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What is This?

Egyptian Views on the Politics of Egypt Today

Manar Shorbagy

Books Reviewed

Abdel Meguid, Wahid (2005). *Al taghyeer, tareek masr ilal nahdah* [Change: Egypt's Path to Renaissance]. Cairo: Masr El Mahrusa Publishers.

Amin, Galal (2009). *Masr wal Masreyoun fi 'ahd Mubarak, 1981–2008* [Egypt and Egyptians in Mubarak's Era, 1981–2008]. Cairo: Dar Merit.

Awa, M. Selim El (2006). *Al Kadaa wal sultan, Azmat al Qada'a al Masry* [The Judiciary and Power, the Egyptian Judiciary Crisis]. Cairo: Dar el Sherouq.

Bishry, Tarek El (2006). *Masr bayna al tafakkuk wal 'essyan al madani* [Egypt between Dissemblance and Civil Disobedience]. Cairo: Dar el Sherouq.

Shaaban, Ahmed Bahaa Din (2006). *Raffat al farashah, Kefaya: al Mady wal Mustaqbal* [The Butterfly Effect, Kefaya: Past and Future]. Cairo: Kefaya Publications.

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Introduction

These authors, prominent Egyptian intellectuals and activists, tell the story of Egypt today. It is the story of a people with a wounded pride and of intellectuals and activists from different political persuasions who are all gravely concerned about the future of their country.

The authors are all known not just in Egypt but across the Arab world, though these important works have yet to be translated for non-Arabic readers. They come from different political trends and work in different professions. Yet they all agree that Egypt is in a deep multidimensional crisis, confronting spiraling economic deterioration, a decline in regional and international influence, US dominance over national decision-making, and continued regime monopoly of power with

no end in sight. What is even more striking is that while they might disagree on the details of both the causes and the way out of this crisis, they basically agree not only on the general features of the crisis but also on the essential outlines of its resolution.

The five books reviewed here have been written by a political scientist, an economist, a judge, a law professor, and a political activist. Galal Amin is Professor of Economics at the American University in Cairo, a well-known nationalist, and one of the most astute and prolific of Egypt's social critics. Tarek El Bishry is a distinguished retired judge and M. Selim El Awa is a law professor and international lawyer, and both are recognized as major Islamic intellectuals who have made important contributions to the development of Islamic political thought. Although their writings have influenced the Islamic movement in general, both are independent of all Islamic political organizations, including the Muslim Brothers (MB).

Wahid Abdel Meguid, a political scientist, is based at Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. He is also the deputy chief of the Egyptian Book Foundation. A liberal and a member of the highest committee of the liberal opposition Al Wafd party, Abdel Meguid was once close to the ruling party, especially the committee chaired by Gamal Mubarak, the President's son and his heir apparent. For two years (2004–6), he regularly attended the leadership meetings of that committee until he withdrew in protest over the way in which the constitutional amendments were finally written. Ahmed Bahaa Din Shaaban is a highly regarded leftist activist who played a key role in the founding of the important Egyptian Movement for Change, Kefaya. An engineer by profession, Shaaban started his political life as one of the leaders of the 1970s student movement; he has ever since played a leadership role in many direct action campaigns working for political and social causes.

In one sense, all five of these books came as a response to the important political events of 2004–6 that witnessed the rise of the Kefaya movement, as well as the rise and fall of the hopes for democratic reform by the regime. The year 2004 was the year in which national and international pressure for democratic change mounted. The Egyptian Movement for Change, Kefaya, was announced and for the first time took to the streets without waiting for government permission. The Bush administration bombarded the Egyptian regime with harsh statements calling for movement to democracy. By 2005, the President, who for years had rejected democratic calls for constitutional amendments, suddenly and single-handedly directed the parliament to amend the constitution to allow the choosing of the president through direct election rather than a referendum. However, the presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2005 simply reinforced the status quo and were followed by drastic changes in the constitution that represented a setback for democratic reform.

These books have been written by authors who belong to the four major trends in Egyptian political life, the nationalist, Islamist, leftist, and liberal trends. While none of the authors claims to speak for his political trend and none represents all points of view in his camp, each is nevertheless representative of a considerable sector of that trend or at least has considerable influence on it. The analyses put forward by these authors reveal that the areas of consensus among the different political trends in Egypt are far broader than many people might think. The composite analysis that emerges from examining the five works in the same review

not only illuminates the causes of the current crisis but also helps us assess the different options discussed in today's Egypt as a way out.

Three major pathways to resolving Egypt's crises are generally on the table in political debate about Egypt's future. The first option is gradual reform by the regime. The advocates of this option argue that Egypt has a strong regime that monopolizes all sources of power in society. Both secular and Islamist parties are severely weakened, the former owing to an arsenal of laws that virtually lock them in their headquarters, and the latter always subject to the threat of military courts if they are seen as endangering security. Thus, it is argued, gradual reform by the ruling party in coordination with other political forces is the safest way to avoid the unpredictable revolutionary consequences of a mass uprising. Abdel Meguid, a leading advocate of this view, discusses the realistic possibilities of this option in his work.

