Between the devil and the deep blue sea? Political reform in Egypt

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A number of media sources and commentators referred to 2005 as a turning point in Egyptian politics, given that a hint was detected that the country might move away from a semi-authoritarian political system towards democracy. Since then the government of President Hosni Mubarak has been faced with the question of whether to reform or to maintain the status quo. Two occurrences or factors played a direct role in this dilemma: Hamas’s victory over Fatah in the Palestinian elections and fear over the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Role-players in favour of political reform gained an unexpected ally in the United States, which despite giving Egypt foreign aid (second after Israel) has of late being demanding more democratisation.

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Developments in Egypt therefore need to be analysed within a broader framework: former radical Islamist organisations gradually began to advocate reform that they intended to implement not through violence, but through being part of the political process. Hamas serves as the most recent example, although the Muslim Brotherhood was the first to initiate this strategy, even before the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981. The difference is that the latter is not recognised as a legitimate political party. Voter empathy in Egypt is evident in the fact that turnouts in the 2005 election and 2007 referendum were respectively 23 per cent and 27 per cent, compared to 70 per cent in the 2006 Palestinian elections (Wikinews 2006).

In Egypt: the government realised that it needed to come up with reform initiatives, since internal pressure was mounting. President Mubarak’s therefore announced his intention to amend the constitution in February 2005. The government decided to amend article 76 of the constitution to facilitate the election of the president, formerly decided through a referendum.

With the suggested amendment of article 76 in early 2005, government has made it impossible for the Muslim Brotherhood to sponsor a presidential candidate. According to this article only registered political parties with at least one seat in the People’s Assembly or the Shura Council could nominate a presidential candidate. This inevitably excluded independent candidates. In addition to article 76, article 5 – which banned the formation of political parties on the basis of religion – was amended to include political activities within any religious frame of reference and further excluded the Muslim Brotherhood from the political process.

The political reform process however received a setback with Hamas’s victory in January 2006. In February 2006, less than a month after Hamas’s victory, the Egyptian government suddenly announced the postponement of local council elections. The explanation of government was that it was in the process of introducing amendments to the Local Administration Law, which will give greater power to the councils and consolidate decentralisation in the Egyptian political system (BBC Monitoring Middle East 2006).

Despite government’s verbal commitment, reform can only be achieved after addressing various issues:

- **Voter apathy and political participation** in the political process are directly linked to the legitimacy of the political process. However, the legitimacy crisis extends beyond the government to include political parties recognised by the political system (the Muslim Brotherhood is currently excluded). Evidence of this crisis can be found in voter registration and election turnout: only 32 million voters registered (approximately 40 per cent of the total population). Voter turnout during the 2005
elections was estimated at 23 per cent, and 7.3 million people voted (of an estimated population of 77 million) (UNDP 2006). Despite the decision of the government during the 2005 elections to open up the political system and limit intervention of the security forces (in comparison with previous elections), the number of opposition seats in Parliament decreased from 17 in 2000 to 14 in 2005. In the referendum on 26 March 2007 to decide on 34 controversial constitutional amendments voter turnout was officially estimated at 27 per cent, although, according to opposition groups, voter turnout was as low as 5 per cent (Youssef 2007).

Representation and engagement with ordinary citizenry is critical, particularly considering that the role of political parties in the political system is to represent the needs and realities of the electorate. If political representatives represent ordinary citizens and reflect or protect their interests, one would expect greater participation in the political process. In reality, the political debate is being exclusively conducted between the political and intellectual elites without any real participation by ordinary citizens. There is therefore a clear divide between the political elite and the masses, who do not have a constructive outlet to voice their opinions, not even when it comes to the agenda of the political reform process or the implementation strategy. In the absence of a legally acceptable channel for ordinary citizens to express their viewpoints the possibility of violence is an unfortunate reality. It is therefore essential that government reconsider its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood in recognising it as a legitimate political party and engage with the organisation in incorporating their viewpoints into the political reform process. In addition, political parties need to mobilise support as part of the democratisation process, since without public participation in the political process essential principles of democracy are disregarded.

