Egypt's Local Elections Farce
Causes and Consequences

By Mohammed Herzallah and Amr Hamzawy

Egypt's local elections of April 8, 2008 were a confirmation of a backward slide in Egyptian politics. They were plagued by social unrest and political discord. In the weeks prior to the elections, labor protests escalated, precipitating a harsh crackdown that resulted in at least two fatalities and many injuries. The country's largest opposition force, the Muslim Brotherhood, decided at the last minute to boycott the elections. Voter turnout did not exceed 5 percent and the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), facing virtually no competition, landed a sweeping victory—winning roughly 95 percent of the seats at stake.

These developments bring to light a broader deterioration in Egyptian politics. Three elements of this process stand out and deserve careful attention:

- First, the burgeoning social crisis caused by out of control inflation, a crippled welfare system, and persistent unemployment;
- Second, a return to the old authoritarian practices of the ruling establishment; and
- Third, worrying signs that call into question the very existence of a viable opposition capable of advancing reform through the political process.

Social Unrest

On April 6, a number of civil society organizations including various independent unions, syndicates, and networks of young activists—some of whom belong to political parties—organized a national strike day to express their frustration with deteriorating social and economic conditions. Although government security forces contained the strike in most Egyptian cities, they could not stop workers in state owned industrial complexes in Mahalla, a city

in northern Egypt, from orchestrating massive demonstrations. There were numerous reports of violent confrontations and clashes between thousands of protesters and security forces that went on for two days.

Workers' strikes have become frequent in Egypt. Hundreds of strikes and protests have been carried out over the past two years, but none escalated to the levels witnessed in early April. The primary demand of workers has been to link their wages to commodity price levels. Inflation has been a problem for many years in Egypt, settling at around 8 percent in late 2007 according to the IMF. Based on a recent press release by the Central Bank of Egypt, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) has reached punishing heights in the past few months, arriving at 12.1 percent in February, up from 10.1 percent in January. In a country where more than a third of the population lives below the poverty line of $2 a day, wheat prices in particular are a major source of concern. Earlier in March, unanticipated shortages of subsidized bread caused considerable popular agitation, prompting President Mubarak to instruct army bakeries to boost their production. These problems have intensified public accusations of mismanagement and corruption that the regime has yet to address adequately.[1]

The political unrest of the last two years is quite different than what Egypt witnessed briefly between 2004 and 2005. Then, street level outbursts were the result of reform driven activism led by several opposition movements, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood and Kifaya. By and large, the present unrest is a reaction to the acute decline in socio-economic conditions, and its instigators do not appear to have a well thought-out agenda. The regime has consistently tried to contain such social strife through a combination of repressive and conciliatory measures. Government officials warned industrial workers that participation in strikes or any other protest activities would cost them their jobs. More often than not, security forces have been deployed to preempt or smother strikes. At times, however, the regime has yielded to certain narrow demands such as modest increases in wages, expanding the beneficiary pool of state welfare programs, and sustaining some subsidies. At any rate, the persistence of confrontations and the recent escalation in Mahalla in particular demonstrate the seriousness of popular discontent and the failure of both oppressive methods and minor concessions to mollify the public.

Exacerbating the problem is the absence of a clear strategic vision at the top levels of the Egyptian ruling establishment on how to best resolve socio-economic pressures. Small measures like President Mubarak's recent decision to terminate tariffs on basic food commodities and certain medicines have fallen short of the kind of comprehensive remedy that is so urgently needed. Notwithstanding the fact that the Egyptian economy continues to grow at an impressive 7 percent annual rate and attracts substantial foreign capital, especially from the Gulf region, it still lags behind in providing sufficient

safety nets to alleviate the pains of the ongoing transition to a free market economy.