The second option is the amendment of the constitution. Several Egyptian political forces have, for years, called for constitutional amendments. Bishry in very forthright public statements and articles has sought to preserve the authenticity of the constitutional option by warning against amending the constitution under the repressive status quo in Egypt. Subsequent events established the wisdom of his judgment when the regime used constitutional reform to strengthen its hold on power rather than work for democratization.

The third alternative is that of the ballot box. More often than not this option is discussed in the context of whether or not it offers a way out, given the weakness of political parties and the power of the grassroots Muslim Brothers Organization. However, Awa's book seriously questions the very possibility of conducting a free election under the current regime's monopoly of power. The book tells the story of the judiciary's struggle for independence, which is linked closely to the issue of elections in Egypt. Awa's book, in effect, makes the case that the way forward through the ballot box is to all intents and purposes an illusion.

If these three classic pathways to change are in fact closed, then many may be tempted to think that democratic reform from within is impossible and that real change will require support from abroad, namely a US role. It is important to put this inclination of some to look to a US role in the context of the wider Egyptian political opposition. The books of these five major intellectuals provide just this broader background, against which the three internal pathways to the future can be assessed, along with the possibility of a US role in the resolution of Egypt's multiple crises.

Explaining the Crisis: Egypt in the Freezer

Bishry, Amin and Abdel Meguid all provide detailed and sophisticated diagnoses of Egypt's illness. While each uses different approaches and concepts, they all end up pointing to the same core causes and symptoms. All three identify the absence of a national project, the rise of special interests over national interests, and the unprecedented level of corruption and monopoly of both power and wealth as the major explanatory factors.

According to Bishry, the regime that rules Egypt is not simply authoritarian; nor is the problem simply one of repression. The core problem is that it is a system of "personalization of power." Unlike in authoritarian or even totalitarian regimes, explains Bishry, the ruling elite in the personified system does not represent

a particular constituency, a tribe, religious sect, class, or political force. The regime rather controls power simply by empowering its own top personnel. It overcomes pressures for change by keeping a small circle of individuals in office for a protracted period of time, thus creating a system in which professional and political relations are replaced with individual ties and personal interests.

By putting all sources of power in the control of a handful of individuals who do not represent a particular constituency, the interests protected by the regime narrow and become simply the interests of those individuals who now have a stake in the survival of that regime. The direct result of this has consistently been an increasing level of repression toward all adversaries. The personalized system is thus a closed system that is exclusive and has no mechanisms for political democratic change from within. Changes in personalities are in fact a sort of "political cloning." It is exactly as in human cloning, explains Bishry, "where the new has the same characteristics as the old. In a sense, the new is as old as the original" (p. 28). It is a type of political system that is incapable of changing itself, and therefore it strives to remain in power as it is and at all costs.

By these lights, inaction is thus the direct result of the regime's inability to change, for when things move or develop, change becomes necessary. And because any such movement or development is particularly dangerous to this type of regime, it necessarily lacks a national project which normally forces change in personnel and policy. For this reason, Bishry notes that neither Nasser's system nor even Muhammad Ali's was a personalized one. Although both enjoyed absolute power, each of them had a national project that responded to international challenges and national problems. Each was capable of changing policies and replacing individuals according to the needs of the project.

While Galal Amin uses a different concept to understand the Egyptian predicament, it is striking how similar his analysis of Egypt's core problem is. Amin finds Gunnar Myrdal's concept of the "soft state" most useful. He argues that the state in Egypt has resigned from most of its core responsibilities and allowed such tasks to be taken over by unregulated competition, corruption, and individual feuds. Egypt has, thus, become a government without law. He argues that throughout history Egypt has flourished only under a strong state. He says that Egypt has become a soft state because of identifiable domestic and international factors, notably a globalization that flourishes only with a weak state and a regime that has become more inclined to look after individual rather than national interests.

Three years after the 1967 defeat, Nasser died and Sadat took power. Sadat's policies needed a soft state and contributed to its emergence. Nasser's project was one of political and economic independence, through nationalization, the redistribution of income, and an ambitious economic development plan. The very nature of that project necessarily depended on the existence of a strong state. Sadat's reorientation, however, was about opening up to foreign investors, building close ties with the US and the West, and reaching a political settlement with Israel, a project easier to implement under a soft state and thus destined to result in weakening the state. The economic "open-door policy" was recklessly pushed forward at a pace inappropriate to the stage of agricultural and industrial development, thus undermining both. The economy's focus on the service sector (commerce, tourism, and oil) barely added to the employment rate. With US encouragement, the state's role in the economy declined, while neither national nor foreign private enterprise replaced it.

Dismantling the powerful state was also a price Egypt had to pay in return for the reclaiming of Sinai. Amin explains that the Egyptian–Israeli peace accord, concluded in 1979 with US help and support, not only removed Egypt from the Arab–Israeli conflict, but also prepared the ground for Egypt's gradual distancing from the rest of the Arab world on all major fronts. It also Americanized Egypt's arms purchases and opened the Egyptian economy to foreign domination. Amin concludes that the state had already weakened before Mubarak took office in 1981. He argues, however, that the softening of the state has reached unprecedented and dangerous new levels during Mubarak's 28 years in office.

