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The New Protest Movements in Egypt: Has the Country Lost Patience?

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The declaration by the Egyptian Movement for Change “Kifaya”, which held its foundation conference on September 22, 2004 and its first demonstration on December 12 of that same year, ushered-in the era of widespread public protests in Egypt, a phenomenon in Egyptian society, by all accounts. The main belief that gave rise to Kifaya was, to begin with, the realisation of the abject failure of the “national” or “post colonial” state’s” performance in the Arab world, in general, and in Egypt, in particular, and its inability to face up to the looming challenges and dangers, both internal and external. It was also the lack of human rights, snatched from citizens by force, and the multi-levelled tyranny that exhausted the region’s population and rendered it incapable of fighting the complex heaped upon it internally, or standing-up to the colonial hatched against it from every direction. It was also the fact that this state has allowed the population to wallow in backwardness and dependence despite its considerable resources and latent potential. It is interesting to follow this movement’s path and the role it played in breaking the bonds of fear from the regime, and from its despotism and haughtiness. It is also interesting to witness the ensuing willingness to protest, that moved from members of the middle classes, among which Kifaya has evolved and to whose aspirations it gave voice, to those of the poorer classes, like the peasants and labourers. These are the very classes whose conditions underwent intense deterioration in recent years, when the state withdrew its social services and left them to their unfortunate fate and ultimate collapse, and when free economic policies, privatisation and the narrowing of the public sector became the norm, coupled with the state renegeing on agrarian reform measures. Is Egypt now able to catch its breath once again?

This study looks at the situation from a sympathetic angle to the above-mentioned movements, for its author is himself a member of Kifaya. The Arab Reform Initiative’s interest in exposing its readers to this particular point of view is in tune with its policy to bring together the research community and civil society.

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Background and departure points

Kifaya was not born out of a vacuum, but was rather the end-result of previous popular struggles. Its members played leading roles in the democratic student movements that went out into the street in the aftermath of the military defeat of 1967, and played an important part in various national and public activities against “normalisation” after the Camp David Treaty. They played an equally important role in the establishment and leadership of the “Committees for the Support of the Palestinian *Intifada*” and in the large-scale protest movements against the invasion of Iraq. Strengthened by years spent in jail and detention, most of its cadres came to know one another well, built tight relationships despite their divergent political agendas and, over the past few decades, participated together in various forms of civil action.

Based on the above-mentioned reasons that led to the creation of Kifaya, the movement’s founders were of the opinion that recapturing the value, and spirit, that Egyptian and Arab citizens have lost must be place at the top of any liberation agenda (in the general sense) in our country. They agreed that the issue of peaceful democratic “change”, based on popular initiative and resistance against projects that use “democracy” as a pretext to dismember the nation and erode national and popular solidarity, is an issue of primordial importance, and of such danger, that no one group can shoulder it alone. This is where the search for common ground among various national movements took off, including leftists, nationalists, Islamists, liberals and patriots. They were all invited to rally round Kifaya, seek together new modes of activism that reach into the citizens’ soul, encourage them to overcome their deep-

rooted and traditional fear and breach the iron wall that the regime erected between them and their right to participate in their country’s political and civil life. The aim was to overcome the stringent constraints the regime has placed on street activism, so that contact can be maintained with the public now that the ruling National Democratic Party’s monopoly of power, during the past three decades, and the concomitant corruption, abuse and tyranny, have led to the total paralysis of political life, both in form and content. This left the door wide open for certain currents (like fundamentalism) to monopolise the political arena, uncontested. This state of affairs led to the total paralysis of official political parties, both pro government and in “opposition”, and turned them, in the words of the famous historian, Younan Labib Rizk, into “wooden structures that resemble the Egyptian aircrafts that were hit in the 1967 War”!

Achievements and Results

To make that vision a reality, it was, in the words on one academic “absolutely necessary to build and spread a new political culture in order to launch a process of political change that will succeed in forging a new society. The survival of the regime of tyranny and corruption now relies, alongside its oppressive security services and arsenal of freedom-restricting laws, on a political culture none other than that of despotism and scaremongering that prevailed over many decades. This culture has succeeded in doing away with all resistance on the part of opposition groups and movements, and in destroying the institutions through which they would have been able to express themselves and voice their political and social demands, independently or collectively.

The citizen became a mere individual in the face of the full might of the state and its instruments of tyranny, forcing everyone to buckle under, accept the fait accompli and learn to live with it.” (What is Kifaya’s Real Achievement? by Dr. Imad Siyam – Al-Badil newspaper; 15/8/2007).

