

Egypt's "Facebook Revolution", Kefaya, and the struggle for democracy and good governance (2008-ongoing)

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Written May 2010

Updated December 2010

**Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Conflict Summary:

Egypt is currently in an uneasy transition towards democracy. The Mubarak regime is ailing, while popular dissent is on the rise. With more than 40% of Egyptians living on just \$2 a day, estimated 30% unemployment, and more than 30% illiteracy, most Egyptians feel neglected by the state, yet unable to voice their legitimate concerns. Mubarak's almost-30-year monopoly on power and the emergency status laws have left the country without strong opposition to the regime. Egypt just held parliamentary elections in November 2010 and is scheduled to hold presidential elections in September 2011. While the Egyptian regime is escalating its crackdown on political opposition, internet and Facebook activism provide an alternative space for newly emerging civil society groups and political forces to operate. Growing dissent movements are planning nationwide grassroots organizing to peacefully mobilize against Mubarak and his party in the upcoming presidential elections.

Political History:

Egypt formally gained independence from Great Britain in 1922, after Egyptians organized an impressive, three-year civic disobedience movement against colonial occupation. This fight for independence later became known as the "1919 Revolution". For the next three decades, Egypt was ruled by the relatively liberal and popular King Farouk. Then in 1952, a young army colonel by the name of Gamal Abdul Nasser led a military coup that overthrew the monarchy and established a military dictatorship—a pattern that has continued to today. Nasser—and his successor Anwar Sadat—established a political system in Egypt that put nearly all power in the hands of a strong president who employs a massive security apparatus to maintain a firm grip on Egyptian society. Following the assassination of Sadat in 1981, Hosni Mubarak became president and since then has been in power for more than 29 years.

Currently, the Egyptian regime is considered a "hybrid regime" where democratic practices are present but shallow.¹ Since the military coup in 1952, power remains in military hands. Mubarak and those in leadership of his National Democratic Party (NDP) make an enormous effort to win legitimacy with the population by organizing elections; elections in which they use all of their state powers to ensure that they alone "win".² In 2005 Egypt had its first contested presidential election, as well as a parliamentary election. In the presidential election, Mubarak was declared the winner with a whopping 88.5 percent of the vote. Ayman Nour, leader of Al Ghad party came in second with 7 percent of the vote. The NDP got more than 70% of the seats in the parliament seats. Members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood running as independents came in second with 20% of the seats. It should be noted, however, that no more than 30% of registered voters showed up on election day. The remaining 70% of eligible Egyptians who did not participate did not trust the political process.

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Lacking transparency and credibility, Egyptian elections suffer ongoing problems with voter registration, freedom of campaigning, and political party organizing. In addition to existing restrictions on political activism, in March 2007 the government amended Article 88 of the constitution, to remove judicial oversight over the elections. In the Parliament elections of 2008, election monitors were granted very restricted access—most were denied entry into polling stations to observe voting, and none were permitted to be present during the vote counting. Thus, both the administration and monitoring of the elections was under the purview of the Interior Ministry.

In Egypt, the President constitutionally controls virtually all of the government.³ President Hosni Mubarak has been ruling Egypt for the past 28 years under “Emergency Laws” that grant him unlimited powers. He maintains his tight-grip on the system by employing a massive secret police and intelligence force that enjoys tremendous authority and legal impunity. These security forces are infamous for their merciless and widespread use of torture. The Egyptian government also uses the emergency laws to restrict freedom of association. Other laws contain numerous restrictions for registering and operating political parties and non-government organizations.

Nevertheless, Mubarak’s health is deteriorating and he is thus preparing a transition of power to his son, Gamal, who tries to build on his father’s legacy while portraying a new, young fresh image. Many inside the regime have expressed apprehension with this plan for succession, as have most of the opposition parties. Ayman Nour, head of the liberal Al Ghad party has vowed to mobilize opposition and run against Mubarak or his son, if either runs in the presidential elections in 2011.

Most prominently, Dr. Mohamed Elbaradei, an Egyptian Nobel Prize Winner and Former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has declared his willingness to run for election, if the process is changed to allow for necessary guarantees for credible competition. The announcement was met with great reception from youth and opposition parties who celebrated Elbaradei’s return and gave him a hero’s reception in Cairo airport. They joined his online support group, which has grown to almost one million online members.

Strategic Actions:

A. Overcoming Apathy through Youth and Internet Technology

Part of the challenge in confronting Mubarak and his security apparatus is that a massive number of people need to be mobilized if the opposition is to be successful. However, apathy is endemic in Egyptian society because of the long legacy of government suppression of political dissent. For example, only 23% of the registered voters went to vote during the 2007 election. More

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recently during the 2010 parliament elections, turnout estimates ranged from 35 percent (the Egyptian government's estimate) to under 10 percent (the estimate offered by some local observers).⁴ One leading activist claimed that this was the lowest voter turnout in any election ever in Egypt.⁵ This small percentage of voters who usually participate in elections is largely divided among the ruling party of Mubarak, the Muslim Brothers, and a small fraction for other secular parties. The remaining majority of Egyptians are still not confident enough in the process to participate.