While Bishry thinks that the absence of a national project under Mubarak was a cause and result of the personalized system he created, Amin believes that the absence of such a project was due to the fact that Sadat's project, which Mubarak simply decided to follow, was almost fully implemented by the time Mubarak took office. "It appeared as though all that was needed was the completion of Sadat's project and an ability to take good care of new things if and when they came up," explains Amin (p. 28). The project was therefore simply to maintain the status quo.

Both Bishry and Amin agree on one of the consequences of the absence of a national project. Amin says that Nasser had a project and he brought into office individuals who either believed in it or at least pretended to believe in it and the same was true for Sadat, although he had a distinctively different national project. Consequently, both Nasser's and Sadat's appointees were politicians who had been chosen to carry out a political vision. For the Mubarak era which has no national project, there is in fact no need for politicians. Therefore Mubarak's appointees have increasingly grown non-political and are even individuals who have never been known to have paid any attention to politics, let alone have any political experience.

In the absence of politicians, politics disappear and with it the national interest. Individual interests dominate the political scene, and when individuals of such a caliber are in power at a time when globalization knocks violently at the doors of the economy, the state easily grows softer. Amin finds this combination of national and international factors the key to understanding the astonishing level of corruption in today's Egypt. When there is no national project that people rally around, when the regime relies more on satisfying Western powers than on meeting the expectations of Egyptians, and when the importance of knowledge and talent recede and the foreign pressure to privatize mounts, "you end up with a marriage of power and wealth. It thus comes as no surprise that in one cabinet, the current one, six ministers were appointed each to the ministry that makes policy for the private enterprise he owns" (p. 63). Poverty reaches a point where the number of those who can survive without breaking the law reaches record lows.

Abdel Meguid uses a different approach, yet his analysis brings him to a parallel conclusion. He describes Egypt at the advent of the 21st century as being in a dangerous mode of inaction which was justifiable in the beginning but that has lasted for more than two decades and lately reached dangerous levels. In his view, Egypt has been a laboratory for two contradictory national experiments under Nasser and Sadat that exhausted the nation. In the 1950s and 1960s, the socialist project resulted in a systematic looting of the public sector that prepared the ground for the corruption that flourished once the open-door policy was adopted.

Under Sadat, a second experiment started in the name of capitalism. To Abdel Meguid, who is an advocate of the free market economy, what happened under Sadat was a reckless form of capitalism not just dominated by the state bureaucracy, corruption, and strong power centers; it was also "capitalism without capitalists ... a type of capitalism that works for the interests of baron-like businesspeople who are anti-intellectual and have been unwilling to spend a single penny on research and the production of knowledge, including that which serves their own enterprises" (p. 102).

The two experiments, according to Abdel Meguid, exhausted the nation, which initially needed a respite to catch its breath and return to normal. However, the Mubarak regime has protracted that pause into the foreseeable future. Besides the inaction in terms of generating new policies and ideas, individuals remained in their offices for over twenty years, not only in the top political posts but also in various national institutions and agencies. "It turned a needed pause into a process of putting the whole society into the freezer until it has been hard to bring society back to healthy normal status" (p. 102). Both Amin and Bishry warn that the relative openness in terms of the proliferation of newspapers, satellite communications, and numerous public events should not be confused with features of a vibrant democratic society. The emergency law puts all this activity under control. Conferences and public events held in closed rooms are no problem for the regime because they are easily monitored and do not reach mass audiences. In fact, they can be useful because the government can detect intentions and new ideas. Newspapers with all their critical commentary are still in the end like pipelines that are virtually under control and can simply be closed at any time. Newspapers and cable news are read and watched in closed rooms and thus help people ventilate their anger.

Amin adds to this the fact that the regime also controls national newspapers by appointing people to top leadership positions on a contract basis. Renewal of those contracts is thus a tool for subjugation. Opposition newspapers are kept under control through the manipulation of the distribution process and the control of the advertisements that reach them. Amin argues this is the reason why some opposition newspapers resort to blowing some issues up out of proportion to attract readers. He names the issue of the Islamist–secularist divide as one that has been exaggerated in importance by the opposition press.

Bishry adds to this picture the crisis of the state bureaucracy, often overlooked by intellectuals. For the leadership posts, the government has replaced the tenure system with a system of nationwide competition, through which people who have never worked in the state bureaucracy may apply for those jobs, supposedly on the grounds of efficiency. Individuals who occupy the leadership positions depend on the government that hired them to keep their jobs from year to year. This new system has not just undermined the principle of security that keeps the bureaucracy immune from political interventions and opened the door wide for corruption and cronyism, but it has also undermined the rights of career state bureaucrats and deprived the country of their expertise and experience.