This goal was at the core of Kifaya’s sudden ringing and awe-inspiring cry, a movement that hovered over Egypt like a butterfly, causing continuous ripples, not the least of which was breaking the barrier of fear from the regime’s looming tyranny, and blatantly daring to challenge it. It could also be said that Kifaya brought down the highest and semi-sacred being the president, from his high perch, demanding that he be tried and held accountable and that he and family leave the scene. They dared to come out against plans to install hereditary power in Egypt by passing the mantle of power on to his son and heir!

For the first time, and after nearly five and a half decades (since the crisis of March 1954), Kifaya was able to seize the right to organise openly and independently, without having to know-tow to the security services’ threats, something which, before the movement’s establishment, was a taboo that no one in Egypt dared to violate! Furthermore, Kifaya embodied what remained of the principles of genuine struggle, at the head of which stood the loftiest expression of national solidarity, namely its choice of a Coptic activist by the name of George Izhak as its first General Coordinator. Coming at a time when sectarian polarisation was at its worst, this vivid example of the “principle of citizenship” was a practical answer to those promoting division in the country.

However, the most important and exemplary achievement by the Kifaya

initiative, and its original agenda, is that all those who had a legitimate right, grievance or demand were encouraged to raise their fist in defence of their existence, once it became unequivocally clear that the state and the regime, had totally abandoned their social responsibilities towards their citizens. This is the single most important responsibility that defined the Egyptian central authority’s historical role and justified its huge size and prerogatives, a role that became more entrenched and expansive under the Nasserite state. Moreover, this very role was transformed into its exact opposite when it openly shifted towards the new, small and very rich social classes that rose to society’s surface in the last few years, thanks to their close relationship with the regime’s high officials and their dependence on foreign monopolies. This made it easy for them to climb, rather quickly, to the top of the social ladder and take advantage of the prevailing situation to accumulate huge wealth in just a few years, through the embezzlement of public funds, profiteering from the prevailing climate of corruption, selling public factories and institutions “dirt cheap” and hardly concealed manoeuvres, all within the context of the “privatisation”, “restructuring” and “economic liberalisation” projects, imposed by international financial organisations, in accordance with “neo liberal” theories!

Kifaya and her sisters

The birth and launch of Kifaya was tantamount to an open licence to establish a large number of “sister” movements. Some came out from under Kifaya’s mantle, some were formed by a number of Kifaya activists, and others yet were born with relative or total independence from

the movement. All of them, however, worked for the same objectives, namely entrenching and deepening democratic practices, widening the margin of independent public action and opposing official measures that go against the public interest.

- For example, the “March 9 Movement” to reclaim university independence was established by a large group of respected academics, from various Egyptian universities, with the aim of gaining academic freedom, extricating the Egyptian University from the control of the state and its security services, guaranteeing intellectual freedom and belief for both students and professors, and combating corruption on campus;
- The “Workers for Change” Movement was founded in order to defend the rights of the working class, oppose the government’s plans that destroy the country’s industry and mobilise workers against the “structural adjustment” plan;
- According to its special mission statement, the “Youth for Change” Movement is meant to operate among young people “who were born, have existed and spent their entire lives under the state of emergency”;
- “Doctors for Change” was founded to defend doctors’ rights in light of the deteriorating conditions of the medical profession, and of medical services afforded to the citizens;
- “Writers and Artists for Change” comprises a group of distinguished Egyptians who see eye-to-eye on a number of principles, the most important of which are “underlining the importance of freedom in all its forms, especially in the fields of literary, artistic and intellectual creativity and scientific research, and rejecting all kinds of restrictions and controls imposed on the Egyptian mind”. The movement’s members also agree on a set of general political principles, among which are: “the abrogation of all laws that limit freedom, at the top of which is the emergency law; safeguarding the right to form political parties, publish newspapers and hold peaceful demonstrations and strikes; the release of all political detainees, and the rejection of renewal of the president’s political terms and hereditary system”;
- “Journalists for Change” comprises a group of Egyptian journalists who rose up in defence of public freedoms and related union demands, the most important of which are the annulment of jail sentences as punishment for intellectual offences, the right to publish independent newspapers and a set other related claims;
- In its opening declaration, “Lawyers for Change” expresses its members’ desire for “a comprehensive peaceful change in the deteriorating situation under which we currently live, and changing the current constitution to become a more democratic one in which freedoms are the primordial objective”;
- “Engineers Without Surveillance” organises the ranks of Egyptian engineers in view of extricating their union from the grip of the state, which imposed its “guardianship” upon it over 12 years ago, after failing to impose its control over the will of its members;
- What is more important, regarding the above movements, is that they arose to complement the “Egyptian Judges’ Movement”, this historically highly influential group that has reflected all along the ongoing aspiration for the restoration of lost justice. The judges rebelled against blatant interference by

the executive authorities in their affairs, and against being forced to bear “false witness” to the conduct of all previous elections whose results were falsified in favour of the regime, claiming all the while that they were held under judicial supervision. They rose against unfair laws that deny them the right to achieve financial and administrative independence, and deepen their dependence on a lawless regime that violates the constitution on a daily basis.

