The Centre for International Governance Innovation

WORKING PAPER

State Fragility

Egypt's Constitutional Test: Averting the March toward Islamic Fundamentalism

HANY BESADA

Working Paper No. 28

August 2007

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Author Biography

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While studying in the US, he worked for a number of governmental and non-governmental research institutes and offices. These included Amnesty International, the Office of Senator Dianne Feinstein, United Nations Associations and the Joan Kroc Institute of Peace and Justice.

Abstract

After gaining overwhelming support in a March 2007 national referendum, long-time Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak introduced new constitutional amendments that effectively give more power to the president and loosen controls on security forces. Mubarak's amendments constitute the latest move in a set of orchestrated plans not only to entrench the stronghold of his own National Democratic Party and pave the way for his son as his successor but also to curb the power and ambition of his greatest opposition – the Muslim Brotherhood. As he steps into his fifth consecutive six-year term in office, Mubarak and his regime are being met with harsh criticism as opposition groups, human rights advocates, and Western governments urge for meaningful democratic reform in the country. But promoting democracy is a complex issue in Egypt, and indeed in much of the Arab world. Mubarak and other leaders face the Islamist Dilemma, where any move toward a more democracy-friendly political system threatens to empower Islamic militants and open the floodgates for non-secular political parties.

1. Introduction

When Egyptians went to the polls for their country's first contested presidential elections on 7 September 2005, many Western government officials were hoping that this would signify Egypt's readiness to embrace democratic pluralism. As expected, Hosni Mubarak, the incumbent president, won a fifth consecutive six-year term in office, securing 88.6 per cent of the votes cast. Mubarak's main challengers, Ayman Nour of the Tomorrow Party, and Numan Gumaa of the once influential New Wafd Party, took 7.6 per cent and 2.9 per cent of the votes respectively. Substantial criticism arose prior to and during the election process, focusing primarily on the alleged election law violations during voting, as well as on the process of selecting eligible candidates. The elections were further undermined by an extremely low voter turnout of less than 15 per cent nation-wide (Sharp, 2006).

Despite these shortcomings in the electoral process, Mubarak was widely applauded for agreeing to amend the country's constitution to allow the first multi-party presidential elections in the nation's history to take place. Previously, Egyptians had only been able to approve or reject candidates appointed by Parliament, which is heavily dominated by the current regime. Since 1981, Mubarak has been re-elected four times by this kind of referendum. Therefore, it came as no surprise that, for the sake of encouraging political reform, the international community chose to not dwell on alleged reports of irregularities and other electoral flaws recorded during the 2005 polls. However, the regime's decision to push for a referendum on amendments to the country's constitution in March 2007 is widely regarded as a major setback regarding promises made by President Mubarak, two years ago, of a gradual dismantling of Egypt's strict state control over its political life.

2. 2007 Constitutional Amendments

Although government contends that voter turnout for the referendum came to 27.1 per cent, which meant that some 9.6 million of Egypt's 35.4 million eligible voters turned out to approve these significant changes to the 1971 constitution, human rights group indicated that a turnout rate of less than 10 per cent was more correct (BBC, 2007). The highly controversial referendum was criticized by opposition parties as an orchestrated attempt to stifle free speech, stratifying the ruling NDP's hold on power while extending the arbitrary power of the security forces. One of the amendments called for the establishment of an electoral committee to monitor elections. Opposition groups condemned this amendment as an attempt to stifle any independence while limiting the role of the judiciary in observing and overseeing the balloting process in future elections. They argued that this would ultimately pave the way for more electoral irregularities, particularly vote-rigging, which had occurred previously during legislative elections.

Other contentious amendments that prompted the sounding of warning bells by human rights groups included measures to give more power to the president, such as dissolving Parliament and terminating the judicial monitoring of elections; the drafting of a new anti-terrorism law to replace the emergency legislation that has been in place since October 1981, following the assassination of President Anwar Sadat by Islamic extremists; the right of security forces to investigate terror suspects and search their homes without a warrant – a measure that many human rights groups argue would increasingly lead to the systematic repression of opposition groups and dissidents; the requirement that any candidate for president must come from a recognized political party; and the empowerment of the president to refer "any terrorist crime to any of the judicial authorities stated in the Constitution

or the law." According to opponents, this actually means that the president may refer suspects to military courts, which are sharply criticized by human rights groups, since their rulings cannot be appealed. However, arguably the most controversial of all amendments passed is the banning of political parties from using religion as a basis for political activities, which effectively prevents any compromise sought to allow the highly popular, yet illegal, Muslim Brotherhood (MB) to form a political party in future.

This amendment is widely regarded as essentially cementing government's long-standing aim to prohibit the pursuit of any political activity, or the establishment of any political party, that has religion as a frame of reference. Consequently, this has helped to restrict the Brotherhood's scope of political participation by marginalizing its independent candidates in Parliament. The amendment permits a change in the electoral system from a candidate-centred system to one that is largely based on a party-list system; in so doing, it effectively allocates a limited, unspecified margin for independent seats. Being a banned organization, whose only avenue to seek political representation in government is through fielding independent candidates, this is expected to minimize the MB's electoral chances in future elections. In the past, the Brotherhood largely depended on a candidate-centred system for fielding independent candidates in parliamentary elections.