The Way Forward: Gradual Reform from Above

In a chapter entitled "Reform not Revolution," Abdel Meguid warns that the delay in implementing political reform opens the possibility for a mass uprising with

unpredictable results. Throughout the chapter, the author argues for gradual reform from above and against "revolutionary mass movements." Using strong language, Abdel Meguid warns that a mass uprising "wrecks the society, distorts its fabric and turns it into debris that takes a long time and effort to fix because it undermines the very values and traditions that maintain the society's equilibrium" (p. 91). Abdel Meguid finds that Egypt has a strong regime that monopolizes all sources of power in society. This regime faces a secular opposition that cannot offer a credible alternative and a powerful Islamic movement that eludes effective control. With this understanding of political realities, Abdel Meguid favors gradual reform by the ruling party as the best way forward for the nation.

The author, however, laments the way in which the hopes for such gradual reform were dashed at the hands of the very people who were carrying the banners of reform inside the ruling party. The author tells the story of how the expectations of many people, including himself, were never met and how the promise of Gamal Mubarak never materialized. He also admits in explicit language that he was wrong to have once believed that Gamal Mubarak's party committee was a force for reform within the ruling party. Abdel Meguid traces the story back to the 2000 parliamentary election, which was a clear manifestation of all that was wrong with Egypt's ruling party. Before the electoral campaign started, the National Democratic Party (NDP), which rules Egypt, chose those who were to run for parliament carrying its label, a process that ignored hundreds of party hopefuls who had served the party for years in one way or another. Angry at the slight from their own party leadership, many of those who were not chosen decided to run as independents anyway, defying the leadership's threats that they would lose their membership.

The election results were a resounding defeat for the party. Members running as independents fared far better than colleagues who ran under the party label. Only 38.5 percent of those who ran under the party's label won seats in parliament. Jeopardizing the party's majority status in parliament, the results forced the party to bring the dissenters it had expelled during the campaign back into its fold. The fact remained, however, that the weakness of the ruling party's structural, organizational, and mass base had been exposed.

Abdel Meguid, who has always been an advocate of a strong ruling party as the key to political reform, was optimistic when the NDP appeared to have learned its lesson and showed some signs of taking concrete steps toward renewal. At its 2002 annual convention, the party announced some leadership and structural changes. The young Gamal Mubarak, previously only a member of the party, became the chair of a new party committee created by the convention and called the "Committee on Policies." A new council made up of 200 academics and intellectuals was also created under the auspices of that new committee as an advisory board to inject new ideas and put forward concrete proposals for national political reform. The convention also reflected a new vision for party renewal and for interaction with other political parties.

In mid-2004, the Committee on Policies did indeed play a major role in the formation of the new cabinet announced in July of that year. Abdel Meguid at the time found it promising that the "reformist" wing of the party was behind putting into office six individuals who would be in charge of important ministerial portfolios that are key to any political reform: education, investment, industry, commerce, finance, and administrative development.

Soon enough, however, his hopes turned out to be groundless. Abdel Meguid explains that the expectations of the supporters of gradual reform were dashed at the party's 2004 convention, held in September of that year. The committee which in July had played a role in forming the cabinet did not follow up by institutionalizing the relationship between the cabinet and the party. It did not introduce any mechanisms to regulate the relationship. More seriously, the party convention did not put forward a clear plan or a timetable for political reform. It was not made evident what the priorities for political reform were, nor why they were needed; nor was there any promise of further reforms to be carried out in the near future.

In an analysis that echoes Bishry's idea of political cloning, Abdel Meguid then acknowledges that he had also been unduly optimistic about the nature of the Committee on Policies as a force for change in the party. He explains that when that committee was first created, there were two views, besides his own, about the nature and potentials of the committee, and that eventually it became clear that the reality lay somewhere between those two views, both less optimistic than his own. The first view argued that the Committee on Policies lacked any coherence. It was an entity created from above and its members were recruited through personal relations. The members were highly diverse in their political orientations and did not necessarily believe in reform. The second view argued that the committee did not represent a reformist force in the party, not because of its incoherence or diverse membership but because it was rather a gathering of people who were looking out for their own interests. Most members of the committee perceived it as a source of influence and a launching pad for their careers. Clearly, Abdel Meguid's analysis allows us to conclude that what the two views had in common was that Gamal Mubarak's committee represented a new elite that would simply struggle to replace the old guard without necessarily having a reformist agenda.

The Constitutional Pathway

A few months after the 2004 convention, President Mubarak single-handedly announced the amendment of the constitution to allow multi-candidate presidential elections. One year later, 34 articles of the Egyptian constitution were also amended. Although the opposition forces had long called for specific amendments of the constitution, the way in which the amendments were written, introduced, and passed represented a setback for the democratic movement.

Bishry rejects the idea that amending the constitution is the key to solving Egypt's political problems. The constitution's deficiencies, he argues, have not been the cause of Egypt's crisis. The cause is rather the disrespect for many of the articles of the constitution. The constitution is a legal framework which legitimizes the social transformation that takes place in society. It does not, however, create such transformation. In the absence of strong political forces that can impose their will and bring about the constitutional amendments it wants, tampering with the constitution simply ignores reality and thus maintains the status quo. Priority, therefore, should be given to changing the reality that suffocates political life in Egypt, namely putting an end to the endless state of emergency, to the laws that constrain the right to form political parties, and to those that impose a siege on different civil society institutions.

