

MIDDLE EAST

Egypt's Government Resigns Amid Corruption Probe

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CAIRO — Egypt's government resigned Saturday in the face of intense criticism from state-friendly media that reflects growing discontent but stops short of faulting President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi, the former general who led the overthrow of an Islamist president two years ago.

The office of the president said he accepted the resignation of Prime Minister Ibrahim Mehleb and his Cabinet but that the ministers would continue to serve until a new body is appointed. El-Sissi tasked Petroleum Minister Sherif Ismail with forming a new Cabinet within a week.

Prior to handing in his resignation, Mehleb provided a report detailing the performance of the government, which two officials from the president's office said el-Sissi found "unsatisfying." The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they are not authorized to brief reporters.

Egypt's president is generally in charge of major affairs of state while the prime minister, whom he appoints, handles day-to-day running of the government.

El-Sissi in recent months has had to perform tasks that normally should fall to Mehleb, such as arranging meetings with ministers and negotiating business deals with foreign investors, according to the two officials. Mehleb also failed to pressure his ministers into following through on memorandums of understanding that el-Sissi signed during a much-publicized economic summit in March, they said.

The country's private media, while lavishing praise on el-Sissi, have slammed the government in recent weeks, accusing ministers of incompetence and of being out of touch with ordinary citizens suffering from years of turmoil since the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak.

"El-Sissi and the armed forces are responsible for the accomplishments we see," said Ibrahim Eissa, a prominent journalist and popular TV host, who called Mehleb and his Cabinet a "burden" on the president. "All of the ministers that failed were Mehleb's choices," Eissa told viewers earlier this week.

The government suffered a major blow when Agriculture Minister Salah el-Din Helal was detained Monday after tendering his resignation amid an investigation into allegations that he and others received over \$1 million in bribes.

The Egyptian government has long been plagued by corruption allegations, particularly regarding land deals. El-Sissi routinely insists that he is rooting out corruption.

Mehleb walked out of a press conference in Tunisia earlier this week after being asked about the allegations, a move widely ridiculed by the pro-Sissi private media.

"Didn't you watch el-Sissi's speeches?" television host Youssef el-Hosseiny said, before playing clips of the president's past press conferences for comparison.

The corruption allegations have fed into the perception that the government is detached from the people and engaged in the sort of cronyism that was widespread in the Mubarak era and was a central grievance of the protesters who overthrew him.

Last week, the higher education minister reportedly tried to exempt the children of judges, army and police officers from unpopular regulations that restrict where Egyptians can attend university. In May, the justice minister suggested the children of sanitation workers could never aspire to be judges.

Mehleb, a former construction magnate and prominent member of Mubarak's now-defunct National Democratic Party, angered many in July when he suggested the country's youth consider driving auto-rickshaws, known as tok-toks, instead of counting on government employment.

El-Sissi has approved a new civil service law that many believe will dramatically reduce the country's 6 million-strong public workforce.

There have been few public expressions of discontent with the government. A draconian law restricting protests, and a wide-ranging crackdown on supporters of ousted Islamist President Mohammed Morsi as well as secular activists, have largely silenced dissent.

The dismissal of the Cabinet could further bolster support for el-Sissi ahead of parliamentary elections later this year, furthering the image he has cultivated of himself as a leader who is above the political fray.