The weakness of the organized political opposition is augmenting social unrest. Because the regime has used various constitutional and unconstitutional means to restrict the activities of political opposition groups, the capacity of these actors to operate effectively has been terribly deflated. The consequence of this condition has been a massive increase in spontaneous, unstructured civil disobedience outbreaks. Leading these discordant waves of activism are labor leaders, human rights activists, bloggers, and young journalists. They have roots that stretch across the ideological spectrum and are remarkably responsive to the public's sentiments. In spite of various attempts by some political parties to develop links to these activists, they have remained largely autonomous. On the whole, the decentralization of the protest movement and independence of its activists have made it more difficult for the Egyptian government to contain the ongoing unrest. Nevertheless, this dispersion of energy from the center of the political system to its peripheries has also obstructed the emergence of a coherent movement with a clear set of demands.

Return to Authoritarian Practices

The Egyptian regime's lack of an overall strategy to address the country's enduring troubles extends far beyond the economic sphere. Politically, the regime seems to have abandoned the option of using political reforms to defuse socio-economic tensions. This stands in contrast to what happened in the 2003–2005 period. The unprecedented political openings of those years were a direct result of the economic difficulties the country was experiencing after it decided to float its currency in 2003, a decision that caused the Egyptian pound to depreciate significantly. Among the political reforms introduced in this period was easing control over opposition activities, amending the constitution to allow for the country's first ever multicandidate presidential elections, and tolerating an increased level of political participation by the major Islamist opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Political reforms may have eased tensions, but they also led to results the government considered unacceptable. The strong showing of the Muslim Brotherhood in the parliamentary elections of 2005, when its candidates won 20 percent of the seats of the People's Assembly (the lower chamber of the Egyptian parliament), tested the regime's grip on power, and compelled it to reverse course. In 2006, the regime postponed the local elections, extended the state of emergency for two years, and cracked down on popular protests. It also suppressed efforts by the country's judiciary to accrue some measure of independence. The Muslim Brotherhood also became a target. In 2006 and 2007, and despite of the limited impact of the Brotherhood's parliamentary

activities, the regime launched a wave of arrests targeting the movement's high ranking leaders and financiers.

In 2007, the ruling National Democratic Party used its control of parliament to ratify amendments to 34 articles of the constitution, dealing a serious blow to political reform in Egypt. Most significantly, the amendments replaced judicial oversight of the elections with oversight by a new supreme supervisory committee whose members would be appointed by the president. This effectively overruled the 2000 Constitutional Court ruling that called for direct judicial oversight of elections. Incidentally, although repression and fraud were not completely absent, judicial oversight of elections had contributed to the emergence of a relatively transparent electoral process, especially during the 2005 parliamentary elections.

The amendments also banned the pursuit of any political activity or the establishment of any political parties within any religious frame of reference. This ban aimed at preventing the Muslim Brotherhood, or any other political group with an Islamic orientation, from establishing a legally recognized party. The amendments also introduced a mixed electoral system based primarily on proportional representation that favored parties able to present lists, leaving only a small unspecified margin for independent candidates. As an outlawed movement prohibited from establishing a political party, the Muslim Brotherhood has been able to gain parliamentary representation over the years by fielding independent candidates. In all likelihood, this change will diminish the Brotherhood's electoral prospects and consequently its representation in parliament.

Taken together, the Egyptian regime's policies in the past two years have put an end to the political mobility the country briefly experienced between 2003 and 2005, and reintroduced the stagnation that characterized the 1980s and 1990s. The space in which the opposition, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, can operate has been greatly restricted, resulting in widespread, severe polarization. In view of the socio-economic pressures prevalent today, it would seem more sensible for the regime to attenuate public anxiety by making more conciliatory gestures toward the opposition. Conceivably, the fact that the regime is in the process of preparing the stage for a new president to succeed Hosni Mubarak may be the main consideration preventing authorities from replicating the 2003–2005 measures.

