

## The Travails of Egypt's Democrats

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*Ahead of this month's parliamentary elections, FRIDE researcher Irene Menéndez witnesses the problematic inception of a new Egyptian reform initiative and assesses what 'added value' this might bring to the country's burgeoning opposition.*

Demands for reform in Egypt are gathering momentum. A number of developments in the wake of the country's presidential elections attest to the incipient drive for change. Mounting discontent across a wide social spectrum, together with an international context apparently more favourable to reform, is compounded by an expanding pro-reform movement, increasingly determined to publicly challenge the regime's attempts to circumvent change. Proof of such determination was the somewhat tortuous birth on 22-23 October in Alexandria of the Egyptian Democracy Support Network (EDSN). The conference called to launch this initiative was, unsurprisingly perhaps, disrupted by elements linked to the Mubarak regime, which used physical violence against participants.

Contrary to reporting in Egyptian newspapers, the Conference resumed and proceeded to sign its founding agreement. Promoted by the Ibn Khaldoun Centre for Development Studies, the EDSN brings together a number of Egyptian and international organisations and individuals with the purpose of fostering coordination and cooperation on reform. Discussion focused on the state of democracy in Egypt, external contributions and the potential role of the EDSN in the promotion of reform. Participants included a number of notable intellectuals and civil society representatives, such as Kifaya, the Cairo Centre for Human Rights, the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights and the Islamic International Labour Federation, and a number of prominent international organisations working in the field of democracy promotion.

In the context of upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled to take place on 9 November, the question arises of what might be achieved by this new initiative and how favourable the broader context is to political reform in Egypt.

### **A Widening Reform Constituency**

Recent months have witnessed the emergence of a number of pro-reform movements willing to challenge the regime's monopoly of the political arena. Egyptian political life has long been marked by the dominance of President Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP), whose strength derives mainly from its close association with the state and the its control of embedded patronage networks.<sup>1</sup> Triggered by growing internal and external pressure, the spectrum of opposition to the regime has expanded noticeably to include an array of activists such as students, university professors, lawyers, engineers and journalists, and strikingly, judges and Al-Ahzar scholars. Among the most prominent are the Kifaya (Enough) movement and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), both of which have gained considerable visibility in the wake of the September presidential elections.

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<sup>1</sup> Madalena Rosende & Hendrik Kraetzschmar, 'Parties of power as roadblocks to democracy: the cases of Ukraine and Egypt', CEPS Policy Brief, n. 81, August 2005.

Born in August 2004, Kifaya appeared as a non-partisan pressure group embracing a wide spectrum of discontented segments, from liberals, leftists and Nasserites to Islamists and independents. In addition to generating broader public acceptance, this extended membership - and the lack of defined ideological programme it entailed - enabled the movement to transcend major divides. Initially calling for basic reform to prevent the president's re-election and hereditary rule, the new movement has intensified democratic lobbying in the aftermath of the presidential elections. Demands today include constitutional change (in particular to ensure freedom of association), establishing dialogue with national forces (reaching out to the broader public and government officials in charge of relations with civil society) and supporting national figures not necessarily part of the movement albeit with political aspirations.

The emergence of Kifaya has been met with ambiguity from a number of sectors. Political parties engaged in dialogue with the regime are keen to discredit it, while the MB, which participates in the movement and its demonstrations, has expressed reservations on the slogans used and is wary of the potential effect the movement's increasing popularity might have on its own popular presence. Arguably, however, Kifaya's merits lie less in its ability to provide a viable political alternative than in its breaking of the fear barrier. A reflection of popular demands for change, the movement's secular demonstrations, the first in decades, questioned the assumption that only religious forces were able to organise. Importantly, it also succeeded in bringing the Coptic community into the public space, for thirty years withdrawn from public discussion. Finally, and crucially, the movement's merit lies also in its redefinition of priorities; in contrast to prevailing demonstrations on the issues of Iraq or Palestine, which were allowed to divert domestic pressure, Kifaya put Egypt first.

Throughout the last two years, the Muslim Brotherhood has embarked on a line of reform calling for the opening up of political space. The willingness to reform was apparent in a number of announcements and demonstrations. The Reform Initiative announced by the Brotherhood on 3 March 2004 called on the Egyptian government to end the state of emergency and embark on the road to reform. A year later, a demonstration held in defiance of state authorities resulted in the arrest of hundreds of the organisation's followers. Importantly, the decision to encourage participation in the presidential elections despite the prohibition set by the amendment of Article 76 (which ruled out the possibility of the MB of running a candidate) indicated a willingness to play by the rules. A number of developments account for this relatively new emphasis on reform. On the internal front, the exclusion of the MB from the national dialogue called for by the legal opposition, together with the emergence of Kifaya as a potential rallier, prompted the MB to reassert its influence. On the external front, growing international pressure led to the belief that a calculated show of force on the part of the Brotherhood would probably result in greater parliamentary representation. Either way, such developments point to a general acceptance of gradual reform.