The Electoral Route

Coming from a perspective that favors gradual reform through existing structures, Abdel Meguid in the end acknowledges that reform by the ruling party had proven unrealistic. In response, and in keeping with his liberal position, he suggests that a free and fair election might be the key. He argues against the regime's concern that any election might bring the Muslim Brothers to power. He thinks the MB will come to power when an election is impeded, and not through elections. In Abdel Meguid's view, the absence of a free electoral process that can bring all political forces into the political arena will also be helpful in showing that the strength of the Muslim Brothers is less than is usually assumed.

However, until there are live political forces capable of peacefully competing, elections are hardly the key to political democratic change in Egypt. Furthermore, assessments of the strength of the MB are hardly conclusive. It just might be that today, while the MB is a powerful political force, the weakness of the other forces will make it possible that with a free election under the current conditions Egypt will fall into yet another political monopoly of power, this time under the MB. The current Islamist–secularist polarization and tension among the political forces make it likely that the MB in power will aggravate rather than solve Egypt's problems.

Moreover, Awa's book casts even more serious doubt on the electoral route. He raises serious questions about elections as a means of democratic change in today's Egypt, not in terms of results but in terms of the likelihood of fairness and freedom in the first place. Before the latest constitutional amendments, the Egyptian constitution provided judiciary oversight of national elections. In 2000, the Supreme Court declared article 73 of the law on practicing political rights unconstitutional because it allowed individuals who did not belong to the judiciary to preside over some of the balloting sites. President Mubarak responded positively to the ruling. Legal and administrative arrangements were put in place to allow full judiciary oversight of the voting process for the next parliamentary election of 2005.

It is important to note, however, that the Supreme Court ruling was confined to the balloting stage of the election and so were the arrangements that followed. The court ruling did not deal with any of the other stages or electoral operations that are in fact under the full control of the executive branch, such as the drawing of the districts, the preparation of voter lists, and voter registration.

Egyptian judges have, for decades, been calling for reforms that guarantee a free election. At their 1986 convention, they studied all stages of the electoral process and came up with recommendations to guarantee a free election under judiciary oversight. But those recommendations were never heeded. Justices also demanded at the time that individuals who work in prosecution jobs and the ministry of justice must not be involved in the judiciary oversight of the election because those jobs are legally subject to the control of the executive branch. It is thus impossible to ask the occupants of those jobs to act independently in overseeing the elections. This recommendation was not heeded either until it became a Supreme Court ruling in 2000.

In preparation for the 2005 parliamentary elections, the Club of Justices, an association that speaks for the justices of Egypt, created a fact finding commission that looked into the way the 2005 referendum on the amendment of the constitution was conducted. The commission later issued a report that put forward several

recommendations for the conduct of any future national election. Simultaneously, justices reintroduced their demands for an independent judiciary. They made clear that the budgetary and administrative independence of the judiciary branch was closely linked to the ability of the justices to guarantee a free election. The executive, through its control of the judiciary, could force or at least sway some justices overseeing the elections to rule as it prescribed.

The 2005 election was held under judiciary oversight of the voting process alone, while all other stages remained in the hands of the executive branch. However, voting fraud and irregularities were exposed by some justices, leading to a bitter clash with the regime that reached a point where two justices were brought before an ethics committee as a way of retaliation. The judges' demands, which in the beginning were concerned with guarantees of a free election and the independence of the judiciary branch, had, through government intransigence, become a fully fledged movement that was quickly embraced by the democratic forces.

The judiciary oversight of the election had thus proved to be a headache for the regime, which consequently decided to amend the constitution so that it no longer stipulated the judiciary's oversight. In 2007, article 88 was amended to give a high committee that is "impartial and independent" the job of overseeing elections, and it left it up to the lawmakers to decide how such a committee should be formed. However, the article provides that the membership shall include among others "individuals affiliated or ... formerly affiliated to the judiciary." This amendment of the constitution has actually marginalized any independent entity from overseeing the electoral process.

Change from Without: The US Role

During its first term in office the George W. Bush administration made the exportation of democracy to the Middle East a major issue on its agenda. The US, argued the Bush administration, had long supported tyrants throughout the region in the name of stability and protecting US interests. After September 11 2001, the US claimed to understand that that policy had achieved neither. Tyranny had bred violence and terrorism that reached the US heartland in 2001. The time had come, according to the Bush administration, to change that mistaken policy and promote regime change and democracy in the Arab world.

The Bush administration was particularly vocal in pressuring Egypt and Saudi Arabia to adopt political reforms. Only marginal, albeit vocal, groups of intellectuals and civil society institutions found those pressures useful. The mainstream Egyptian opposition forces from the right to the left neither believed the Bush administration nor thought such a US role was desirable.

Bishry makes it clear that the first condition for creating a democracy is that it must be made at home and manufactured "only of national fabrics." This requirement stands for all democracies around the world. The author advises those who advocate a foreign input to "better imitate the Westerners they admire in their self-reliance" (p. 55). Those Westerners, he says, "built their own democratic political institutions and local systems." Bishry expresses his dismay at those who took the Bush rhetoric at face value, ignoring the record of the US in helping dictatorships around the world.