This challenge of apathy is currently being addressed by a new generation of activists who use Internet and cell phone technology to reach out to greater populations in the society. Egypt has more than 20 million Internet users and 42 million cell phone owners, which is the largest number in both categories for any country in the African continent. It also has more than 162,000 bloggers. Most of these are young people who in their lifetime have seen no other president than Mubarak. The internet has become the favorite venue for Egypt's disaffected youth. In 2008, one group on the Internet social networking website Facebook managed to mobilize 80,000 supporters to protest rising food prices. Facebook networking also played a crucial role in broadening support and turnout for a textile workers' strike and protest on April 6, 2008.

The Egyptian government was shocked on April 6, 2008 to find that almost a third of the country's population stayed at home that day, in what proved to be Egypt's first successful large scale mobilization that was organized online. The government scrambled to satisfy some of the demands of the strikers by lowering some prices of essential commodities and raising the annual wage increase at an unprecedented rate, but it also detained some of the online organizers for several weeks. Since then, April 6 has become the day of national dissent all over the country where all social and political groups mobilize and advocate for reforms.

One of the most impressive recent examples of this in the context of Egypt involved the case of Khaled Saeid, a young Egyptian who was tortured to death by the Egyptian police in June 2010. Immediately after his death, thousands of young people dressed in black all over the country to protest. The young man became a national symbol in just a few days, with more than a quarter million people joining a Facebook group asking for investigations into his case and advocating putting the police officers who tortured him to trial for criminal charges. In a few weeks, the national and international media picked up the issue, which became a major source of embarrassment for the regime to the point that they ordered a hasty trial for the police officers.⁶

B. Exploiting the Issue of Presidential Succession to Unite the Opposition

As mentioned before, the issue of succession in Egypt is one that has observers both inside and outside the country worried. With no vice-president and an old, potentially ill president, many

are wondering who will fill the political vacuum. The mass-based Kefaya (“Enough”) movement was created in 2003 to highlight this very issue.

From 2003-2006, Kefaya built a broad coalition of groups and individuals from varying ideological, religious, and political persuasions to challenge Mubarak and the possible succession by his son Gamal. Kefaya’s ability to bring together diverse groups and organizations around a common cause was unprecedented in Egyptian politics. The movement raised its profile significantly during the 2005 constitutional referendum and presidential campaigns by introducing a new style of protest to the Egyptian political arena, which managed to unite disparate political forces for the first time. Kefaya linked the demand for political freedoms to the national pride that everyday Egyptians feel about their country’s pivotal historic, geographic and strategic importance in the region.

C. Winning American and Western Support

Because of its geographic and political position in the Middle East and Africa, Egypt has been a strategic ally for the US and the West. In exchange for its assistance on a wide range of regional issues (particularly for its 1979 peace deal with Israel), the Egyptian regime receives on average more than \$2 billion in Western aid annually. The Egyptian opposition has tried to use Egypt’s ties to Western countries to its advantage, by petitioning and appealing to these foreign governments to use their leverage with Egypt to support the development of democracy and to defend human rights defenders in Egypt.

For example, in 2003 one of Egypt’s largest military and development donors, the United States, put pressure on Mubarak to free Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Egypt country’s leading democracy activist. Within a few months, Dr. Ibrahim was freed. Such leverage was used once again by the newly elected Obama administration to free Ayman Nour, Egypt’s most famous political prisoner. Both Dr. Ibrahim and Dr. Nour has been charged with fraudulent defamatory cases because of their political activism. In the 2010 case of Khaled Saied outlined above, both the U.S.⁷ and the EU⁸ talked openly about the case in meetings with the Egyptian government and with Egyptian press, thus creating even more pressure on the government to prosecute the police officers who were responsible for this incident.

However, the more recent reactions of the American and European countries to the wide rigging of the November 2010 Egyptian parliamentary elections were disappointing for Egyptian activists. Mohamed Elbaradei, who is famous of being reserved in his comments, lashed out in an interview with an Egyptian daily on the topic.⁹ He said:

“the [US] State Department say they are ‘dismayed.’ Well, I’m frankly dismayed about their dismay. A country is being stripped of its soul--which is what the legislature is. And then

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compare that to the reaction to the Iranian elections; compare that to the election in Burma. Compare that to the reaction to [Zimbabwean President Robert] Mugabe. I'm not saying the West has to impose its version of democracy. I'm not saying they're the one who are going to change Egypt or shift it from a police state to a democracy. But these are human values. If you want to have credibility, you have to be consistent. You cannot say 'The Iranian election has been terrible' just because you don't like Ahmedinejad. The message you are sending to the people here is that you're full of hot air."

