pledged to the council to liberalize the strict regulations of nonprofit groups that are now being used to prosecute the Americans — a commitment that American officials say led them to believe that the rules were effectively dead after the ouster of Mr. Mubarak.

But Ms. Abul Naga always stood out for her round-the-clock work habits, deft political skills and personal ambition. “I always told her, ‘When you become foreign minister of Egypt, don’t forget to appoint me your spokesman,’” said Ahmad Fawzy, an Egyptian friend of Ms. Abul Naga from the United Nations.

Mr. Mubarak always considered Egypt’s reliance on American aid “a humiliation,” American diplomats wrote in a cable disclosed by WikiLeaks. And Ms. Abul Naga was his chief negotiator in years of battles to stretch and control the American aid money.

Married to a diplomat now serving as Egypt’s ambassador to Japan, Ms. Abul Naga often spent time with a circle of female friends she shared with the former president’s wife, Suzanne, her friends and former officials say.

After Mr. Mubarak’s ouster, Ms. Abul Naga was one of the only cabinet members to retain a post. She even expanded it, adding economic planning as well. Her dual role means that as Ms. Abul Naga defends the crackdown on foreign financing of Egyptian nonprofits she is also in charge of asking the West for billions more in aid to help stabilize the Egyptian economy. Sometimes she does both at the same news conference.

It reminded Mr. Sadat, the lawmaker, of an old Egyptian proverb. “I beg you for charity,” he said, “but I’m your master.”