

EGYPT'S DEMOCRACY DEFICIT

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In a recent interview to the Egyptian opposition weekly *Al-Ushbu`*, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak declared that the opposition Muslim Brotherhood movement was endangering Egypt's security. "Should this movement come to power, he added, "many will take their money and leave the country... investment will come to a halt, unemployment will increase and, worse than that, Egypt will be irrevocably isolated from the world." This apocalyptic scenario was aimed at justifying both the proposed constitutional amendments that included a ban on religious-based political activity and the extensive wave of arrests of Muslim Brotherhood members over the last two months. The detainees included Khairat Al-Shatr, second deputy to the organization's spiritual guide, dozens of movement leaders and affiliated businessmen, and 180 students, all charged with belonging to a banned organization seeking to overthrow the regime. Publishing houses close to the movement were shut down as well, and its English-language website was blocked by the authorities.

The regime's offensive against the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) was a response to a march initiated by 50 MB students of Al-Azhar University on December 10, 2006, in which the students were masked and dressed in black. This exceptional act sparked an extremely heated debate in the Egyptian media. Muhammad Ali Ibrahim, editor of the Egyptian daily *Al-*

Gumhuriyya, wrote that the MB "showed a great measure of Fascism and extremism the way they choose to march," while *Al-Ahram* columnist Tareq Hassan declared that "the MB is not a political opposition but a program for anarchy, heresy (*takfir*) and murder."

At the same time, voices critical of the regime were also aired. Dr. Farhi Abd Al-Fattah, editor of the Egyptian government cultural magazine *Al-Muhit*, argued that the government was partially responsible for the radicalization of the MB's activity, constituting "the natural outcome of the policy of putting out fires... with no serious attempt to draw up a plan to prevent this fire and to deal with the roots of the problem". Mubarak was personally criticized by columnist Magdi Muhana in the Egyptian opposition daily *Al-Masri Al-Yaum*: "If the MB movement is indeed endangering Egypt's security, we must ask how Mubarak, as president of the country, commander-in-chief of the military and head of the police and the executive authority is permitting such a danger to exist? How did he permit Egypt's security to be threatened by the rise in power of such a movement?" International and domestic human rights organizations, too, expressed concern over the regime's crackdown, particularly the employment of violence by pro-government thugs against MB students. These actions, the Egyptian Organization of Human Rights (EOHR) stated, will only "bring about

more hatred within Egyptian society."

The government's heavy-handed action against the MB was one indication of the fragility of Egyptian democracy. The November 2006 arrest of the Egyptian blogger Abd Al-Karim Suleiman, known as Karim Amr, was another. Amr was accused of criticizing Al-Azhar sheikhs, as well as the role of religion in Egypt, having posted to his website statements calling for equal rights for women and the protection of free speech. At bottom, the case reflects the Egyptian authorities' fear of the way young Egyptians use the new media to criticize the regime and the president himself. Concern over the loss of control over the media was also epitomized by the arrest of *Al-Jazeera* journalist and documentary producer Howaida Taha on January 13th, on charges of "practicing activities that harm the national interest, and possessing and spreading false pictures on the internal situation in Egypt that could undermine the dignity of the country". Taha had been authorized to film an officer's training course on human rights and to document conversations with former police officers. Her report included reference to leaked videos showing men and women being tortured in police stations.

Six major indices can be used in ranking countries as "defective democracies": restricted political competition, lack of commitment to civil liberties, the personalization of political office, the absence of institutionalized checks on the exercise of power, the apoliticisation of the public and the prevailing ethos among ruling elites that they inherently know what is best for the public. The most insidious aspect of a defective democracy is that rather than constituting an interim stage on the way to a fuller democracy, it represents itself as a government which has already reached that status. How does Egypt fare with respect to these criteria?

Khalil Al-Anani, an analyst at the *Al-Ahram*

Center for Political and Strategic Studies, recently addressed this issue by analyzing the proposed amendment of 34 articles of the Egyptian constitution. His conclusion was unequivocal: rather than offering the prospect of substantive political liberalization, the proposed amendments are designed to further entrench the current executive system, reflecting "disdain for the principle of checks and balances." One practical effect of the amendments would be to restrict the right of independents to participate in the political process, thus blocking MB members from fielding themselves as candidates in future elections.

Egyptian political life currently consists of two main camps: one, steered by the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), seeks to modify the existing government apparatus in order to perpetuate its hold over the state; the other, headed primarily by the MB, aspires to break the monopoly of the traditional actors and change the rules of the game in order to attain a substantive, and eventually preponderant share of political power. Over the last two years, the emergence of the *Kifaya* ("Enough") protest movement and the *Ghad* ("Tomorrow") liberal party suggested that something was stirring in Egypt, and that real strides towards greater democracy had begun. However, the regime's response was harsh. It imprisoned Ayman Nour, leader of *Al-Ghad*, on December 24, 2005 for challenging Mubarak's monopoly on the presidency, and successfully pressured *Kifaya* leader George Ishak to step down, an act that split and weakened the movement dramatically. The authorities' repressive measures also took place against the background of Mubarak's apparent desire to insure a smooth succession to the presidency by his son Gamal. Taken together, these actions demonstrated once again official Egypt's determination to maintain the country's status as a "pre-liberal democracy."