Egyptian government suppresses opposition while US turns blind eye

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A number of prominent Egyptian opposition figures have been arrested in recent weeks. On January 29 state security arrested Ayman Al Nur, a member of parliament and leader of the recently established *Al Ghad* (Tomorrow) Party. Security officers reportedly assaulted Nur during the arrest. The former journalist is accused of forging more than 1,000 signatures used to register his party.

Al Ghad's vice-president was also detained and the first issue of the party's newspaper was suppressed. Nur denied the charges and accused the government of orchestrating a frame-up. His case has achieved widespread attention, both within Egypt and the United States.

Nur's arrest was one of several. On January 31 police detained nine men who were allegedly associated with the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and charged them with membership of an illegal organisation.

On January 28, three men—Marwa Farouk, Baho Abdallah, and journalist Ibrahim El-Sahhari—were arrested at the Cairo International Book Fair. The three are members of the Socialist Studies Centre and were promoting a book titled, *A Socialist Vision for Change in Egypt*. They were charged with distribution of material inciting hatred against the government. El-Sahhari was only released on February 8 after he began a hunger strike in protest against his detention.

The repression is designed to send a strong signal to the government's opponents. In recent months opposition has mounted against moves by President Hosni Mubarak to secure another six-year term. The 76-year old has ruled Egypt since 1981 and is currently seeking to extend his tenure up to 2011. There has been speculation that Mubarak's son is being groomed for succession. Gamal Mubarak, a wealthy businessman and advisor to his father, is widely despised in Egypt.

The president has routinely imprisoned and tortured his political opponents, and has maintained a tightly censored media. His effective dictatorship is, however, dressed up in a pseudo-constitutional facade. The national parliament—which is dominated by Mubarak's National Democratic Party—selects a presidential nominee every six years by a two-thirds vote. A referendum is then held in which people can accept or reject the sole nominee.

This mechanism has functioned as Mubarak's rubber stamp for more than two decades. This year, however, simmering discontent within Egyptian society has produced an unprecedented debate about the political setup. The presidential plebiscite is scheduled for September and parliamentary elections are due in October.

Three political activists—a feminist writer, sociology professor, and former MP—have declared that they hope to stand against Mubarak. While their candidacies have no chance of success, the three are attempting to collect a million signatures in a petition demanding a constitutional amendment to allow the presidential nomination of more than one person.

On December 12 last year, between 500 to 1,000 people demonstrated against another Mubarak term in front of Cairo's High Court. State security outnumbered the protestors two-to-one. The protest was organised by the Egyptian Movement for Change, a coalition of different oppositionists, including Nasserists, Islamists, and remnants of Egypt's various Stalinist groupings. The formation—popularly known as the *Kifaya* (Enough) movement—has achieved significant publicity. Another small protest was staged at the Cairo International Book Fair and further demonstrations have been planned.

Opposition to the regime is especially intense among young people, who are taking advantage of developments in information technology to circumvent media censorship. Egypt has almost four million internet users and there are numerous web sites and chatrooms devoted to anti-Mubarak discussions.

Underpinning the mounting political discontent is a severe social crisis characterised by mounting inequality. The Egyptian economy is in recession and unemployment stands at an estimated 15 percent. Per capita income remains at just $1,200. In May, the government reintroduced food vouchers in the face of rapidly increasing inflation. In contrast the leading sections of the bourgeoisie are doing very well—the value of the Egyptian stock market doubled in the past year.

In the absence of an independent working class movement—for which Egypt's Stalinist Communist Party is primarily responsible—opposition has largely flowed through the mosques, and banned Islamist organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

Bourgeois liberal movements such as *Al Ghad* and *Kafiya* have also been galvanised by the fear that without reform measures, Egypt's social divisions will find an explosive political expression. The level of repression directed against many of the liberal politicians is totally disproportionate to the content of their demands. Ayman Al Nur, for example, is not opposed to another Mubarak term in office, provided that he permits certain constitutional reforms.

The reformist organisations are calling for multi-party presidential elections, the restriction of presidential office to two terms, the end of the 24-year old Emergency Law, and allowing the free registration of opposition parties.

Egypt, together with Saudi Arabia, was one of the US allies targeted for democratic reform in George W. Bush's state of the union speech earlier this month. "The great and proud nation of Egypt, which showed the way toward peace in the Middle East, can now show the way toward democracy in the Middle East," the president declared.

Notwithstanding this claim, the administration's response to the wave of arrests has been low-key. The State Department issued a perfunctory statement on Nur's detention. "We are concerned by the signal that the arrest sends," a spokesman said. "The arrest, in our mind, raises questions about the outlook for a democratic process in Egypt."

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit met with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on February 15. In her remarks to the media following the discussion, Rice expressed her "deep appreciation" for Egypt's support of US policy in Palestine, Iraq, and Sudan. Only when questioned did she discuss Nur's arrest. "Yes, I did raise our concerns, our very strong concerns, about this case," she said. "And I expressed our

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very strong hope that there will be a resolution of this very soon."