During the first several months of 2008, it became evident that authoritarian practices were not going to recede any time soon. A campaign targeting several media outlets and a number of journalists attracted considerable attention. But, it was the April local elections that made clear the extent of the regime's resolve to enforce its control and reassert its monopoly over power.

Local councils have traditionally been dominated by members of the NDP and have little power and no direct impact on the political process. Nevertheless, the councils have acquired a slim measure of significance following recent constitutional amendments, which stipulated that any future independent (not a member of the registered political parties) presidential candidates must be sponsored by at least 140 local representatives. The Muslim Brotherhood was seen as the one movement most capable of launching a successful bid for Egypt's 2011 presidential election. To the regime, this prospect presented a clear challenge and resulted, as mentioned earlier, in the postponement of local elections twice since 2006. This fact also explains why the Egyptian government was determined to cap the electoral gain potential of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 2008 local elections.

Intending to preclude the opposition from achieving any meaningful gains, the Egyptian regime engaged in a calculated effort to prevent most opposition candidates from registering and running in the local elections. Approximately a thousand opposition activists, primarily from the Muslim Brotherhood, were arrested. Of more than five thousand potential Muslim Brotherhood candidates, fewer than 500 were allowed to submit their candidacy papers. Eventually approximately two dozen candidates affiliated with the Brotherhood were approved by the authorities. The remaining opposition groups had less than 1,000 candidates on the final lists. The NDP, on the other hand, had over 53,000 registered candidates. Not surprisingly, over 80 percent of the 52,000 local council seats were won by NDP candidates running unopposed. The elections, it should be added, were not supervised by judicial authorities in any meaningful way.

Weakened Opposition

The current political debacle is not only the result of amplified government repression. Opposition forces have their own problems. Presently, Egypt's organized opposition is too vulnerable and divided to be taken seriously.

Liberal and leftist parties occupy less than 5 percent of the seats in Egypt's lower and upper houses of parliament. These parties are split between two camps. The first is composed of parties like the liberal Wafd Party and the leftist Unionist (Tajammu') Party, which have grown dependent on the authorities to ensure their survival and ward off the political threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result of this, these parties have lost their credibility and, for all intents and purposes, their political autonomy.

The second camp is comprised of parties such as the liberal Democratic Front, the Arab Nasserite Party, the Ghad Party and the leftist Karamah Party, which maintain their autonomy but are institutionally underdeveloped and suffer from chronic internal disputes and disagreements. They have limited popular appeal and have failed consistently to establish a dedicated core constituency.

Neither camp, as a result, has established credibility or has been able to perform standard opposition functions. Sure enough, the April 8 local elections have underscored the deficiencies of these parties. The Wafd and Unionist parties relied on the government to maintain some representation in the local councils—together they were guaranteed a few hundred seats. They were unable to mobilize their electoral base or reach out to new constituencies and essentially won the seats the government allowed them to have. On the other hand, the Democratic Front, Nassarite, Ghad, and Karamah parties failed to communicate to the public whether they were boycotting the elections or taking part in them and, at the end of the day, won ten or so seats.

Civil society has remained active, but mainly because of the street level networks that were discussed earlier. Fundamentally, these are protest oriented groups whose mode of activism is inherently different from that of organized political parties. One reason these actors have been gaining ground recently is the absence of real dynamism in the representative institutions in which political parties are supposed to be operating. Although these civil society actors can stimulate national discourse, they are unlikely to bring change on their own, essentially because of their limited resources and lack of organization. Moreover, these actors have a very limited ability to channel social unrest into constructive political activities. Their failure to penetrate the political process by nominating candidates in the local elections, despite their efforts, was indicative of their disadvantages.

