

Egypt: Creating a New Political Reality

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Translated from Arabic by Michele Dunne

At present there are at least three possible readings of Egyptian politics. There is the government version, in which President Mubarak's decision to amend Article 76 of the constitution to permit direct and pluralistic elections for the presidency is an historic reform step approved by a majority of Egyptians, first via the two chambers of parliament and then via the May 25 public referendum. Government newspapers and writers close to the ruling National Democracy Party (NDP) stress that the constitutional amendment was not an isolated step, but was preceded by a package of political reforms during the last few years including the establishment of the National Council for Human Rights and abrogation of emergency courts. They suggest more change will be coming regarding laws pertaining to political rights and participation, and the electoral system. Thus they project an image of an Egyptian government committed to a gradual democratic transformation that will not disrupt stability or security, and which will guarantee continuous economic growth and an end to poverty and unemployment. Although President Mubarak has not yet declared his intention to run for a sixth presidential term, the media campaign supporting him has already begun, for example in a six-hour television interview with Mubarak entitled "My Testimony to History."

Opposition parties and various protest movements—particularly the Egyptian Movement for Change, Kifaya—offer a second perspective, accusing the government and NDP of evading demands for political reform while pursuing two well-known Mubarak strategies: making cosmetic changes that do not touch the regime structure in any substantial way, and employing systematic repression against opposition forces. The Egyptian opposition points to the following: First, the amendment of article 76 of the constitution is devoid of democratic content due to the nearly impossible conditions for independent candidates as well as the difficult conditions for opposition parties to get candidates on the presidential ballot from 2011 onward (the party would need to hold 5 percent of parliamentary seats). Such conditions—not unusual in well-established democracies where they exist to avoid fragmentation of the political sphere but inappropriate in an authoritarian system seeking to democratize—caused the opposition to call on Egyptians to boycott the referendum. Second, the amendment does not provide for full judicial supervision of the presidential election but rather forms a presidential electoral commission composed of five judges and five public figures appointed by the NDP-controlled parliament. Third, the government has not acceded to opposition demands to abrogate the emergency law, lift restrictions on forming political parties, and limit the powers of the president of the republic. Fourth, the government has increased its repression of opposition movements, in particular the Muslim Brothers, nearly one thousand of whom have been arrested in recent weeks, including leadership figures. In addition, there were beatings and sexual assaults of activists from Kifaya and other movements on the day of the constitutional referendum. Fifth, the government is trying to bypass the demands of Egyptian judges for full and independent judicial supervision of presidential and parliamentary elections by employing both sticks and carrots. Sixth,

regarding international election monitoring, the Egyptian opposition is divided between those who reject it as a form of unwanted foreign intervention and those who see it as having become an accepted practice globally; surprisingly the Muslim Brothers tend toward the latter position.

A third reading of the situation, which relies on historical comparisons, notes that the current political scene in Egypt is unprecedented in terms of variety, and provides both government and opposition with new models of political interaction that will ultimately tend toward greater freedom and pluralism. Never since the beginning of the Mubarak era in 1981 has the government faced such organized opposition, some of it within government institutions, and never before have opposition forces gotten such a hearing in Washington and European capitals. Although the opposition is accustomed to government repression, it still has a limited capacity to sustain confrontation with the government, or to take advantage of the opportunities and challenges of coordination between secular and religious forces.

On the surface, some developments even appear comical. Security forces abuse demonstrators during a referendum and then are criticized by the prime minister and president after a telephone call from President Bush. The Kifaya (“Enough”) Movement raises a slogan for change and is answered by an NDP slogan of Mish Kifaya (“Not Enough”). The opposition uses a song criticizing Arab leaders by popular singer Shaban Abdel Rahim in order to criticize Mubarak, and the government convinces the singer to produce a new song entitled “Whether Yes or No, Mubarak is Best.” Some judges demand democratic change, while others support Mubarak and stability. And so the government and opposition compete for public opinion locally and globally, and yet accept each other in practice. Thus, despite the slow and limited nature of reform so far, the current pluralistic moment is leading toward a qualitatively new stage of democratic change in Egypt, and the upcoming parliamentary elections may be the opening act.

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