While attempting to curb the advancement of Brotherhood members into mainstream politics, the constitutional amendments also carefully orchestrate the return of legal opposition parties from the fringes of the political debate. This is widely regarded as a move designed to provide disenfranchised voters with realistic and credible alternatives to opposition parties other than the Brotherhood. It paves the way for a greater number of legal opposition parties to contest future presidential elections. This follows a poor performance in the 2005 general elections, where the leftist

Tagammu, the liberal Wafd and Ghad, and Arab Nasserite, the country's most significant legal opposition parties, were not able to individually secure 5 per cent of the seats in the People's Assembly, the country's lower House of Parliament.

Political analysts contend that these amendments to the constitution, as well as the widespread gross human rights violations in the form of torture and illegal detention of suspected Islamic militants, like those documented in Amnesty International's report of April 2007, had a lot to do with attempts by the NDP to undo the damage inflicted by the MB during the parliamentary elections of 2005. To the dismay of the NDP, it saw its stronghold of power shaken by an unprecedented successful run of independent candidates who were fielded by the country's de facto largest opposition group. MB independent candidates managed to secure one fifth of the seats in the People's Assembly, which is the country's legislative body.

3. The Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood

Current Egyptian law prohibits the formation of political parties based on religion. In 1928, the ideas of the MB founder, Hasan al-Banna, prepared the foundation for the political movement responsible for today's Sunni Islamist criticism. As the largest, oldest, and most influential Islamist organization, MB has always made Egypt the centre of its operations, although it maintains branches throughout the Muslim world, including the Palestinian territories. (During the January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, Hamas defeated the rival secular Fatah party to become the first branch of the MB to control an official government.) It is also represented in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Baharain, Jordan, Sudan, and Syria. (Although officially banned, the MB has worked with Syria's opposition parties in the past). It is furthermore active in Iran and Iraq (the MB is represented

by the Iraqi Islamic Party), as well as in the United States. (Muslim activists affiliated with the MB established the North American Islamic Trust, the International Institute of Islamic Thought, and the Muslim Students' Association.) Its presence is also felt in several European states – in particular among Muslim immigrant communities.

During the 1930s, the movement was, for the most part, an underground organization. In addition to stockpiling weapons, it operated camps that offered instruction in terrorist and military activities. Due, in part, to the Egyptian monarchy's lack of popularity and the MB's call for a return to traditionalist Islamic values, the group's membership increased from a mere six to more than half a million by 1940. During this turbulent period, the MB became more assertive in challenging the then ruling government, headed by Prime Minister Mahmoud Fahmi Nuqrashi, who dissolved the organization in 1948. As a result, he was murdered by a member of the Brotherhood. In retaliation, Hasan al-Banna was killed in Cairo in 1949 and an official crackdown was ordered against the movement. Following Gamal Abdel Nasser's seizure of power in 1954, the MB split into two factions. The more radical faction, led by the ideologue and controversial writer Sayyid Qutb advocated armed revolution against so-called corrupt, Western-friendly Arab states and, more broadly, against the so-called "unbelievers" – in particular Jews and Christians.

Qutb argued that Egyptian society under Nasser was in contradiction to Islam and that it had to be opposed by whatever means necessary. It comes as no surprise that his writing was in sharp contrast to the mainstream Sunni Islamic teachings of tolerance and peace. He has often been cited as the origin of today's political Islamic thought and ideas, many of which were championed by extremist groups, such as al Qaeda among others. Although he was executed in 1966 on charges of plotting to overthrow the Egyptian

government, he inspired a global following of radical believers and supporters who heed the call for violence in the name of Islam.

In brief, there appears to be three overarching principles behind the movement's Islamic agenda for Egypt. It purports that Sunni Islam provides a blueprint for politics; that the solution to social ills is a return to the pure faith; and that Islam faces enemies, be they outsiders or a Muslim government seeking to thwart the renaissance of the true Islam (*Economist*, 2005). The MB, like other Islamist organizations operating in the country, nurtures the long-term goal of implementing Sharia'a law as the basis of the country's national law. They espouse the idea of an Islamist state in Egypt as part of a larger Islamist caliphate that would unite other Muslim countries into an "Ummah" (Community of Nations).[1] For the Muslim Brotherhood, the Muslim Ummah is a transnational geographic entity with the Middle East as its centre. According to MB ideology, as articulated by Hasan al-Banna, the integrity of the Ummah has often been compromised, while the inability of Muslim leaders to unite in establishing a Muslim caliphate, which would bring together Muslim nations under an Ummah umbrella, has been blamed on the transgression of the West into Middle Eastern political, economic, and cultural affairs over the past five centuries.

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[1] The concept of Ummah originated in the 7th century with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. In the Quran, it is mentioned approximately 60 times. It has been referred to as anything from a religious group, a small group of believers within a community of believers, to an order of being for Muslims. Over the centuries, this vagueness has led to many groups into manipulating its underlying concept to serve their own political and economical interests, whatever these might have been. Today, the Ummah is largely perceived to entail a consciousness of belonging to a community, whose membership is open to all believers. In this larger concept, it embodies the universalism of Islam. It has also become a means of nurturing, not only a religious, but also a cultural identity, which is independent of today's Muslim states.