Various groups within Egyptian society thus continued their campaigns to regain lost rights, and took their struggle into the public arena to entrench fundamental democratic principles. That still ongoing trend, to which Kifaya has opened the door wide, reflects on the one hand, the deep-rooted feeling of collective injustice by most sectors of the Egyptian population. On the other, it demonstrates the great courage with which people are demanding their rights after long decades of submission and hesitation and after social, political and economic conditions have deteriorated to an unprecedented level. A few months ago, the “Unemployed”, a large sector of the Egyptian population, formed a union to defend their right to find an appropriate job, and teachers denied their rights established “Teachers without a Union”. A group of economists linked to Kifaya started a movement called “No, to the Selling of Egypt” to fight against the regime’s policy of uncontrolled selling of Egypt’s public assets (companies, factories, large service institutions, banks, etc.). A movement for the “Defence of Insurance Rights” demanded the restitution of the 270 billion Egyptian Pounds and their accrued interest to the people, which is the total of insurance money the central authorities had illegally

put its hands on. Likewise, a movement for the “Defence of the Citizen’s Right to Health” was formed with the aim of raising the citizens’ awareness, and mobilising them against the privatisation of health insurance, and its destructive repercussions on the health of the Egyptian population. Underway, is also a “Non-Government Organisations’ Campaign for the Defence of the Right to Organise” against the regime’s severe restrictions on the freedom of forming civil society organisations, and their peaceful activities.

The last to be born in this series of movements is “Egyptians against Torture”, formed on September 9, 2007, to confront acts of systematic torture that have become a common practice of the security services in recent years. These do not only target the regime’s political opponents but also ordinary citizens, and often take action in relation to matters that have nothing to do with political or opposition activism. There is a host of other movements, which space does not allow us to list here.

A strategic variable

The emergence of these movements and their activities has occurred, within the context of efforts by groups that belong mostly to the Egyptian “middle classes”. The latter have risen in protest against the considerable deterioration in their economic conditions, retreat of their traditional and pioneering social and political roles, and the sidelining of their physical and moral presence in recent years. The urge to confront grievances is both natural and understandable if one considers this social class’ history, its members’ advanced level of education,

their high awareness of what is at stake and their ability to organise.

The regime and its media argued that movements for change, mainly Kifaya, were over and done with thanks to the security services' overbearing intervention. But while the government claimed that the "Cairo Spring", and these large-scale movements in 2005 demanding "rights and freedoms", had been thwarted, a new variable stormed on the scene within the past year.

This new variable is the overwhelming presence of the disadvantaged classes and neglected sectors of society, including workers, peasants and various members of the small bourgeoisie, as well as the socially marginalized, squatters, addicts and disenfranchised proletariat, all of whom are active alongside the middle class movements. Also highly effective are the activities of marginalised human conglomerations at the periphery, such as the "inhabitants of al- Nouba", in the south, who rose in protest against their historically unfair treatment ever since they were driven, in the 1960s, from their lands submerged by the rerouting of the River Nile when the Aswan Dam was built. These are the same demands as those of the Bedouins of the Sinai Peninsula, to the east, who want ownership of the lands they inherited from their forefathers, and have lived on since, and are protesting the abuse by the security services and collective punishments meted to them and their sons. There are also the activities of the al-Salloum's inhabitants, to the west, against their violent treatment by the security services.

One cannot fail but notice that these protests, by the inhabitants of both Sinai and al-Salloum, were characterised by a significant amount of violence, and have

caused many deaths, injuries and detentions. This is due, above all, to the intense pressure that has governed the relationship between these citizens and the security services, in the last few years, and due to a prevalent feeling among them that their peaceful attempts to take their grievances and complaints to the authorities have all failed.

This variable stole the limelight by declaring that the need for change, and for action to retrieve stolen rights, Kifaya's primary *raison d'être*, has now become a national obsession exceedingly difficult to control, that now neither this obsession nor the Egyptian population's expectations can be denied or thwarted and that there is no way of ignoring it.

The peasant movement

Two historical issues stand behind the current peasant protests: land and water. The Egyptian state has played a big part in overseeing and controlling these two very fundamental issues, and has relentlessly drawn "the legitimacy" of its absolute power from them throughout history.

