

Egyptian opposition decides to take part in elections

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In the past few days, almost all of the official opposition parties in Egypt have announced their intention to participate in the parliamentary elections due in November. In so doing they are ignoring the call by the former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and best known Egyptian opposition politician Mohamed ElBaradei to boycott the elections.

At the start of this year, ElBaradei founded his independent party, the National Alliance for Change, and at the beginning of September declared that participation in the election was tantamount to violating “the national will” to establish democratic structures in Egypt. The Mubarak government would falsify the result and exploit the elections to stabilise its own fragile position. A boycott is therefore the only way to undermine the legitimacy of the governing National Democratic Party (NDP).

With his demand for a boycott, ElBaradei spoke for sections of the Egyptian bourgeoisie who are deeply disturbed over increasing discontent in the population and advocate a movement outside of the official political framework to channel and demobilize such opposition. In a television interview at the end of September, ElBaradei declared that due to discontent, repression and poverty, the regime of President Hosni Mubarak was on the brink of collapse. His own reformist agenda is designed aligned to prevent a “revolution of the hungry”.

It comes as no great surprise that the entire opposition, with the exception of the liberal Al-Ghad-party, plans to put up candidates and ignore ElBaradei’s proposals.

In Egypt a party committee, consisting of three ministers, three judges appointed by the president, as well as the parliamentary president, decides on which parties can take part in the election. This means that the NDP and the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak effectively select and control the opposition parties. There is in fact no

genuine opposition.

Last Saturday the leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Badie, announced at a press conference in Cairo that his party would put up candidates for 30 percent of the seats in parliament. While it is officially banned, the Muslim Brotherhood has been tolerated for some time and is the biggest oppositional group in Egypt.

Up to now the Muslim Brotherhood has supported ElBaradei and his platform, collecting the majority of signatures for his campaign. The latest decision by the Muslim Brotherhood was therefore seen by many commentators as a serious setback for ElBaradei. According to the director of the Al-Ahram center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, Gamal Abd Al-Gawad, the Islamists’ participation will lend political legitimacy to the elections.

At the last parliamentary elections in 2005, Muslim Brotherhood candidates standing as “independents” won 88 seats (20 percent of vote). It is questionable that they could repeat their success, according to Dr. Maye Kassem, a political scientist at the American University in Cairo. Kassem told *Media Line* that the ruling party had always won three quarters of all seats, and the NDP would never allow an opposition party to gain a majority. Kassem added that there was little chance that an Islamist achievement in the elections would destabilise US-Egyptian relations.

In addition to the Egyptian opposition, a number of American media outlets have in recent weeks expressed opposition to ElBaradei’s call for a boycott. On 13 September the *Los Angeles Times* published an editorial titled “The boycott blunder”, describing ElBaradei’s boycott appeal as a major error. ElBaradei would be better advised to “draw Egyptians out of a state of political apathy and resignation, and to help elect opposition members to parliament, where they would have a higher

profile and some immunity to push for more reforms”.

An article in *Foreign Policy* magazine of September 20 (“Is Gamal Mubarak the best hope for Egyptian democracy?”) also argued against ElBaradei's position. It concluded that a transfer of power to the president's son Gamal Mubarak was the best way to further the democratic process in Egypt.

The most cynical contribution, however, came from Tarek Masoud, a professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He wrote, “Yes, the election that will bring Mr. Mubarak to power will be manipulated, but it will not be the last election he will ever have to face. Every six years will bring another one. And although those elections will likely be rigged too, each will nonetheless bear a kernel of uncertainty. Surprises at the ballot box, while rare, can happen”.

If the ailing Hosni Mubarak fails to stand in next year's presidential elections due to his ill health, sections of the US elite have no qualms about supporting a transfer of power to his son who stands, particularly in questions of foreign policy, for maintaining the status quo.

Washington is carefully monitoring the growing discontent of the Egyptian masses with the Mubarak government. Mubarak has held power on the basis of emergency laws since the murder of his predecessor, Anwar Al-Sadat, in 1981. His policy of free-market liberalisation within the framework of the structural adjustment programs laid down by the International Monetary Fund has plunged broad layers of the population into bitter poverty. Forty-four percent of the Egyptian population lives on less than two dollars a day.

Although the Mubarak regime has proceeded with increasing harshness against opposition elements in the run up to the elections, there has been barely any international protest. After a number of arrests, the National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority recently ordered new restrictions for dispatching SMS messages in an obvious attempt to intimidate oppositional activities.

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR), and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) said in a joint press statement that “a string of recent events” represent an orchestrated attempt to muzzle dissent.

The attitude of the US and the Western powers to the Egyptian regime typifies the blatant hypocrisy of their claims to be struggling for democracy in the Middle East.

During the elections in Iran last year, Western

politicians and media condemned Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and depicted the leader of the opposition, Mirhossein Mousavi, as the only hope for democracy. Now the same sources write uncritically about the parliamentary elections in Egypt, while at the same time having little positive to say about ElBaradei.

The reason for this is not difficult to understand. Along with Israel, Egypt is the main ally of the Western powers in the region, while ElBaradei has been a thorn in the side of the US ever since expressing his opposition to the Iraq war.

ElBaradei had also repeatedly expressed his opposition to American-Israeli plans for a military attack on Iran. In an interview with the columnist Roger Cohen in the *New York Times* on April 2009, ElBaradei expressed his fears that a military strike against Iran would have disastrous repercussions for the entire region. In June of this year he told *Spiegel Online*, that he did not believe Iran was preparing to produce nuclear weapons and stated that the danger of a nuclear armed Iran had been overrated and deliberately inflated by some quarters.

In its efforts to maintain its supremacy in one of the strategically most important regions of the world, the US is preparing to step up its support for Egypt. Just a few days ago, the US International Development Agency (USAID) decided to increase its subsidies to Egypt by 20 percent, to \$250 million. The new director of USAID in Cairo, James A. Bever, said, “We are starting a new chapter in development cooperation with Egypt, which is inspired by President Obama's strategy of binding aid with mutual respect and common objectives”.

These “common objectives” were underlined by the deal struck last week between the US and Israel for the delivery of 20 F-35 combat aircraft.

The Egyptian daily paper *Al Masry Al Youm* noted that the deal came at a time of growing tensions between US-Israel and Iran. Only recently the US signed another huge weapons deal worth over 60 billion euros with Saudi Arabia, another important American ally in the region. Egypt signed its own contract for the supply of 20 F-16 combat aircraft in December 2009.



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