The absence of any significant US response to Mubarak's repression demonstrates that the Bush administration's rhetoric of freedom and liberty is nothing but an instrument for the consolidation of American hegemony over the Middle East. The administration backs brutal dictatorships throughout the region and the world whenever it is in the interests of US imperialism to do so.

Egypt receives almost $2 billion a year in aid from the US, which represents a reward for Mubarak's long standing role as loyal US proxy in the Middle East. The dictator has played an important role in backing the Bush administration's "war on terror". Among other contributions, the Egyptian security services have worked closely with the CIA in interrogating and torturing "rendered" terrorist suspects.

Mubarak has also played a critical role in the region through his support for Israel. He has been instrumental in helping promote Israel's favoured Palestinian leader, President Mahmoud Abbas. Egypt hosted the recent Sharm el-Sheikh summit where Abbas met with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

The summit saw further moves towards closer Egyptian-Israeli cooperation. Mubarak pledged to step up Egypt's policing of its border with Gaza and will deploy 700 border guards later this year. Egypt is also training Palestinian police officers. The nation's ambassador has been returned to Israel. The diplomat was withdrawn in 2000, in a concession to anti-Israeli sentiment following the eruption of the second intifada.

"There seems to be a new deal, with a campaign in Egypt to improve the image of Sharon and to show Israel as a peace loving nation," noted Emad Gad, a senior researcher at Cairo's Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies. He observed that the state media had stopped attacking the Israeli prime minister and derogatory cartoons no longer appeared in the press.

Egypt's ties with the Zionist state are deeply unpopular, and are part of the reason why there is so much opposition to another Mubarak presidential term. Thousands of students at Egypt's major universities staged demonstrations against Sharon's visit and demanded his arrest on war crimes charges. Scores of journalists also staged a sit-in at their union's headquarters in Cairo in protest against the reception.

Such sentiments have not deterred Mubarak, who has stepped up Egypt's economic integration with Israel. The Israeli Electric Co. arranged last May to purchase $2.5 billion worth of Egypt's gas over 15 years. Outraged Egyptians only learned of the arrangement through the Israeli press, as the local state media suppressed the story.

Last December, Egypt, Israel and the US signed a three-way agreement which saw the creation of Qualified Industrial Zones within Egypt. Local companies within these zones can export to the US tax-free, provided that Israeli components constitute 11.7 percent of the product.

None of these deals will improve the conditions of ordinary Egyptians. They will, however, further enrich the ruling elite.

While the Bush administration continues to back the Mubarak regime, sections of the US ruling elite have grown concerned that the glaring disparity between this support and the declared goal of spreading democracy throughout the region may damage America's long-term interests in the region. Many also share the concern of Egypt's liberals that without political change, the country's social tensions could erupt, fatally undermining the government.

Only days before his arrest Ayman Al Nur had met with Madeleine Albright, who served as secretary of state in the Clinton administration. Albright was visiting Egypt as head of a congressional taskforce promoting reform in Arab countries.

The suppression of the *Al Ghad* party was met with a number of sharp editorials in major US newspapers. The *Washington Post* ran two pieces, "'Enough' in Egypt" on January 18, and "Egypt's Test for Mr. Bush" on February 2. The *New York Times*' editorial on February 4 was titled, "Promoting Democracy in Egypt".

"The helpful role of Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, as a peace broker between Israelis and Palestinians should not earn him immunity from criticism of his self-perpetuating dictatorship," the *Times* declared. "After nearly 24 years in power, he appears ready to add 6 more in a single-candidate referendum this fall, all the while grooming his son Gamal for an eventual Pharaonic succession. American taxpayers have bankrolled this regime to the tune of tens of billions of dollars over the years. It is about time that Washington woke up to the explosive powder keg that has been building up under Mr. Mubarak's despotic rule."

These concerns may see the Bush administration press Mubarak to grant some concessions on constitutional reform. Any such move could be hailed by the US government as a significant step towards democratic reform, and would also help limit opposition from within the Egyptian bourgeoisie to another six-year extension of Mubarak's rule.

Prior to the wave of arrests, the president had given some indications that he was preparing such a move. Last November the government permitted the registration of the *Al Ghad* party. The *Financial Times* described this as the first time in 28 years that the regime's party registration committee had permitted the formation of a serious opposition party. Mubarak had also announced the formation of a "national dialogue" on the question of constitutional change between government spokesmen and selected politicians. This so-called dialogue was convened just days after Nur's arrest.

While the Bush administration would no doubt prefer that Mubarak refrained from arresting high-profile politicians, under no circumstances will it press for anything that even approximates genuine democratic reform. The Mubarak regime represents a multi-billion dollar investment for US imperialism, and the Bush administration expects to reap its dividend through ongoing Egyptian support for its interventions in the Middle East. Such support can only be secured through the continued exclusion of the Egyptian masses from the political system.

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