

Egyptian Politics 2006: Democratic Mobilisation Wanes and the ‘Hereditary’ Political Succession Scenario Becomes Consolidated

Sarah Ben Néfissa

Researcher

Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), Paris

The year 2006 in Egyptian politics was preceded by a period of an unprecedentedly broad-based movement for democracy, political and institutional reforms, the first ‘pluralist’ presidential elections, which confirmed Hosni Mubarak in his post and finally, legislative elections, with the significant entry of the Muslim Brotherhood into the People’s Assembly, which won 88 out of a total of 444 seats. The year 2006 itself, on the other hand, was characterised by an ebb of democratic activism, the regime’s return to authoritarian methods and above all, the consolidation of the ‘hereditary political succession’ scenario, with Gamal Mubarak succeeding his father. In any case, the regional situation, in particular with the victory of Hamas in Palestine, the war waged by Hezbollah against the Israeli military forces in Lebanon and the rise of Iran as a possible future regional power, contributed significantly to diminishing international and particularly US pressure for democratisation of the Egyptian regime. The latter thus consolidated its continuity. Egypt 2006 was likewise the stage for important social movements, as if the change of political climate in 2005 had had delayed effects on other spheres, in this case, the social and labour milieus. The democratic movement instigated and developed among the ranks of the political and intellectual elite subsided in 2006 due to a series of factors: the disillusionment generated by the poor political and institutional results of 2005; the demobilisation of part of the actors; the repressive stance taken against them; and finally, increasing internal division. This was precisely the case with the Egyptian Movement for Change, better known by its slogan, ‘Kifaya,’ or ‘Enough,’ which was singular because it united all branches of political opposition in the country, including the Islamist political tendency.

Demobilisation and Conflicts within Kifaya

Since the beginning of 2006, the authorities have sought to stop one of the primary forms of action undertaken by Kifaya, namely, the right to demonstrate without previous authorisation as established by Egyptian legislation. Kifaya’s support of Egyptian magistrates in conflict with the authorities gave them the opportunity. It was after a number of demonstrations organised by Kifaya that the Minister of Home Affairs undertook waves of arrests of young activists participating in the movement, generally keeping them in custody for long periods thereafter and putting them in prison for terms of over ten months, as allowed by the state of emergency still in effect in this country. With regard to its internal affairs, the composite nature of Kifaya that gave it so much force in 2005 became a source of weakness and infighting in 2006, fuelled, true enough, by a vast press campaign in official newspapers against the movement. Significantly, the ideological and political divisions within the movement came to the fore precisely following the statement issued by its leaders on remarks by Farouk Hosni, Minister of Culture, criticising the wearing of the Islamic veil. The statement by Kifaya leaders was interpreted by a group of eight members as supporting Farouk Hosni’s remarks. Despite the retraction of the statement, the group quit the Movement in a spectacular manner, accusing the leaders of authoritarianism. It is thus not surprising that the close of the year brought a renewal of the Movement’s leadership, in particular the replacement of its charismatic leader, Georges Ishaq, by the historian, Al Messiri.

The End of Egyptian Political Parties

If the Muslim Brotherhood has become the main political opposition force in the People’s Assembly,

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other recognised opposition political formations and parties gained but 14 of the 444 seats. Such deplorable electoral results reveal the extreme weakness of the different political parties of the legal opposition as well as their incapacity to produce an electoral machine after the fashion of the candidates to the National Democratic Party – the party of the State and current administration – or after the fashion of the Islamist candidates heading important social and charitable activities.

Withdrawn in their headquarters and cut off from all social and electoral grassroots supporters after over thirty years of having their activities limited by the regime, in 2006 their historic leaderships experienced a series of divisions and incidents of infighting. The phenomenon is general but has above all involved the three main political formations: the National Progressive Unionist Party, the Wafd Party and the Arab Democratic Nasserist Party. Hence, in the Wafd Party, there was a conflict between Mahmud Abaza and Noman Gomaa, the former party chairman who ranked only third after the *outsider* Ayman Nour in the presidential elections of 2005. This power struggle among party leaders reached its apogee in an armed clash between the two rival clans at the party's headquarters, resulting in 23 people wounded. The near disappearance of political parties reveals the limits and deep ambiguity of the Egyptian regime's position vis-à-vis its legal opposition, which persisted through 2006. Hence, the Political Parties Committee of the Shoura Council has refused to grant authorisation for 12 political parties, in particular the Al-Wasat Al-Jadid party, created by former members of the Muslim Brotherhood in conflict with the leadership for over a decade now.

Wrestling Match between Judges and the Authorities

The control of judges over polling stations established by the Supreme Constitutional Court in 2000 has

contributed to significantly decrease one of the forms of electoral fraud in this country, namely ballot stuffing. In 2005, grouped together in the Judges Club, Egyptian judges threatened to refrain from supervising elections unless conditions were established to allow them to supervise all stages of the electoral process. By the same token, they demanded a law guaranteeing their full independence from the Executive Branch. This wrestling match between the judiciary and the executive continued throughout the course of 2006. The appearance in May before a disciplinary tribunal of the two senior judges of the Court of Cassation, Mahmud Makki and Hisham al-Bastawisi, for having publicly denounced cases of fraud in the 2005 legislative elections gave rise to a significant movement in their support within the country. The tribunal issued a reprimand against the former and exonerated the latter. A new law on judicial authority passed in June did not take into account the demands formulated by the Egyptian judges to guarantee their independence and in November, the new Minister of Justice blocked subsidies that the State has traditionally granted the Judges' Club. But the apex of the regime's attempt to quell the rebellion of the Egyptian judges consisted in the presidential project to reform Article 88 of the Constitution in order to ban the judges from supervising elections by 'constitutionally' imposing the holding of various elections in a single day. In previous elections, voting was carried out in several stages to allow the number of judges available to correspond with the number of polling stations to be supervised.