D. Commitment to Nonviolent Methods

The Egyptian opposition is overwhelmingly nonviolent in their vision, planning, and implementation of their strategy. With the exception of some mob violence in the city of Al-Mahala on April 6, 2008 during the workers' strike, both the leaders and the members of the opposition movement employ nonviolent methods against constant government oppression. In one of the most telling examples, Egyptian protesters in downtown Cairo imitated the actions taken by their Ukrainian peers (from Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004) in handing roses to the soldiers who beat them down. In another, they responded to calls by some Egyptian parliament members to fire on the demonstrators by showing up in large numbers in front of the parliament hanging bullseyes on their chests, inviting policemen to take a shot.¹⁰

Ensuing Events:

Despite restrictions and government repression, Egyptian civil society is continuing to fight for political change. President Mubarak's deteriorating health continues to cause Egyptians to think about the future of the country.

Empowered by the warm reception he has received, Mohamed Elbaradei launched a national campaign to unite opposition around a collective proposal to amend the constitution, which he called the "National Association for Change". The campaign aims at collecting millions of signatures of support from Egyptian citizens. He managed in three months to collect more than one million signatures (online and offline). The extent to which this campaign will be successful depends on his ability to include youth and new media, his willingness to take some risks in street mobilizing, and his ability to continue to appeal to other opposition leaders as a candidate for "change" and not just for the "presidency". Many opposition leaders said they would support Elbaradei as a temporary leader to transform the country and the political system in a few years until real free and fair elections can take place.

Ayman Nour, the head of Al Ghad, has announced his intention to push for political reform in the lead up to the 2011 parliamentary and presidential elections. He has been "campaigning" nationwide and internationally to galvanize support for his call for reform. Hamdeen Sabahi, a

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prominent leader in the Nasserite parties and a current parliament member is also galvanizing support around Nour's presidential bid.

Other Liberal parties (Al Wafd and Al Gabha) may not have strong independent candidates, but are exploring the potential to cooperate with one another and to reach out to other key players such as the Muslim Brotherhood, who have strong grassroots support because of their religious credibility and their provision of social services. They are also coordinating with the growing youth movement that started on the Internet.

Other supporting groups include the Judges' Club—a semi-syndicated union of judges that poses a serious threat to the regime's monopoly on formal political power. The Judges' Club has long struggled for autonomy from the executive branch of the government. They supervised and monitored past elections in 2000 and 2005, allowing for freer and fairer elections. Part of their leadership is continuing to mobilize judges to monitor and supervise upcoming elections.

Another important element in the growing reform movement is the independent media, including newspapers as well as TV satellite and independent channels, which manage to cross over regime-imposed “red lines” and increase the margin of freedom of speech inside the country.

In addition, democracy, human rights, and development NGOs are playing a unique supporting role. They played an active role in monitoring the election in 2005 and since then managed to maximize the use of foreign funds to enhance their resources and capabilities.

All of these forces were active during the November 2010 parliamentary election, the outcome of which was critical in shaping the conflict between the Egyptian government and the opposition. Although the opposition was united in calling for election reforms ahead of the elections, the Egyptian government promised free and fair elections but offered no legal guarantees or changes to the election framework. The opposition was divided in responding to the regime into two camps. The first camp, which included Elbaradei's Association for Change and the Al Ghad and Al Gabha liberal parties, chose to boycott the election. The second camp, which included the Muslim Brotherhood and the Al Wafd Liberal party, chose to participate in the elections. As expected, the first round of the elections witnessed massive irregularities, fraud, and violence and resulted in an almost complete monopoly of the ruling party. After seeing the overwhelming number of violations, and the loss of almost all opposition candidates, leading opposition forces, including the liberal Al Wafd party and the Muslim Brotherhood, decided to withdraw from the run off election on the 10 percent of the seats that they had qualified for, refused to recognize the few seats that some of their affiliates had won, and joined other opposition parties who had boycotted the elections from the beginning.

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Observers saw the election as a strategic mistake by the Egyptian regime. Instead of winning what they really needed—a two-thirds majority giving them control of the legislative process while allowing some space for the opposition to exist without really having an effective voice—the government was scrambling to win everything and leave nothing to chance, which showed them to be weak and insecure.¹¹ On the other side, the elections were an opportunity for the opposition to unite again. The late return of Muslim Brothers and Al Wafd party to the boycott camp was a victory for Elbaradei and his quest for reforming the system.

The Egyptian parliament currently does not have any real opposition representation for the first time in decades (now only 3 percent of the seats are not held by the NDP, and those 3 percent are occupied by members of phony opposition parties who are affiliated with the government). The serious opposition parties are legally challenging the legitimacy of the parliament in courts¹², forming a “parallel parliament” representing the serious former opposition members to challenge the new parliament publicly¹³, and maximizing on the call for an election boycott by mobilizing the people if the election process is not reformed ahead of the presidential election in September 2011.¹⁴

Endnotes:

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Further Reading:

For more information, please read Freedom House analysis on Egypt:

- Freedom in the World 2008: Egypt
- Freedom of the Press 2008: Egypt
- Freedom on the Net 2009: Egypt