The Brotherhood's steadfast commitment to contribute to the establishment of the Ummah, by bringing Egypt even closer to adopting Sharia'a law, has prompted secular critics and government officials to claim that the MB's sole political ambition in recent times has been based on their loyalty to the concept of the Ummah rather than to their state. They contend that that Islamists, including the MB, advocate a new sense of pan-Islamism to replace Egyptian patriotism and nationalism. For instance, in a recent interview with the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood in a government-owned paper, he was quoted as saying: "Tuz fi (to hell with) Egypt," "Our nationality is Islam," and "The Rule of the Ottoman Empire over Egypt was not an occupation, because it was a Muslim Caliphate." He goes on to say, "We don't mind to have a Malaysian president for Egypt (as long as he is Muslim)" (Guindy, 2006).

Whatever the case may be, the MB, unlike more radical and militant Islamic movements, such as the Gama'at Islamiya, Al Jihad and, more recently, the Tawhid wa al Jihad, has, in recent years, committed itself to working with the current political system to achieve this objective, while renouncing violence – at least in its official statements. However, government sources remain skeptical and have argued that the MB's hesitancy to engage itself in violent confrontation with the state masks the true nature of the ideological and intellectual debate currently taking place among leaders of the movement, which lends itself to an eventual and often inevitable violent insurrection, similar to that which Egypt experienced during the 1990s.

Some even go so far as to contend that the Brotherhood's claims that they are a moderate Islamic movement, spearheading the movement for the so-called return to true Islamic principles and way of life as entrenched in the Shari'a, are actually misleading and counterintuitive, to say the least. Hala Mustafa, a liberal

academic at the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, argues that the movement's basic ideas haven't changed much since the turn of the twentieth century, when Hassan al-Banna was conceptualizing the organizational framework of the MB. Secular intellectuals indicate that the underlying agenda of the MB movement is the eventual establishment of a genuine Islamic state in Egypt. The distinguished Egyptian intellectual and staunch secularist Farag Foda, who was assassinated for his academic criticism of Islamists in 1992, had grouped the MB with other Islamists. He indicated that the so-called moderate MB is nothing more than the political wing of the more violent Islamist movement's armed movement (Al Din, 2004).

A large number of secular intellectuals have often toyed with the idea that the regime's continual refusal to entertain the concept of legitimizing the movement as a genuine opposition group while refusing to adhere to calls for a genuine Islamic state, run in full accordance with Sharia'a law, would inevitably lead to some factions, particularly from the younger generation of leaders within the MB, resorting to violence. Government security analysts and Western diplomats point out that there are signs that some factions within the rigid hierarchy of the MB have called for the abandon-ment of the group's official non-violence platform (Al Din, 2003). In an op-ed for *Dar-Al-Hayat*, newspaper columnist Jameel Theyabi wrote that the December 2006 Muslim Brotherhood military parade of MB youth cadres, demonstrating with sticks, chains, and martial arts displays at Cairo's Al-Al-Azhar University (the centre of Sunni Islamic learning) while displaying the phrase, "We Will be Steadfast," had betrayed the group's intent to plan for the creation of militia structures, and their return to the era of secret cells (Theyabi, 2006).He pointed out that this development reflected the group's intention of acting and reacting to political developments on the ground, regardless of what these may be, and that it further

stratified the group's ability to recruit new elements and to institute the military training and mobilization of its members on the ground. This is a dangerous development, as it threatens to awaken other more militant Islamist sleeper cells, both in Egypt and abroad, into launching a country-wide, violent campaign to topple Mubarak's regime and install a full-fledged Islamic state.

Some political analysts in Egypt, who have closely followed the group's activities over the years, point out that last December's show of force is but one indication of a gradual remilitarization of the MB taking place, born out of a long tradition and history of terror and assassinations. The events of the 1948 assassination of Egypt's then prime minister, Mahmud Fahmi Nokrashi, by MB militants, as well as the attempted assassination of former president Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1954, continue to linger in the minds of NDP officials. These officials frequently emphasize, for the benefit of their Western counterparts, their hesitancy to open the political landscape to the MB, for fear of a return to violence.

Some have even gone so far as to indicate to American officials that September 11 was born in Egyptian jails where MB members were awaiting sentencing on terrorism-related charges. The writings of Qutb are legendary among al Qaeda members, one of whom is Ayman Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Osama Bin Laden's deputy and a lifelong Egyptian radical. Many counterterrorism experts and Islamic specialists believe him to be the intellectual and ideological driving force behind al Qaeda. As a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood (during his early life as an Islamist), Al-Zawahiri hails from a long line of prominent MB members. These counterterrorism experts often held the Muslim Brotherhood responsible for producing a number of important Islamic fundamentalists, ranging from accomplices in the murder of former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat

in 1981, to prominent al Qaeda leaders, such as Mohammed Atef (its former military head) and Khalid Sheik Mohammed, the architect of September 11, who participated in a Kuwaiti Islamic camp organized by the movement. Repeated calls by al Qaeda for orchetrated attacks against Egyptian soft targets, such as hotels, restaurants, and tourist camps in the Red Sea area, or in Upper Egypt, have long since preoccupied the minds of the country's intelligence community.

