

State repression rampant in run up to Egyptian parliamentary elections

By Johannes Stern
27 November 2010

The Egyptian parliamentary elections on Sunday are taking place in an atmosphere of open state repression. In the last days and weeks the country's security forces have undertaken a wave of suppressive measures and violence against opposition parties and the population.

This is clear from a report titled "Elections in Egypt State of Permanent Emergency Incompatible with Free and Fair Vote" issued by Human Rights Watch (HRW), published on Wednesday. According to the report, in the weeks before the elections the Egyptian regime made arbitrary mass arrests, systematically harassed the election campaigns of the opposition and intimidated their candidates and activists. The Egyptian government proceeded with especial brutality against the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood is considered to be the country's largest opposition group and supports a wing of the Egyptian bourgeoisie. Moneim Abdel Maqsd, the main solicitor for the Brotherhood, told HRW that the security forces had so far arrested 1,306 members, including five candidates of the Brotherhood.

Last weekend the regime intensified its suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In the port of Alexandria the police used massive force against its supporters, carrying out mass arrests and employing tear gas and rubber bullets.

On Monday the chairman of the parliamentary block of the Muslim Brotherhood, Saad Al-Katatni, was attacked by thugs, a few hours after denouncing the actions of the government at a press conference. Katatni's office accused supporters of Shadi Aboul Ela, the candidate of the governing National Democratic Party of an assassination attempt.

Human rights groups fear that violence will escalate on election day and raised a number of severe reproaches against the regime of Hosni Mubarak, which is widely supported by western powers. Mubarak has governed the

country with a hard hand since 1981 basing his rule on Emergency Laws.

Hafez Abu Seada, the chairman of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR), said at a press conference a few days ago: "Up until now, there have been four deaths in the election campaign. In (the last poll in) 2005, there were 14 deaths and we expect the number of victims to be much higher this year."

At the last elections in Egypt voters for the opposition were forcibly prevented from casting their ballots and the election results were then systematically falsified. The HRW report assumes that the degree of manipulation will only increase in Sunday's election. Joe Stork, the representative of HRW in the Middle East and North Africa, said that the most important civilian and social organizations had failed to receive any permission so far to act as election observers. The Egyptian government has regularly rejected international election observers arguing that Egyptian organizations would take over this task.

With this in mind the head of the Liberties Committee of the Egyptian Press Syndicate, Mohamed Abdel Quddous, spoke in the independent daily paper *Al Masry Al Youm* of "the dirtiest elections in the history of the Egyptian nation".

With its brutal offensive during the parliamentary elections the Mubarak regime is seeking to make its own preparations for the presidential elections due next year. The composition of the parliament is an important factor for the presidential elections. After the change to electoral law in 2005 an independent candidate needs 250 signatures from the upper and lower houses of parliament in order to participate in the presidential elections.

In the elections of 2005 the independent candidates of the banned, but tolerated Muslim Brotherhood won 20 percent of the seats and entered parliament as the largest opposition group. In the past week a leading member of the ruling NDP, Moufeed Shehab, declared the electoral

success of the Islamists in 2005 to be "a mistake" which would not be repeated.

The ruling NDP is rent by fierce factional struggles over who should succeed the ailing 81 year old president Hosni Mubarak, but united in the conviction it is necessary to prevent the Brotherhood from winning a large share of the seats and so creating the basis for standing its own alternative presidential candidate.

Political observers assume that the Muslim Brotherhood will lose a large share of its 88 seats in parliament to other parties. "At this juncture, the regime needs a political force that could help it beat the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Wafd will benefit from this opportunity. I expect it to get at least 20 seats," the Egyptian expert for Islamist groups, Hossam Tammam, told *Al Masry Al Youm*. It is assumed that the liberal Al-Wafd party will replace the Muslim Brotherhood as the largest opposition force in the new parliament.

Al-Wafd was the traditional party of the Egyptian bourgeoisie before the revolution of 1952. It currently has just two seats in parliament. There has been speculation in the independent Egyptian media in recent days that the government has struck a deal with Al-Wafd. Its chairman Sayyed Al-Badawi was involved in the sacking of Ibrahim Eissa as editor-in-chief of the government-critical daily paper *Al Dostour*, and in return it is anticipated that Al-Wafd will be permitted to receive a larger number of seats.

The majority of the Egyptian population reject this election farce with contempt. Estimates of voter turnout hover at around just 20 percent. Most Egyptians judge the elections in a similar fashion to young Hisham who works in a hospital in Cairo: "It does not make any sense to vote because you cannot change anything as a voter. All candidates, those of the government and those of the opposition, represent their own interests and the elite, and not those of the impoverished Egyptian population."

The anger of ordinary Egyptians over the political and economic system has increased in recent months. The prices for meat and vegetables have doubled or in some cases trebled within just a few months. The official rate of inflation for food this year is estimated to be 22 percent.

On Tuesday *Al Masry Al Youm* published an article headed: "The Egyptian government fears workers, not voters". Khaled Ali, the chairman of the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, explains in the article that only the economic elite of the country had profited from the high growth rates of past years, while the situation for workers had worsened. He warned:

"Workers will continue to protest and the protests will be more violent than those in 2008."

In 2008 violent street battles between workers and security forces took place in the industrial city of Mahalla El Kubra following a year of strikes and mass protests against low wages and privatization. The Egyptian bourgeoisie knows it is sitting on a powder keg. The mobilization of the security forces in the run up to the parliamentary elections is a preparation for social upheavals which could erupt at any time.

The official opposition parties and groupings, which have been the main victims of the state repression, also fear a rebellion of the Egyptian masses.

Despite the massive repression of his own organization the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Badie, said in an interview with the news station Al-Jazeera on Tuesday, that the parliamentary elections on Sunday would be "decisive for Egypt". Free and fair elections are essential "to the legitimacy of parliament which, in turn will lend legitimacy to the next president." The ruling NDP and Hosni Mubarak have repeatedly demonstrated their bankruptcy. "It's time for the NDP to step down peacefully via the legal and constitutional process."

The US government, which has so far kept silent about the repression in Egypt, is also observing the tense situation with increasing concern. Philipp Crowley, the spokesman of the US State Department, told press representatives: "We think this is a vitally important period for Egypt's future, and we continue to encourage them to do everything possible to ensure a free, fair and impartial election."

After a meeting with US president Barack Obama and national security advisers Michele Dunne, a former State Department expert on the Middle East, declared: "There is a growing concern that we have this ally and we want them to be our ally, but think that the way to promote greater stability is not to prevent all change."

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