The Muslim Brotherhood's Decision to Boycott

The local elections also uncovered the deep-seated weaknesses of the Muslim Brotherhood and the unresolved dilemmas still inhibiting its career as a political opposition movement. Despite knowing that participation in this year's local elections would make it the target of extensive governmental abuse, the Brotherhood was initially determined to run. Late in February, the movement stated that "running for local and national office is a constitutional right that applies to us."[2]

Faced with massive violations in the conduct of local elections, the Muslim Brotherhood's initial response was in line with the approach it had embraced in the past few years, i.e. to peacefully challenge the regime's restrictions and repressive measures and exhaust all legal means to secure critical space for political participation. Muslim Brotherhood candidates who were blocked by the authorities from registering to run for local council seats filed thousands of lawsuits to settle their grievances. The majority of court decisions affirmed their claims, but the government refused to carry out these verdicts. Left with the prospect of running not more than two dozen candidates and with the number of arrested members approaching 1,000, the Brotherhood reconsidered its commitment to participation. On April 7, one day before the polls opened, the Brotherhood decided to boycott the elections and called on

all Egyptians to do the same. In a statement discussing the new position, the movement said it is continuing to "struggle politically and legally to invalidate the outcome of these elections," calling "on the people to boycott this fraudulent process …" and emphasizing that "it will continue to resist oppression and corruption, call for reform, and fight for change through constitutional and legal avenues.…"[3] Earlier, Mahdi Akef, the General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, warned that the government's actions might well trigger chaos and violence—although he was careful to emphasize his group's commitment to peaceful activism.[4]

Notwithstanding the regime's intransigence and its violations of the law, the irregular attitude with which the Muslim Brotherhood approached the local election crisis stands in conspicuous contrast to the consistent participatory approach to which it had committed earlier. In an interview conducted in late February, a few days after the Brotherhood announced that it would participate in the local elections, Muhammed Habib, the first deputy of the General Guide, outlined the chief reasons behind his movement's commitment to participation in the April local elections despite all the restrictions. He emphasized preserving an active channel of communication with the public to exchange ideas and programs, underscoring the movement's commitment to peaceful reform, keeping the public space in a dynamic condition in the face of continued undemocratic pressures, maintaining a positive public atmosphere, and sustaining vigor and debate within the Brotherhood's ranks.[5]

Various statements made by the Muslim Brotherhood expressed similar sentiments and stressed that the Brotherhood's cause is legitimate and protected by the Egyptian constitution.[6] On the whole, the fact that the movement was determined to run in the elections was not in question. Indeed, participation at all costs offered the Brotherhood a valuable opportunity to challenge the regime's power and demonstrate its ability to remain a vital force in Egyptian politics. In an interview on April 5, Mahmoud Izzat, a member in the Brotherhood's Guidance Bureau, stated that the movement would not boycott the elections regardless of what happened.[7] The fact that Izzat made this statement two days before the Brotherhood announced its boycott of the elections indicated that the final decision had been made hastily and had not been subjected to extensive internal deliberations.

To the degree that the movement intended to retaliate for the regime's flagrant actions, its decision may not pay off. After all, keeping the Muslim Brotherhood out of the local councils was the intention of the ruling establishment in the first place. What's more, the movement is setting a dangerous precedent that the regime will certainly keep in mind: through sufficient political persecution and repression, the authorities can count on the Brotherhood to take itself voluntarily out the political equation.

This episode is also indicative of the state of strategic incoherence that has marred the Muslim Brotherhood's political operations over the past few months. This incoherence became noticeable after the Brotherhood issued a draft party platform late last year. The draft gave analysts many reasons to be wary of the Muslim Brotherhood's understanding of political and religious roles. The platform gave no hints about how the party would differentiate these two spheres of operation. Nevertheless, the promulgation of the draft was followed by a short period of vigorous debate within the movement, in which the ambiguity of its religious and political missions was criticized by many leading voices. Unfortunately, no sooner had the debate become public than it was abruptly brought to an end by the movement's leadership, and the whole issue of establishing a political party was shelved until further notice. Developments like boycotting local elections and terminating discussions about the prospects of becoming a political party reveal a lack of strategic clarity on the part of the Muslim Brotherhood. In view of the congested reality of Egyptian politics, the persistence of this flaw may well make the Brotherhood's efforts to delineate clear boundaries between its religious and political activities out of reach.