Whether this an accurate account of a genuine fear, from a security standpoint, of approving the MB's candidacy as an opposition political party, or a campaign by the NDP to stifle the opposition as a means of maintaining their hold on power, is highly debatable. For their part, the MB argue that the Brotherhood historically resorted to violence when it was an infant organization with conflicting ideological points of departure on how to promote its vision for Egypt. They point out that their militant ideology has long since been abandoned as part of their goal of bringing social change to the country, and that they have since espoused change via peaceful, democratic means. This has not, in their view, helped to bring an end to the state of suppression and intimidation, nor to the strategy of curtailing their activities and limiting their political activism as a way to ensure government's indefinite hold on power.

In recent years, a number of MB leaders have come to the fore to defend the movement, arguing that, far from constituting a danger to the country's security, it has rather contributed to the country's heritage. One MB leader was quoted as saying:

> To attribute danger to state security to us because we follow a religious path is puzzling, because our path is the Islamic path, emphasized in Article Two of the Egyptian Constitution. Egypt is out spirit and its security is more precious than our own. Our

> goals are Egypt's sovereignty and progress, and we would never endanger this. We reiterate that our hearts and our minds are open to dialogue with members of the regime and also with opposition factions, for the good of Egypt. (*IkhwanOnline*, 2007)

Although handicapped to some degree as an official opposition party by a lack of political representation in Parliament, the MB nevertheless continues to make headway in stratifying their influence on the social, cultural, and economic landscape of the country. Since 1981, with Mubarak's ascendance to power, the MB has used a threefold strategy to gain influence in the existing political framework. First of all, the MB attempted to obtain properly elected representation in the country's Parliament, largely through coalitions with other political parties (some even secular), as well as field their candidates as independents. For much of his 26-year rule as Egypt's modern Pharaoh, Mubarak has steered his NDP in a middle course approach between the policies of his predecessors when it came to dealing with the MB. Ever since taking over the helm of the country's top political office, he has balanced repressive and accommodating strategies, often quite ingenuously. This he has done by combining surprising gestures of appeasement, such as offering government amnesty to MB leaders (such as the Supreme Guide Omar Tilimsani, who had been imprisoned during the crackdown on the movement during the final years of Sadat's rule) with sweeping arrests of MB leaders and members, like those that transpired following the 1981 assassination and the 2005 general elections.

These strategies have helped to serve the needs of both the NDP and the MB in the short to medium term. In return for limited tolerance of the MB, Mubarak expected the Brotherhood to refrain from the violent tendencies of other Islamists while, to some degree, restraining its political ambitions. By legitimizing

the movement as the nation's primary representative of Sunni Islamism, Mubarak, up to a point, effectively placed the MB outside mainstream politics, although this has changed somewhat following its recent success in the 2005 legislative elections and a more proactive approach by MB leaders to challenge Mubarak for state legalization. On the other hand, the MB's seemingly limited confrontational stance during much of the 1980s and 1990s has helped them to re-establish an important foothold not only in the country's social structures but also in the political landscape, particularly at administrative levels.

During much of the 1980s, Mubarak's ambivalent relationship with the MB provided them with the necessary ammunition to proceed with their political ambitions for a stake in government. Alliances with the opposition groups during this period, even secular ones like the liberal and nationalist New Wafd Party and Socialist Labor Party, helped to serve and promote the MB's goals and agendas aimed at Egypt's gradual Islamization, necessary for implementing Sharia'a in the future. In 1984, for instance, the MB forged an alliance with its historic arch-enemy, the New Wafd Party, bringing seven members of the Brotherhood into the People's Assembly. Three years later, the MB formed the backbone of the so-called Islamic Alliance, with 35 MB members winning seats out of a total of 60 seats gained by the Islamic Alliance. In 2000, the Brotherhood (running as independents) secured 17 seats in Parliament following a highly charged legislative election. By 2005, the NDP saw its share of seats decrease to 314 during the November and December general assembly elections. The traditional opposition did less well and only managed to secure a scant nine seats, while the MB contested the elections by proxy, fielding candidates as independents and winning 87 seats under the slogan, "Islam is the Solution."

The second advance of the Brotherhood was its penetration – largely through the electoral process – of professional and student associations, which had traditionally been the most influential private organizations in Egypt. As early as the latter half of 1987, the MB won control of the Engineers' Syndicate, a body boasting more than 200,000 members, with estimated assets worth a relatively very sizable five million dollars. By the early 1990s, it had managed to secure its domination over nearly all professional associations, which had previously been strongholds of secular groups and national government bodies (Abdel-Kotob, 1995). The Brotherhood exploited the vulnerable unemployment situation of the country, particularly among the 800,000 graduates from state-run institutions and universities (Besada, 2006). Rolling out money for starting up small businesses and vocational schools for training, it attracted large crowds of disenfranchised youths, as well as the unemployed.

The third and final strategy employed by the MB was the establishment of a network of social services in villages and neighborhoods. Many independent analysts and social work organizations across the country point out that the MB's expansive social network in villages assured it of an enormous following and loyalty among the poorer segments of the population in the general elections. By and large, these charitable services, provided by the Brotherhood, serve to promote their Islamic message and social outreach program. Their credibility and legitimacy are primarily based on their ability to intervene in areas where government services have been lacking, without gaining any formal power in the neighborhoods. For example, the movement's efficient and timely response to the 1992 Cairo earthquake earned plaudits from social services groups and NGOs around the country. The MB's medical and engineering branches built medical tents and shelters, and they provided monetary assistance to families

affected by the earthquake (Pelletiere, 1994). The MB offered health and other social benefits that even the government was unable to offer in parts of the country – particularly in local small towns along the Nile in Upper Egypt.