The idea that the US admitted past mistakes and should now be trusted to open a new page was ridiculed by Shaaban. The timing of the US change of mind

could not be worse, he says. In sarcastic and bitter language, he exclaims that the "US that now occupies a large Arab state ... and supports the aggression against the Palestinians is, alas, the same US that is so concerned about us and wants to help us to create a democracy" (p. 32).

Coming from the liberal perspective, Abdel Meguid is also not impressed. "What is new and dangerous," he writes, "is that the [US] pressure makes democracy appear as though it is a western project, not a genuinely Egyptian struggle" (p. 27). This point is similar to that made by Shaaban, who notes that at no time has the cause of democratic transformation been so harmed as when it was raised by the Bush administration.

Abdel Meguid, like Bishry, argues that democracy must be a made-in- Egypt product. To achieve democracy, he adds, a national consensus must be reached between the ruling party and the opposition as a basis for the formulation of any reform agenda. "Nobody can do this but Egyptians themselves," he concludes (p. 34).

Shaaban directs his critique squarely at Saad Ibrahim, the well-known sociologist, who after the invasion of Iraq wrote an article in the London-based Arab news-paper *al Hayat* making the case for a democracy supported by the US since Arabs were incapable on their own of getting rid of the regimes that rule their countries. Shaaban explains why he does not buy the US rhetoric, noting that "the US goals in our countries are as clear as the sunlight, namely oil, the security of Israel, and the maintenance of military bases which guarantee the control of the heart of the world." Besides, he continues, "Freedom is never granted, nor can [it] be a for-eigner's gift. Freedom is earned only through a long term systematic movement by natives who are willing to pay the price" (p. 34).

The US role has put democratic activists like Shaaban in the impossible situ-ation of having to choose between the two evils of either siding with the regime against foreign pressure or siding with the Bush project. Shaaban refuses both. He argues that "just as we are against defending the tyrannical regimes under the pretext of confronting the West, we are not willing to sacrifice our independence in the name of creating a democracy supported from abroad" (p. 37).

Abdel Meguid does think that the US can help democracy in Arab countries. However, he reasons that this contribution can only come indirectly by solving the Arab–Israeli conflict. "If the US genuinely wants to help achieve real democratic reform," he writes, "it must change its biased policies toward Israel" (p. 37).

To the dismay of the Arab world, the Bush administration, which claimed that changing the Middle East was a core US interest, largely ignored the Arab–Israeli peace process throughout its two terms. The Bush administration, explains Abdel Meguid, argued that the Arab–Israeli conflict had nothing to do with the situ-ation in the Arab world and was just an excuse manipulated by autocratic regimes in the region to postpone democratic reforms in the name of giving priority to the external threat. This argument is perverted, argues Abdel Meguid, because it ignores how the regional conflict has affected the domestic dynamics in Arab countries including Egypt.

Abdel Meguid reasons further that it is true that the conflict "was frequently manipulated by the regime and under the banner of confronting the external threat personal freedoms were confiscated." By his lights, the mistake of the Americans, however, was that they ignored the other important way in which the conflict affects the democratic agenda. Because democracy is practiced in a sociopolitical

and cultural environment, what is so dangerous is that this environment has been dominated by a high level of anger and frustration brought on by the devastating events in Palestine. The sense of helplessness on the part of the average Egyptian makes the political scene more open to the most demagogic views. Abdel Meguid uses Germany as example to make his point. "The unjust settlement imposed on Germany after the First World War had created an environment open to demagoguery that helped the worst enemies of democracy, the Nazis, to win elections" (p. 40) In other words, the Arab–Israeli conflict distorts and poisons the public arena and empowers the most extreme and militant views in society.

Amin, who judges that US economic and military aid to Egypt works against Egypt's independence, believes that the US rhetorical bombardment in the name of democracy in the Bush years had goals that had nothing to do with democratic change in Egypt. In 2001, he argues, the new US plan was the occupation of Iraq and the so-called greater Middle East. It was useful in this context to pressure the Egyptian regime to force it to help achieve the new plan. The pressure took the form of letting the rulers believe that their survival was no longer guaranteed as before. In short, reasons Amin, the American pro-democracy stance was simply pressure in the name of democracy to achieve regional goals that had nothing to do with democracy.

Made in Egypt: The Call for Civil Disobedience

Tarek El Bishry calls on Egyptians to resort to non-violent civil disobedience as the most useful path to ending the tyranny. There is no inclusive sphere of legitimacy that encompasses the framework in which both the state operates and civil society exists. The solution is therefore to create the sociopolitical forces that can exist and act on their own. Any direct action will be met with repression and, therefore, Bishry warns that people must be willing to accept this fact and refuse to react violently. Any ruler, no matter how absolute his powers, needs legitimacy, which is basically public acceptance and obedience. When people stop obeying, it is impossible for the ruler to govern. Such an eventuality has been blocked thus far in Egypt because the regime has been able to undermine all civil institutions and render them meaningless. Students' unions, professional associations, and labor unions are all either under the direct control of the government or emptied of any meaningful content. Nevertheless, Egypt does have experience in civil disobedience. The 1919 revolution was based on non-cooperation and mass civil disobedience. The British occupation realized that Egypt had become ungovernable and it was forced to make concessions. Bishry concludes that for civil disobedience to succeed it needs to become a mass movement, "a non-violent mass movement as broad as possible." This kind of movement, it is clear, must be broad and also cross-ideological.

