

Egypt: Mubarak regime cracks down on opposition

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With the tacit support of the Bush administration, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has recently arrested a number of political oppositionists and journalists and cancelled local elections scheduled for later this year. The repressive measures are intended to serve as a notice to ordinary Egyptians that the regime's promises of reform and democratisation are not intended to permit any genuine challenge to Mubarak's rule.

In one case that has received significant coverage within Egypt and the US, imprisoned liberal oppositionist Ayman Nour was charged with 17 criminal offences late last month. The politician is accused, among other things, of calling Mubarak "ineffective" and a "loser" at a campaign rally, assaulting a police officer, and funding a statue of an Egyptian composer. Prosecutors have declared the latter act to be an offence against Islam. Nour's wife has also been charged with assaulting a security officer during a political rally.

Nour and his wife deny assaulting anyone and insist the charges are all politically motivated. In Egypt's first multi-nominee presidential election last September, Nour won 7.6 percent of the vote amid widespread electoral fraud, government censorship, and intimidation and violence.

Last December he was sentenced to five years imprisonment on electoral fraud charges. Opposition groups and human rights organisations condemned the trial as a fraud. Among other irregularities, one of the prosecution's witnesses retracted a statement which implicated Nour and claimed to have been coerced by state security forces.

The latest charges against the politician were issued just days after US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Egypt and met with the president. She described Nour's case as a "setback," but stressed the Bush administration's support for the Mubarak government and its fraudulent presidential and parliamentary elections held last year.

"[Egypt] is a country that has undergone a lot of change in the last eight months since I spoke here," she declared. "We have to realise that this is a parliament that is fundamentally different than the parliament before the elections—a president who has sought the consent of the governed."

Mubarak later described the nature of his meeting with Rice. "She was very polite as she was listening to Egyptian opinions and points of view," he told local newspaper editors. "She didn't bring up difficult issues or ask to change anything or to intervene in political reform, as some people say... She was convinced by the way that political reform and the implementation of democracy are being done in Egypt. She said that democracy in the Arab countries needed a generation."

Washington's support for the Mubarak regime again demonstrates the cynical nature of its drive for "democracy" in the Middle East. States deemed to be hostile to US interests—Iran and Syria, for example—are targeted for regime change under the banner of democracy, while regimes allied with America, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are given the green light to take whatever measures are necessary to maintain control. Egypt receives almost \$2 billion in annual US economic and military aid; only Israel receives more American aid money.

The charges against Ayman Nour are just one example of the Mubarak government's recent moves to shore up its power. On March 7, Amira Malash, a journalist with the independent weekly newspaper *al-Fagr*, was sentenced to a year in jail for allegedly libelling a judge in a story on a bribery investigation. According to Reuters, Malash was sentenced after a single trial session.

In a separate incident, the Mubarak government has charged three judges with "insulting and defaming" the state for their criticisms of electoral fraud during parliamentary elections held last November and

December. The judges spoke out after supervising elections in which government candidates won through large-scale ballot rigging.

“This kind of behaviour goes in line with the government’s insistence to use the public prosecutor as a tool against reformists and democracy supporters in Egypt,” Gamal Eid, director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, commented.

The arrests followed last month’s cancellation of local council elections scheduled for this year. While the government maintained that it was necessary to postpone the vote until 2008 in order to make the elections more democratic and grant councils greater powers, the real concern was to prevent another debacle for Mubarak’s National Democratic Party (NDP) and a strong showing by the Muslim Brotherhood.

In last year’s parliamentary elections, the NDP won just 35 percent of the seats, despite resorting to countless anti-democratic and repressive measures. The government maintained its two-thirds parliamentary majority only by subsequently winning over (or bribing) candidates who had stood as independents.

The election result was another expression of ordinary Egyptians’ hostility to the Mubarak regime and to the entire political setup in Egypt. Like the NDP, opposition parties officially recognised by the government lost many of their seats. The oldest Egyptian liberal party, the Wafd, won just 6 seats, the social-democratic Tagammu 2, and Ayman Nour’s Ghad Party just 1. The official parties have discredited themselves through their long collaboration with the government and have been wracked by factional infighting.

Candidates identified with the proscribed Muslim Brotherhood won 88 of the 444 contested seats. The Islamic fundamentalists, who were forced to stand as independents, won support by campaigning against government corruption and highlighting their own social services network. According to the IRIN news agency, the Muslim Brotherhood runs 22 hospitals in Egypt and has schools in every governorate in the country.

The Islamists’ education and health services are far cheaper than other privately run organisations and are of a higher standard than state-provided services. “On the whole, the government turns a blind eye [to our activities] because we fill a very obvious gap in public social services,” prominent Brotherhood member Gamal Abdel-Salam explained.

The Bush administration viewed the parliamentary result with alarm and did not object to last month’s

cancellation of the scheduled council elections. Rice did not publicly mention the issue during last month’s visit. The rising electoral fortunes of Egypt’s Islamic fundamentalists has tempered Washington’s rhetorical support for elections in the country, particularly in the aftermath of Hamas’s election win in the Palestinian territories.

Egypt’s local councils do little beyond delivering municipal services, but their composition may determine who is eligible to stand as a presidential candidate in the next election due in 2011. Under laws designed to restrict ballot access to Mubarak and pro-government stooges, candidates must have 250 nominations from elected office holders, including at least 140 from local councils. Mubarak can ensure that no candidate aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood stands in the next presidential election if he indefinitely postpones the local elections or brings forward the presidential vote.

In the aftermath of the parliamentary elections, Gamal Mubarak, the president’s son and rumoured successor-in-waiting, foreshadowed an offensive against the Islamists. “The group [Muslim Brotherhood] has no legal existence, so from the legal point of view we must deal with it on that basis,” he told a local newspaper. “There is another situation which appeared in the parliamentary elections and that is the attempt to circumvent the existing laws to penetrate political life and on top of that the strong exploitation of religion and religious slogans to achieve political ends. This is something we must stop and think about.”

In the past week five members of the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested and charged with possession of anti-government publications. “The government and the regime want to send a message to us... that there is nothing new and that all the promises it made for political reform must be forgotten,” Mohamed Habib, deputy leader of the Brotherhood, declared.



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