However, nowhere have the movement's social programs been more evident today, than in the instrumental role they played in the establishment of Islamic banks geared to serve the working and middle classes. These financial institutions attracted a large pool of customers thanks to their attractive interest rate returns – generally more than double what most commercial banks offered – made possible by operating according to profit-sharing arrangements rather than simply offering certificates of deposits. These Islamic institutions greatly facilitated the transfer of unofficial remittances from the Gulf, offering a vital service to millions of Egyptians who are dependent for their survival on these wages from their families. Remittances to Egypt is a key source of development funding and foreign currency for the government, sometimes outpacing official development assistance, and a lifeline for millions of families in the country. Currently, it receives $2.4 billion annually in remittances from the millions of Egyptians working mainly in the oil-rich Gulf States and the West (Besada, 2006). Although there have been a number of recorded instances of mismanagement and fraud in the past, Islamic banks nevertheless help support the informal sector of the economy, which accounts for approximately 35 per cent of the country's official GDP (Moussa, 2006).

These initiatives filled important gaps in government services, creating an unprecedented degree of support for the MB among the local population. Egyptian intellectuals and secular academics, however, have been reluctant to endorse the MB's social activities as charitable contributions to the community, which could be regarded as an exclusive manifestation of Sunni Islamism,

as the Brotherhood espouses. Rather, they feel that it has only helped to serve the MB's hidden and entrenched organizational and theological traditions shrouded in recent rhetorical claims of an Islamic transformation through peaceful means. As the Brotherhood has succeeded in controlling key professional syndicates, it has gained more political savvy.

The MB's official adoption of pluralistic politics, based on the non-violent advancement of Islamic principles, remains questionable – both in practice and in theory. Even if the MB was to be believed that it has abandoned the call for violent confrontation with the state in order to initiate political change, there is no indication that it is ready to abandon its juxtaposition of religion and politics, as it has claimed to have done with regard to violence and politics (unfortunately the two are too often intertwined in the case of Egypt and other Middle Eastern states). It may have been politically expedient for the MB to have had a certain degree of separation between doctrinal and political practices that were forced onto the Brotherhood by the state, but it is safe to say this has actually worked in favor of the MB in terms of how it has been perceived by sympathetic voters during the general elections and by human rights organizations on the world stage.

Nevertheless, for the greater part of the late 1980s and 1990s, President Mubarak was committed to working with the MB, as long as its members didn't pose an immediate serious security or political threat to his administration. Though his policy had some degree of success, the NDP never applied the policy meticulously, and most other Islamists, operating on the fringes of the political system, faced varying degrees of suppression and intimidation. Independent analysts claim that the MB's grassroots popularity gained since the 1980s and its recent successes in the 2005 legislative polls have served to support claims by some quarters of the ruling party that its policy of limited

tolerance and appeasement toward the Brotherhood has effectively backfired and should gradually be put on hold.

The unexpected successes recorded by the Brotherhood in the last general elections have strengthened government's resolve to curb the influence that the MB currently enjoys. Indeed, there is general consensus among Egyptian political analysts that officially recognizing the MB as a political party would enable the Brotherhood to seriously challenge the NDP's authority and power in future parliamentary elections. Thousands of MB leaders have been arrested in recent years, including a member of Parliament and treasurer of the Egyptian Bar Association, members of regional engineers' syndicates, the secretary-general of the Engineers' Syndicate, the secretary-general of the Pharmacists' Syndicate, the secretaries-general of two regional medical syndicates in Cairo and Giza, and council members of other professional syndicates. These arrests were widely regarded as a calculated policy move by government to prejudice the MB at both syndicate and political level to prevent it from planning and directing electoral battles in future elections.

Past experience has shown, however, that mass arrests and electoral suppression of Muslim Brotherhood leaders have failed to curb the Brotherhood's progress. The state has recently launched a new campaign designed to prejudice the MB's activities by seizing its assets, arresting its beneficiaries and key financiers, and raiding its business undertakings. In December 2006, Khairat al-Shatir, one of two deputies to Brotherhood leader and key financier, Muhammad Akef, was arrested at his home in north-eastern Cairo, and his assets were frozen. Although it is too early to indicate what impact these new measures will have on the Brotherhood's ability to maintain its grassroots community development activities, Hosni Mubarak's government has come to realize that the state needs to look deeper in order to adequately

address the social and economic roots that gave rise to the popularity of the MB in the first place.

4. Economic Conditions and the Growth of Islamic Fundamentalism

There is consensus among the old guard of the NDP that the country is experiencing a dangerous form of religious revival, which is often characterized by a growing radicalization of Egyptian society. In Egypt, religion is making a very strong comeback, as people have long felt that their government's socialist and pan-Arab ideologies over the past four decades have failed to bring about improved living conditions, economic development, and a political openness in which local and national government is responsive to the people's social needs.