As a result of the growing popularity of former radical Islamist organisations throughout the Middle East after they have indicated their willingness to participate in the political process, governments are being increasingly pressured to initiate political reforms that permit them to participate in the political process. In addition to the resolve on the part of these organisations to introduce political and social reform, these groups have another advantage: the policy of Islamist organisations towards the security situation in the Middle East, in particular Israel. In the aftermath of the growing conflict between Israel and Hamas and Hizbollah it became clear that organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood represent the interests and concerns of ordinary citizens. Governments (especially the governing party in Egypt) have traditionally been following a more conservative approach when it comes to Israel – an approach which ordinary citizens regards as passive and weak. In addition to ideological similarities, the Muslim Brotherhood recognised the political advantage of supporting Hamas and Hizbollah. In mobilising support and gaining recognition the Muslim Brotherhood organised numerous (illegal) demonstrations in support of
Hamas and Hizbollah. This put the government in a catch-22 situation: whether to react by arresting organisers and demonstrators, thereby drawing the support of more ordinary citizens for the Muslim Brotherhood, or initiate a comprehensive political reform programme and face the possibility of relinquishing power.

**Balancing stability and human rights** is a difficult act. Despite the verbal commitment of President Mubarak to ‘respect the fundamental rights of citizens’ and to ‘strengthen democracy and broader political participation’ little has materialised. Since January 2006 the government has clearly been implementing an opposite strategy manifested in limited freedom of association, especially the ability to organise and participate in protest marches; and limited freedom of expression, notably freedom of the media and journalists.

Until now the government has implemented reforms without allowing real change, leading to the question: Is Egypt really on the verge of a political transition towards democracy and liberalism? The answer will probably depend on one’s position on the political spectrum: government representatives will answer in the affirmative through referring to their decision to allow more than one candidate to participate in the presidential elections and other subsequent ‘concessions’ as the framework while the opposing side will argue that elections are not a real democratic contest.

Does this imply that the controlled reform initiatives that are being introduced will not threaten the government’s hold on power, but will rather ‘silence’ popular opposition? Two examples come to mind:

- In reaction to the growing concern about, and even outrage at, the possibility that President’s Mubarak youngest son, Gamal Mubarak, is being groomed to become the next president, the government has decided to allow more than one candidate in presidential elections. However, in the current political scenario it is doubtful whether any other candidate really stands a chance to challenge Gamal should he decide to replace his father.

- Growing popular discontent with the state of emergency that has been in place since the assassination of President Sadat in 1981 led to a government announcement that the existing state of emergency legislation would be replaced by new anti-terrorism legislation. History will later judge Egypt’s reaction to the opportunity to introduce democracy and protect civil liberties when confronted with the threat of terrorism. In addition to a disregard for civil liberties, there is a temptation for Egypt – like a number of other countries – to use counter-terrorism legislation against political opposition groups, thereby curbing political activities that are not in support of the government.
Should the Egyptian government allow all political factions to establish political parties without interfering in the affairs of those parties and allow them the freedoms of civil society, one wonders if the ruling party will win the next election. However, history has shown that as long as a government is in control of the initiatives and pace of political reform, the extent, depth and impact of democratisation will be limited. Considering that Egypt does not have a tradition of democracy and liberalism, a paradigm shift is first needed, however. This will include the realisation that a government can lose power and that the above ideals entail an openness to public scrutiny and constructive criticism which strengthen a political system if properly utilised.

Also, a stronger political opposition is necessary. It represents ordinary citizens, balances political power, and acts a check on the excessive use of power. None of these are currently evident in Egypt.

This leaves us with the question why the government announced the initiatives it refers to as ‘reform’. Was it for the sake of financial assistance and the support of the current world superpower, or in the interests of the country and its citizens? With growing concern and pressure from the US, governments throughout the Middle East may experience a fate similar to that of Fatah in the Palestinian elections. We may debate and speculate, but without critical introspection, democracy and civil liberties will remain elusive ideals for Egypt, which may have to return to the ‘political reform’ drawing board.

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