The land issue:

The stable land ownership situation that had been in effect in Egypt since the "Land Reform Laws" of the early 1950s, and according to which the ownership of agricultural land and distribution of the surplus among the poor was settled, was subjected to an organised attack, through Law 196 of 1992, which turned the status quo upside-down. The latter law made it possible to take land away from the peasants, after their having lived on it for decades, in order to return it to its former owners. The law spread an atmosphere of tension and pressure which exacerbated

the tilt by the security services in favour of the rural rich and major landowners. This resulted in bloody clashes between the poor peasants, on one side, and rich rural families supported by the security forces, on the other, that led to many deaths and injuries among the peasants, as well as a number of detentions and trials after levelling accusations of “resisting the authorities” and “endangering public peace” at the protesters. The most noteworthy incident, though by no means a unique one, is that involving the peasants of the village of Sarandu in the Delta, who rebelled in 2005 against the expropriation of their lands, and their subsequent restitution to their very well protected former owners. One of the peasants was killed in the ensuing confrontation, after which the situation deteriorated into civil disobedience that culminated in the detention of the entire village, including the women and children. One of the women villagers died in mysterious circumstances after all the detainees received severe beatings. The trial of the peasant of Sarandu ended only in early 2007, with severe sentences given to the villagers.

The water issue:

The River Nile is the main lifeline of Egypt and its most important source of water. The 55 billion cubic metres of water per annum Egypt draws from the Nile are no longer sufficient for covering the country's basic needs, due to two factors: the first is the doubling of the population (to 80 million in 2008, according to the latest statistics) and the second, the galloping increase in recreational water use. The latter includes parks, large tourist facilities, mansions with large gardens and private swimming pools, and golf courses for the use of the elite...

The intersection of the two above factors exacerbated an already acute drinking and irrigation crisis, which reached its peak this year. The per capita share of water in Egypt went down from 2200 cubic metres in 1800, to 470 cubic metres in 2007, causing a “thirst revolution” all over the country and provoking huge demonstrations in which tens of thousands of angry citizens took part. These went into the streets carrying empty water vessels, cutting major communication routes, declaring that “striking is the solution”, going on hunger strike, clashing angrily with the security services with the slogan “we are thirsty in the Nile country” held up high, and warning that they are ready to go to any length to solve this existential crisis. Events like these took place in most remote agricultural governorates, and at Cairo's periphery, where the citizens' right to drink “a clean sip of water” had been denied for decades.

The Workers' Movement

The Egyptian working class faced extremely poor conditions and deterioration in its overall situation when the government started implementing its “structural adjustment”, “economic liberalisation” and “open markets” policies. When the privatisation of public sector factories and the termination of major projects started in earnest, hundreds of thousands of workers, who were expelled from their jobs under the so-called “early retirement” scheme, joined the ranks of the unemployed, who already numbered around seven million. On the other hand, those workers who found new employment opportunities in private sector factories, a rare phenomenon in itself, now faced exceedingly poor and brutal work conditions, were denied any kind of

benefit, and lacked the basic guarantees, including those they had enjoyed in the past.

This state of affairs led to a wide protest movement by workers, starting with strikes and sit-ins by spinning and weaving workers in large traditional industrial centres that included “al-Mahallah al-Kubra”, Kafr al-Dowwar” and “Alexandria”. The movement soon spread to other industrial sectors in nearby and remote governorates.

A major study by the “Land Center for Human Rights” (published in July 2007) under the title “Protests in the Face of Savagery”, identified some 283 protest activities in the governmental, private and business sectors, during the first half of the year. Among them were 117 rallies, 85 sit-ins and 66 strikes, in addition to tens of protest activities by inhabitants of squatter areas demanding humane living quarters. Some protested the erection of cellular telephone transmission towers near their homes, some demanded that their temporary jobs be made permanent, teachers and al-Azhar graduates demanded public sector jobs and some complained about the deteriorating health conditions. Others yet protested the lack of production incentives and bonuses; some vented their anger at the disappearance of bread, its increasing price and its poor quality, others asked for pay equal to their foreign colleagues, and some protested the “massacre of trees”...

More recent statistics covering the two past months, (July and August 2007), show that protest activities now occur quite regularly in factories, villages and various popular and squatter areas, and that they continue to develop and increase quantitatively and qualitatively.

In September, however, a strike by workers of al-Mahallah Spinning and Weaving Company – 24,000 workers – went on strike for an entire week, supported by sit-ins by some 10,000 workers in other factories. The strike imposed itself on the scene as a priority case, and ended with a victory for the workers in matters related to their work conditions and to their claims for bonuses.

From this brief presentation one is entitled to wonder about the general impact of these activities, and their effect on the increasingly conflictual domestic scene in Egypt. We are witnessing the emergence of a new Egypt, in which matters no longer solely depend on what takes place at the presidential “palace”!