In order to assess the possibilities for this option and whether or not it is viable, we need to look seriously at the efforts that have been made to build such a movement. The emergence of Kefaya and its impact on Egyptian politics are very important and instructive in this regard. By the eve of the 21st century, Egypt's political system had reached a dead end. The opposition political parties were locked in their headquarters, unable to communicate with the public. Virtually acquiescing to the siege of an arsenal of restrictive laws, those political parties have for years suffered from steadily diminishing membership, lack of operational

funds, and internecine internal feuds. The "illegality" of the Muslim Brothers has paradoxically liberated that organization from the restrictions that come with governmental licensing. However, the ideology, posture, secrecy, and political tactics of the grassroots-based MB all engender mistrust of many political forces, including some Islamists. At the same time, the secularist–Islamist polarization hinders the possibility of reaching any meaningful consensus on critical issues. This blockage is not lost on the regime, the clear beneficiary of such divisions among its adversaries, and it does not augur well for the future of the Brotherhood in a lead role, shaping Egyptian political life.

With the seething political discontent, on the one hand, and the ideologically based mistrust among opposition political forces, on the other, Egypt needs more than ever a new form of politics that pulls together diverse forces from across the political spectrum to forge a new national project. The emergence of Kefaya was an attempt at exactly that. The founders of Kefaya are an ideologically diverse group of activists who were all intensely involved under a variety of banners in the student movements in Egyptian universities throughout the 1970s.

While they come ideologically from the far right to the far left of Egypt's political spectrum, the leading figures of the "1970s generation" have been keen to extend political bridges among themselves to overcome the ideological battles that have, for so long, mired Egypt's politics. Through their political action in the 1990s they have come to realize that the ideologically based mistrust and animosity among the older generation of Egypt's political elite only serve to strengthen the ruling party's ability to maintain its monopoly of power.

Shaaban describes the immediate reason for founding Kefaya as being both "the socioeconomic deterioration and the increasing foreign threat represented by the invasion of Iraq" (p. 36). Clearly, the invasion of Iraq aggravated the sense of Egypt's vulnerability in the minds of Kefaya's founders. The founding statement captures the close connection between the external and the domestic forces behind the movement's emergence. The statement explained that the signatories "came together ... despite their different intellectual affiliations" to "confront two highly interlinked threats, each of which is a cause and a result of the other," namely the foreign threats and political despotism.[1]

In a mode of self-critique, Shaaban assesses the role of Egyptian intellectuals and activists in the 1990s. Throughout those years the Egyptian political and intellectual elite had been "preoccupied with the issue of Palestine and the criminal aggression against the Palestinians. With the US aggression against Iraq, a new item was added to the elite agenda. The task had been to expose the terrorist practices of the Anglo-American occupation in that large Arab country" (p. 42). Even before the invasion of Iraq and throughout the years of the siege imposed on the Iraqis, several popular committees were formed in support of the people of Iraq and Palestine. While Shaaban, who was heavily involved in most of those direct action campaigns, still believes that the preoccupation with those issues was both legitimate and justifiable, he finds the main problem with such actions to be that they absorbed most of the time and energy of the Egyptian elite. In other words, the regional conflict not only empowered the militants, as Abdel Meguid sees it from his own very different perspective; it also drained the mainstream as well.

Shaaban notes that Western influence has negatively affected the Egyptian elite in two different ways. The foreign funds channeled to Egypt's civil society actually

spoiled a considerable sector of the Egyptian elite, which deserted direct action altogether and became solely focused on civil society work, lucratively supported by the West and tuned to its agenda. In this context, Shaaban says, the founders of Kefaya realized that the political arena had been left empty of systematic pressures for national democratic reform. Shaaban concludes that, "with good intentions and noble desires to help our brothers in Palestine and Iraq, we have inadvertently colluded with the regime in marginalizing the important issues of political change in Egypt." Kefaya was therefore the result of a realization on the part of some of the elite that the priority should be national democratic change. As Shaaban expresses the point, "to be able to support our brothers we must focus first on our own democratic rights" (p. 45).

It is important to note, however, that the work of the Egyptian activists throughout the 1990s on issues of foreign policy had actually been a crucial step toward their current collaboration on issues of democratic transformation. In the beginning, the ideologically diverse intellectuals and activists who later founded Kefaya simply held dialogues among themselves that helped identify shared values and goals and allowed them to create the precondition for reaching a national consensus. By the 1990s such interactions made it possible for those activists to work together politically on issues of consensus. Foreign policy was an excellent start, since a widely shared platform already existed (Shorbagy, 2007).

By the advent of the 21st century, Kefaya's founders rightly understood that the ruling party's monopoly of power rested largely on the fact that the opposition forces were bitterly divided among themselves and thus unable to agree on any specific political demand and incapable of formulating a joint project for national transformation. A new political movement that transcended ideology was precisely what Egypt needed. The success of the founders of Kefaya in taking a major step forward in their interactive politics, from just working on foreign policy to becoming a fully fledged political movement, was a promising experience that can be extended. The work across ideological lines has been one of the two main contributions of Kefaya to Egypt's political life.