Since 1950, the country has experimented with a number of economic policies. The most important of these were a move toward central and sectoral planning and state socialism from 1957 to 1960; an ambitious nationalization program from 1961 to 1964; the tightening of state control over the economy from 1965 to 1971; and finally, the announcement of an "open-door policy" by former president Anwar Sadat in 1974. This policy sought to strengthen the private sector by defining its role in the context of true economic liberalization. It established a framework within which radical transformation of the country's social structure, its politics, and its economy could take place, and was geared to move Egypt toward greater integration in the global economy, attracting foreign direct investment as a means of creating employment for the expanding workforce.

First envisaged as an attempt to attract more foreign investment to promote economic growth and infrastructure development, Sadat's policy slowly began to steer the country toward

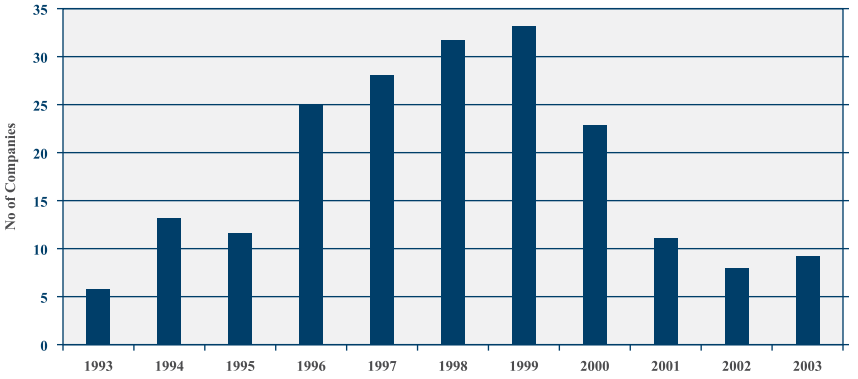
a private enterprise-dominated economy, which, in effect, reversed the state-led development of the 1950s and 1960s under former President Gamal Abdel Nasser. With the discovery of new petroleum deposits throughout the Middle East (including Egypt), and the expansion of the tourist industry, cotton became less important as a major source of foreign earnings. Although this policy contributed to a fundamental structural change in Egypt's economy, it failed to bring the country any closer to the state of development experienced by a number of other emerging economies of the time, such as Malaysia. On the contrary, the country became increasingly dependent upon the unstable commodity exports of petroleum and cotton, as well as on Suez Canal toll fees, tourism, and remittances from expatriates working mainly in other Arab states. It was plagued by external factors, which limited its ability to achieve sustainable growth while reducing acute poverty. Growth was also hampered by major structural imbalances in the economy, mainly between government spending and revenue; required investments and savings; supply of, and demand for labor; and exports and imports.

These imbalances were aggravated by several factors. These included the inconsistency and instability of expatriate remittances in the early 1980s; a drop in cotton revenue in the late 1970s; a decrease in the price of crude oil in the mid-1980s; and budget deficits – although these were gradually narrowed during the late 1980s and 1990s. Government's willingness to reform the economic system was not lacking, but its intentions were thwarted in 1977 due to pressure brought about by a popular revolt over an increase in the prices of staple foods. This resulted in the reforms being continued somewhat timidly under a 1987 standby agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These reforms were to gain new momentum only after a second, farther-reaching 1991 accord had been reached with the IMF

and the World Bank for an Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program (Handoussa and Potter, 1991).

President Mubarak embarked afterward on a program of bold economic reform and stabilization, starting in 1991, supported by bilateral trade relief from the Paris Club and a structural adjustment loan from the World Bank. The program entailed the abolition of some price controls and a reduction in food subsidies; standardization of the exchange rate; interest-rate liberalization; reform of the public and financial sector; and foreign trade liberalization. In addition, major strides were made in rebuilding and consolidating the country's infrastructure, reducing the time and costs involved in opening new businesses, revamping conditions for the running and closing of business undertakings, streamlining procedures, dismantling bureaucratic barriers, privatizing hundreds of inefficient state-owned enterprises, lifting import restrictions, and introducing a free-floating exchange rate. Government also introduced a number of incentives to attract more direct foreign investment.

Figure 1. Egypt's Privatization Scheme

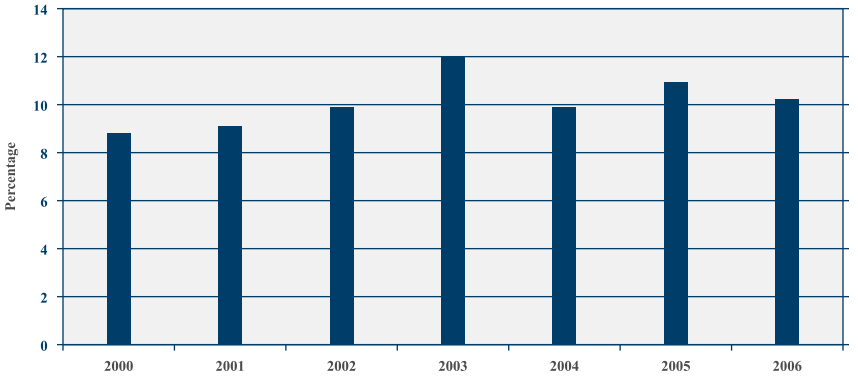


Source: Besada (2006)

These reforms have supported economic growth of about 4.4 per cent over the past eight years, up from 2.1 per cent during the 1980s (Gillespie, Mason, and Martorell, 1996). Egypt recorded an economic growth of 5.5 per cent for 2004-2005 (Egypt, 2005), due to the recovery of the tourism industry, rising oil prices, and an increase in natural gas production. A vibrant private sector, once discouraged under former president Gamal Abdel Nasser's experiment with socialism, now accounts for more than 80 per cent of the GDP. Furthermore, the standard of public service has improved significantly.