Consolidation of the 'Hereditary' Succession Scenario and Restrictions of Islamist Parties

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of the country's political system. The next presidential elections are set for 2011 and will be preceded by legislative elections in 2010, unless the current Assembly is dissolved before the end of its term.

If in 2005 the regime was more or less 'obliged' to accept the arrival of 88 Muslim Brotherhood delegates to the People's Assembly, the victory of Hamas in Palestine demonstrated that neither the Americans nor the Europeans were in favour of such a turn of events in Egypt. The return of the Muslim Brotherhood to the official political stage was thus accompanied, throughout 2006, by waves of arrests against grassroots members and important party leaders. The constitutional reforms announced at the end of the year anticipate the complete banning of the Muslim Brotherhood from the country's politics in the future. The reform of polling methods to establish a party-list proportional representation system will result in barred access to the People's Assembly by political movements not belonging to a legal political party, as is the case of the Muslim Brotherhood. Furthermore, a constitutional amendment will prohibit all religious-based political or advocacy activity. This prohibition, which existed in legislation on political parties, will henceforth have constitutional status. The position of the leaders of the Brotherhood, reiterated in 2006, of not abandoning what makes them different, namely, the simultaneously political and religious nature of their organisation, points to a future political impasse characterised by a dissociation between the formal political system and the country's real political situation.

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In 2006, President Mubarak announced his intention of remaining in his post for life. Today, with the current state of affairs, only one candidate of the National Democratic Party (NDP) will be capable of meeting all the conditions established in Article 76 of the Constitution as reformulated in 2005 for running in the future presidential elections, and this is Gamal Mubarak, who has become the real boss of the NDP, the party in power and holding a majority in parliament. The year 2006 thus presents all the indications of a confirmation of the scenario of 'hereditary political succession.' Apart from the constitutional reforms that will oust the Muslim Brotherhood from legal political life, the National Democratic Party Congress of September 2006 was once again marked by the 'presidential' posture of Gamal Mubarak, who eclipsed

all other senior party members and who above all replied to journalists' questions on foreign policy problems. The announcement by Gamal Mubarak of Egypt's ambition to acquire civil nuclear energy shows the future role Egypt would like to play in the framework of Iran's rise as a regional power and confirms a new Egyptian alignment with regard to US foreign policy, which was clearly expressed during the Lebanon War between Hezbollah and Israeli military forces during the summer of 2006.

Controlling Trade Unions and Meeting Labour Demands

The return of the Egyptian regime to authoritarianism was likewise confirmed by the flagrant corruption in both Student Union elections and trade union elections. For the labour milieu, the stakes are higher in trade union elections for the leaders of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation. The bureaucratic nature of the trade unions, under the regulatory authority of the Ministry of Labour, has been a constant in Egyptian politics over the past few decades, as the working class has been hard hit by neo-liberal economic policy. The privatisation of public enterprise is generally synonymous with layoffs and inflation has brought with it a general decline in living conditions. In 2006, although making sure to replace certain ageing high trade union officials, the elections took place with a total absence of transparency and were above all marked by the refusal to register hundreds of 'undesirable' opposition candidates belonging to left-wing parties as well as the Muslim Brotherhood movement. In this manner, 85% of the positions on trade union executive committees were filled by administrative candidates who faced no competition. The administrative takeover of the trade unions did not prevent 2006 from being punctuated by important social movements. In September of that year, 27,000 workers from the State-owned Mahalla textile factory went on strike for 3 days to demand their withheld bonuses and to indicate their concern about the factory's future. They were followed by the workers of the Mahalla dye-works, then the Helwan and Tora cement workers and finally the railway workers. The most significant phenomenon of these different social movements was the State's attitude, conciliating to say the least, which differed greatly from its 'classic' handling of such conflicts in the worker and farmer milieu. Preceding movements had been systematically

suppressed and the instigators generally fired. In 2006, on the other hand, not only was there no repressive action, but above all, the ensemble of the strikers' demands were accepted in the public sector and the State put pressure on the directors of private companies to comply with their employees' demands. Apparently, the regime's new attitude of 'playing it calm' is related to its wish to maintain its presence in the worker milieu, which has not yet been greatly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, and to its fear of a possible junction of such worker movements with political protests led by intellectuals. What is certain is that the development of social movements is not unrelated to the country's change in 'political climate,' in particular, the increased freedom of expression and of the press. Hence independent publications have provided thorough coverage of these movements and alerted political opinion at home and abroad.

The Independent Press and the New Characteristics of Public Debate

Another positive element that marked Egyptian politics in 2006 was the consolidation of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Thus 2006 witnessed a strike by 28 newspapers on the day the People's

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Assembly was to discuss a reform bill to limit press freedom. President Mubarak intervened in person to request the cancellation of the reform. His attitude reveals how the President of the Republic is trying to renew dialogue with the intellectual elite, whereas the preceding year had signalled a low point in the rift between the two. By the same token, freedom of the press/publication is one of the country's most important public freedoms and it is also the regime's main democratic façade. The Egyptian press, in particular independent publications, can be considered one of the main spaces for debate, not only on the political level, but also on the social and economic levels. In 2006, it was the newspaper columns that informed on and investigated the tragedy of the Salem Express ferry shipwreck, with a death toll of over 1,000, major corruption scandals and finally, problems concerning religious freedom and confessional relations in the country.