### **Challenges Ahead**

While of undoubted importance, these emerging currents of reform are faced with a number of difficulties, internal and structural, which threaten their very sustainability. Among the latter, the NDP's structural entrenchment in state institutions and its corollary, political repression, constitute major impediments to a normalised political competition. Hailed by the international community as a historic breakthrough, the amendment of Article 76 arguably undermined a major demand of the opposition to prevent hereditary rule by introducing a structural change that, given the conditions for participation, effectively legalised Gamal Mubarak's access to power (as leader of the NDP) in nominally competitive elections.<sup>2</sup> In effect, the constraints on participation in the

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<sup>2</sup> Emad El-Din Shahin, 'Egypt's moment of reform: a reality or an illusion?', CEPS Policy brief, no. 78, July 2005.

presidential elections set by the amendment of article 76 made it almost impossible for independent candidates to run.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the amendment did not provide for full judicial supervision of the presidential elections, and was limited to the appointment of a presidential electoral commission composed of five judges and five public figures appointed by the NDP-controlled parliament.

Structural difficulties are compounded by internal weaknesses, foremost among which are the absence of well-defined programmes and the resulting fragmentation of policy proposals. A major obstacle so far has been the lack of clear political alternatives to President Mubarak's NDP. Pro-reform movements are in agreement over a number of short-term issues – namely, basic constitutional reform and the end of hereditary rule. But they are far from constituting a unified opposition, and differ on such issues as state control over the economy, the scope of private enterprise in the public space or the political role of religious movements. In the eyes of a number of civil society representatives, the problem is compounded by the conversion of some NGOs into political parties where change has become fruitless.<sup>4</sup> Such divides apply to legalised parties as well. Political parties are not representative of certain currents – farmers and workers are virtually excluded. Admittedly, efforts by the Wafd and Al-Ghad (Tomorrow) – two of the main competing parties in the presidential elections – to mobilise support represented a shift from closed-door discussions to meaningful participation, but both failed to present alternative visions to the existing regime. Thus, the decision to focus on political reform instead of addressing pressing socio-economic conditions arguably contributed to its poor performance - Al-Ghad came in second after the NDP with 7.6% of the vote, whilst the Wafd obtained just under 3%.

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections, seen by many as decisive to contest the NDP's monopoly over the People's Assembly, the absence of defined visions raises a number of questions.<sup>5</sup> The multiplicity of reform movements with similar demands but different objectives is likely to undermine the reform momentum, and make this liable to fragmentation. So far, at least three parties have undergone fragmentation and fallen out of the political arena – Misr-el-Fatah, Al-Ahrar, Al-Amal, and more recently, the Arab-Nasserite Party, which suffers from severe internal division.<sup>6</sup> In the face of such shortcomings, two main strategies prevail. On the one hand, the creation of a united opposition front embracing a number of pro-reform forces; parties such as the Wafd, the Leftist Unionist and the Arab-Nasserite, along with Kifaya, are intent on running joint candidates. On the other, that of independent constituency-building, favoured by the MB and Al-Ghad, both of which intend to compete independently in a limited number of districts. The former is unwilling to compromise its strength by entering into an alliance with a junior partner, whilst Ayman Nour's Tomorrow party is keen to make good on the relatively good results obtained in the presidential elections.

Beyond the performance of different parties, however, the proliferation of diverse platforms emphasises the lack of a mainstream organisation that can aggregate and coordinate diverging objectives and represent a coherent majority. It is precisely here that the EDSN could play a major role.

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<sup>3</sup> The amendment requires that each independent candidate collect 250 signatures from members of the People's Assembly (lower house of parliament), from the Shura Council (upper house of parliament) and municipal councils. The NDP currently dominates all of these by greater than 90% majorities.

<sup>4</sup> Mohamed Zarya, Organisation for Prisoners' Assistance, EDSN Inaugural meeting, 22/10/2005, Alexandria.

<sup>5</sup> ICG Report, 'Reforming Egypt: in search of a strategy', Middle East/North Africa Report no. 46, 4/10/05; speech by Bahey eddin Hassan, Cairo Centre for Human Rights, EDSN Inaugural meeting, 22/10/05.

<sup>6</sup> Moheb Zaki, 'The fate of El-Ghad', *Civil Society and Democratisation in the Arab World*, September 2005, 11/130, p. 3.

The ESDN represents an attempt at coordination and dialogue between pro-reform forces, and thus addresses one of the most pressing challenges for effective political reform dynamics in Egypt. It is here that the Network offers 'added value' to the emerging cacophony of reform voices and movements. If it can assume an 'aggregative role' and mitigate the regime's ability to sow division amongst its diverse opponents, another crucial step towards political change will have been taken.

All eyes are now on this month's parliamentary elections. Dramatic breakthroughs are unlikely at this juncture. But against this background, the ESDN might be harnessed for more profound change. For one thing, the ESDN is called to play a fundamental role in the crucial monitoring process, thus continuing the work initiated by the Independent Committee for Elections Monitoring launched by the Ibn Khaldoun Centre in the wake of the presidential elections. Through the network of civil societies and volunteers that found its activities, the ESDN will contribute to propagate the philosophy of election monitoring and informing citizens of its importance. In addition, if opposition forces emerge with a slightly firmer foothold, it will then be apposite to look towards consolidating gains through broadly embracing networks like that of the ESDN. It is why these merit support additionally from outside Egypt.

This will not be easy. The potential value of opposition voices aggregating their agendas was reflected in the regime's determination to scupper the initiative. Like all great battles, this will be a battle for hearts and minds.

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