Even though the public sector now controls 20 per cent of economic activity, a number of challenges are still facing the third decade of liberalization. The country struggled to raise investment and savings ratios, and largely failed in narrowing the gap in the trade balance in order to accelerate economic growth and reduce unemployment and poverty. Although economic growth has improved over the past five years, it still remains below the 7 per cent annual rate required to bring about a substan-

Figure 2. Official Unemployment Rates



Source: Global Policy Network, Global Labour Market Database: Egypt.

tial reduction in poverty levels (as defined by the percentage of people living on less than one dollar per day), which is currently standing at 19.6 per cent (World Bank, 2007). (The situation is much worse in Upper Egypt, where 40 per cent of the country's population lives, but which is home to 70 per cent of the country's poor.) Egypt's high unofficial unemployment rate of 20 per cent (unemployment rates have reached 84 per cent among Egyptians in the age bracket 15 to 29 years (El-Mahdi, 2003) and its annual population growth of more than 2.0 per cent (Globalis) contribute to the problem. This has a placed a heavy burden on government to create employment opportunities for the 600,000 Egyptians who graduate from Egyptian universities and technical colleges annually.

It has often been argued that the stubbornly high rates of unemployment and poverty in the urban slums of the northern cities, as well as in the rural and poverty-stricken areas in the south, serve as a breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalism among disillusioned Egyptians, who have not benefited from government's economic liberalization policy, and who have seen little in the line of prosperity and change in their everyday lives. There is a new phenomenon of radicalization slowly making its way into schools and universities across Egypt – let alone in Koranic schools, which have mushroomed from five, with about 3,000 students, at the turn of the twentieth century to more than 7,000, with no less than 1.5 million students today (Guindy, 2006). For example, in an article in the Egyptian Ministry weekly, *Al-Kahira*, Coptic Christian columnist Sameh Fawzi argued that Egyptian schoolbooks often taught pupils to regard the Islamic faith as their homeland, placing no value on Egypt itself, apart from its religious significance as part of the region under Islamic rule (Fawzi, 2007). He points out, for example, that the fifth-grade textbook, *Islamic Religious Education*, carries a poem, entitled "Biladi" ("My Homeland"), in which one line reads: "Islam is the

most perfect religion." This would seem to suggest that Egypt lacks any religious or cultural diversity.

Even before the early 1990s, hundreds of novels, academic works, and films came under the scrutiny of Al-Azhar, the world centre of Sunni Islamic learning, which has been given increasing authority over radio, publishing houses, schools, and television by the current administration, with the expectation that they would act as buffer against the rising influence of militant Islam. Feminists, liberal politicians, Coptic Christians, and secular intellectuals have all pointed out the thousands of unregistered mosques that have sprung up across the country, becoming hubs for religious zealots and the inflammatory branding of secular Egyptian society and the current regime. The outcry by thousands of ordinary Egyptians in November 2006, following controversial remarks made by the Minister of Culture, Farouk Hosni, regarding his interpretation of the veil as a symbol of backwardness, is a case in point, illustrating how fundamentalist Islamic views have taken root in Egyptian mainstream society. This is in contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, when the issue of the veil was largely forgotten under the staunchly secular Nasserist regime. Today, more than 80 per cent of Muslim women, including women from affluent families and those who follow professional careers, are donning the veil (Shahine, 2007).

Ironically, a number of prominent Egyptian political analysts have come to the fore in recent years, blaming the Egyptian regime for the Islamic radicalization taking place in the country. The editor of the Egyptian government cultural magazine, *Al Muhit*, Dr. Fat'hi Abd Al-Fattah, was quoted in the government daily, *Al-Gumhouriyya*, as saying: "What the black-garbed militias did at Al-Azhar is the natural outcome of the policy of putting out fires that have been used by the regime for some time now

in dealing with the banned Muslim Brotherhood and in dealing with all our political and social problems" (Al-Fattah, 2006). In his daily column in the Egyptian opposition daily, *Al-Masri Al-Yawm*, Magdi Muhana wrote: "If the Muslim Brotherhood movement is indeed endangering Egypt's security, we must ask how Mubarak as president of the country is permitting such a danger to exist" (Muhana, 2007).

Even though the Egyptian government has resorted to repressive law enforcement strategies to crush Islamic militancy in the past, with more than 17,000 people being arrested for political opposition or militant violence between 1989 and 1997 (Fawaz, 1999), it has been criticized by secularists in the country for co-operating with Islam-inspired militants ever since. This it did by making public life more visibly Islamic. State television channels began broadcasting more Islamic program content, while government publishing houses began producing more Islamic books than ever before. The call to prayer began to be heard more profoundly and more loudly from state mosques throughout the country. A former Sadat spokesman Tahsin Bashir was once quoted as saying: "Political Islam has been checked in its bid for power, but the Islamization of society had gained ground" (Rodenbeck, 1999).