Conclusion

Egypt is trapped in an unenviable position, characterized by growing social unrest and political polarization. Choices made by the Egyptian regime will most likely determine whether the current social convulsions will be followed by more instability or, if matters are handled prudently, sustainable recovery. In all likelihood the option of moderating the perilous effects of economic strain by orchestrating a new wave of political reforms is one that the regime will hesitate to embrace at this stage. The concern that such openings might make worse the odds of a trouble-free presidential succession seems to surpass any other considerations. The result of this conservative outlook has been a regrettable return to old authoritarian habits on the part of the regime.

But repression over the past two years has not resulted in a sustainable stability that could ensure a smooth presidential succession—far from it. The violence and political repression with which the opposition was contained, coupled with worsening living conditions, have engendered more popular resentment and bitterness.

Regrettably, the panic that presently characterizes the Egyptian regime's handling of the country's troubles is likely to persist until the presidential succession issue is finally settled. To be sure, the task of persuading the regime to support political reforms when it is trapped in this frame of mind is immeasurably difficult. Be that as it may, the present period of repression is likely to have long-term negative consequences that will probably be felt long after the succession has taken place. The capacity of organized opposition forces to reach out to the public and take part in resolving collective

grievances in a peaceful, constructive manner continues to contract. Liberal and leftist forces continue to hemorrhage credibility and cohesion. In addition, the regime's anti-Muslim Brotherhood policies are causing the group to reconsider its consistent commitment to the political participation option. This state of strategic imbalance could have critical repercussions in terms of the Brotherhood's ability to sustain a sense of disciplined moderation within its ranks. Such an outcome would have severe long-term repercussions for the country as a whole.

The current resurgence of protest activism constitutes the one promising development in Egyptian political life. But progress on the street needs to be complemented by real political progress in the performance of organized opposition forces in the political process. Notwithstanding the fact that this progress is largely predicated on the regime's willingness to welcome the opposition's input, it is also dependent on the quality of this opposition. Only through active, disciplined, credible, and committed participation in the political process can organized political forces in Egypt effectively advance the reform agenda and push for sensible and comprehensive policies that can address the socio-economic exigencies at hand.

Notes

[1] Egypt ranks 105th out of 179 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2007; it ranked 70th out of 163 countries for 2006.

[2] The Muslim Brotherhood's statement concerning the matter of participation in the local elections, www.IkhwanOnline.com, February 21, 2008. Also see the Muslim Brotherhood's statement concerning its position on the local elections, www.IkhwanOnline.com, March 15, 2007.

[3] The Muslim Brotherhood's statement concerning its final position on the local elections, www.IkhwanOnline.com, April 7, 2008.

[4] "Our approach as Muslim Brothers is a peaceful, legal and constitutional approach," Akef told reporters, "but we are not responsible for others. It is very likely that (people) explode ... people are fed up." See "Ahead of Polls, Egypt's Islamists Warn of Violence," www.reuters.com, March 15, 2008.

[5] Interview with Muhammad Habib, www.IkhwanOnline.com, February 28, 2008.

[6] See Abdul Munim Abu al Futuh, "Why We are Participating in the Local Elections," www.IkhwanOnline.com, February 23, 2008. Also see Esam al-Aryan, "Awaiting Judicial Review and Elections—The Regime and the Brothers and the Struggle of Wills," www.IkhwanOnline.com, February 24, 2008. And Muhammad Jamal Hishmat, "These Are the Brothers, Where Are You?," www.almesryoon.com, March 21, 2008. Muhammad Jamal Hishmat "From Bread to the Local Elections," www.almesryoon.com, March 22, 2008.

[7] Mahmoud Izzat, www.IkhwanOnline.com, April 05, 2008.

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