The second contribution of Kefaya has been the breaking of political taboos. Egypt's politics has been characterized by a near total monopoly by the ruling regime, which maintains a legal framework that is highly restrictive for both political parties and civil society. Kefaya has broken out of that institutional framework altogether. By refusing to play by the rules of the game stipulated by the regime, the movement has in fact redefined politics in Egypt. For Kefaya, legitimacy is not a government-granted status. By taking to the streets without waiting for government permission – which is usually very hard to obtain in Egypt – Kefaya has expanded what is admissible and opened up more public spaces (Gusfield, 1994). By putting the word "change" in its title, it has shifted the sands of the political terrain. The rules of the "reform" game, which the political parties were drawn to and drowned in for years, no longer apply. After the emergence of Kefaya, several other groupings were announced. All were smaller scale and focused on specific interests. Of these the judiciary movement, discussed earlier, is clearly the most important.

Kefaya's founders, including Shaaban, were fully aware of the limits and potentials of Kefaya. The title of his book, *The Butterfly Effect*, makes this point, and Shaaban says bluntly: "Kefaya was simply a cry of conscience. We believe that social peaceful transformation is an extremely complex process that needs the work of

all forces" (p. 92). Therefore, as Shaaban explains, Kefaya's goal is to motivate the different sectors of society toward the formation of a "civil-historical bloc" that would put an end to the polarization between two major blocs who paradoxically work together against the movement: the regime and the Muslim Brothers. Kefaya offers a third way for Egypt by working on building a new democratic movement that refuses to side with tyranny and corruption under the pretext of confronting the foreign threat or out of fear of the MB, and at the same time rejects the MB approach of domination and manipulation of power.

Conclusion

In recent years Kefaya has lost momentum. However, it is important to acknowledge that the movement has already left its mark. It opened the way for coalitions across party and ideological lines and for social protests unafraid of government retaliation because the taboo was broken. Kefaya inspired directly and indirectly a proliferation of groups. Some of them came out of Kefaya itself and had the involvement of its own activists, while others were independent. All, however, had the same goal, namely to deepen democratic practices and expand popular independent action. The record of the movement continues to provide that inspiration today. Most of the groups that emerged in the wake of Kefaya represented middle-class professions: the university professors (March 9 Movement), Engineers for Change, Doctors for Change, as well as others.

However, a new and important development has taken place in the last two years. Lower class groups such as peasants, laborers, and the unemployed and marginalized have started protesting as well. What is more, government employees, traditionally the least willing to protest for fear of government retaliation, have also taken to the streets. Such protests are different in that they have been exclusively focused on narrow parochial demands and have been totally independent of the actions of the political forces and elites; they have erupted because of mounting economic pressures. Nonetheless, the frequency of such protests is also an important sign of the breaking of the silence. While the first half of the year 2007 witnessed fewer than 300 protests across the country (Shaaban, 2008), by the end of 2008 the number of protests had reached 609 in a single year.[2]

Today, in other words, the Egyptian political arena is different from that of the 1990s. The old formula has changed. It is no longer the formula of strong political regime, weak secular opposition, and a powerful yet besieged Islamic movement. Today most of the viable opposition is outside the legal framework. The legal opposition parties have been drastically weakened by their acquiescence to the regime, which only ended up reneging on all promises of gradual reform. Kefaya and the new forms of protest it inspired have eclipsed the old opposition parties.

The government response to the new forms of protest is sometimes positive but it is a piecemeal type of response, given the circumscribed nature of the demands themselves. Such demands and protests do not force the regime to take action on a broad scale to meet the needs of average Egyptians. In other words, the selective responses to the protests neither force the regime to put forward a comprehensive economic plan that fixes the structural economic problems, nor do they put any pressure on the regime to take concrete steps toward putting an end to its monopoly of power. And that is exactly the missing link between those

protests and Bishry's suggestion of mass civil disobedience as the most promising way to real reform.

The challenge before the democratic forces in Egypt is to form a national democratic movement that involves all political trends and encompasses the demands of the different sectors of society, i.e. to bring the political dimension to focused and limited protests and therefore create a movement that is capable of putting real pressure on the regime to respond. The main obstacle now is ironically not just the regime but the MB. The MB is a powerful force on the ground that no inclusive democratic movement can simply exclude. But the tactics of domination used by the MB and its inability to work with others are still a challenge, as daunting in its own way as regime repression. Today in Egypt there are several concrete efforts underway by different political forces to realize the ambitious and important objective of combining the elite reform movements of civil society, embracing a variety of political visions, with mass protest movements focused on very local grievances. The success or failure of these efforts will shape the future of Egypt.

Notes

1. The founding statement of Kefaya, http://harakamasria.net/informationMOre.asp?id=803&idd=14 (consulted July 13 2005).
2. http:// anhri.net/egypt/lchr/2009/pr0310.shtml (consulted April 15 2009).

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Biographical Note

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