Whether the government or the MB is responsible for the wave of Islamic fundamentalism sweeping across the country, one thing is unmistakably apparent: With increased Islamization of the country, Egypt is continuing to lose it hard-earned position as the intellectual and cultural hub of the Arab world and as one of Africa's pivotal states. Having been considered, since the early days of Gamal Abdel Nasser's rule in the 1950s, as the heart and mind of the Arab world and the political centre of Arab and African consciousness, the country has little to show for itself today in terms of outstanding Arabic literature reviews, intellectual

debates, and musical and artistic work. Gone are the days when Egyptian cinema dominated contemporary Arab culture.

Today, stifled by stringent censorship measures by the Ministry of Culture and the Islamic Research Center at Al-Azhar University, Egyptian movies, books, audio tapes, and any reference to subjects considered as taboo, including religion, politics and sexuality, are often censored or banned outright. This practice has resulted in a decrease in the number of books and movies being produced in the country annually. For example, during the peak era of the 1950 and 1960s, the country produced more than 50 movies a year as opposed to barely 20 over the past decade (Shafik, 2001). The head of the Islamic Research Center, Sami Sharawi, son of the late Sheik Mutawili Sharawi, one of the Arab world's most outspoken Islamic radicals and a televangelist, has been criticized by Egyptian intellectuals for discouraging the production of movies and books deemed as offensive to Islam, and for banning tens of books annually that intellectually challenge any Islamic religious texts. The weekly pro-government tabloid, *Rose Al Youssef*, through its managing editor, Adel Hamouda (author of a number of black-listed novels), was quoted as saying: "Sami Sharawi has found the chance to take revenge on those who contradict his father's opinions about religion" (Engel, 2004).

As early as 1985, Al-Azhar was granted authority to regulate the publication of the Hadith and the Qur'an. By 1993, it was given even greater powers by the fatwa and legislative section of the national administrative court to become involved in the censorship of artistic works of a religious nature. A year later, it was to become the sole authority to issue licenses for tapes, films and books that discuss religion. The state also stands accused of undermining intellectual debate and the freedom of expression granted to Egyptians by the constitution, which acknowledges "freedom of literary, artistic and cultural invention." In February

2007, on recommendations made by the Ministry of Education and the Interior, a court banned foreign schools from teaching from a book entitled *History of the World*, which, according to the Cairo-based *Egyptian Gazette*, "contained information considered blasphemous and humiliating to Islam." Although Egyptian intellectuals have often accused Al-Azhar of stifling free speech, they actually also argue that the problem of censorship is well entrenched in the Egyptian political system of government. Author Sonallah Ibrahim once stated: "Censorship in Egypt is closely connected to political status that does not encourage freedom and to a culture of silence" (cited in *Malaysian Sun*, 2007).

However, government officials have often dismissed all these assertions as unfounded propaganda by opposition groups and argued that the increasing radicalization, reflected by a growing number of women adopting full Islamic cover and men wearing long beards, was largely due to the influence of Wahhabism and Salafism from Gulf Arab states, where hundreds of thousands of the Egyptian population work and live. More pragmatic NDP officials have come to admit that the rise of Islamism in the country should be blamed on former president Anwar Sadat's policy of appeasement of militant Islamists.

In any case, increasing Islamist revivalism and the refusal by the state to entertain any notion of any active involvement by Islamists in public life, have awakened fears of the religious unrest and violence that were endemic during the 1990s. The current calm on the security front, which is largely due the limited tolerance of the MB by the state and a cease-fire between the government and one of the country's most influential militant Islamic organizations, Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiya, is unlikely to last indefinitely. During the 1990s, Egypt witnessed a low-intensity conflict between government and militant Islamists that claimed the lives of more than 1,200 Egyptians and foreigners (El-Hennawy, 2006).

During this dark period in the country's recent history, government waged a bitter campaign of mass arrests, state violence, and financial crackdowns on militant Muslim groups. Following the bloody November 1997 attack by Gamaat Islamiya, which took place in the historic city of Luxor and killed 58 foreign tourists, the Egyptian government introduced tight security measures to suppress any signs of insurgency. Thousands of militants were rounded up under emergency laws that allowed for six months of detention without being charged, as well as for sentencing taking place in military courts, excluding the right to appeal. In March 1999, government signed a cease-fire agreement with Gamaat Islamiya, which had been significantly weakened by government's relentless campaign of torture and mass arrests. Subsequently, the authorities have released thousands of the group's members who were imprisoned over the years.

Security analysts contend, however, that recent attempts by the NDP to exert more power over state institutions constitute a recipe for disaster and could open up old wounds that it has tried so hard to close over the past decade. Regional developments in Iraq and the electoral victory of Hamas in the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections threaten to derail Egypt's progress toward greater democratization and political reform even further. The NDP has become more anxious and wary of the increased power of political Islam, both at home and elsewhere in the region. Its decision in February 2006 to postpone municipal elections for two years and the recent passing of constitutional amendments that curtail the chances of Islamists, and those of the MB in particular, to secure political legitimacy are widely regarded by opposition groups in the country as calculated moves by the ruling party to contain the strength of the Muslim Brotherhood following its successes in the 2005 parliamentary elections.

Working to its disadvantage and against the country's fragile political stability, the NDP's intention to preserve its political dominance of power effectively undermines the orderly and effective representation of opposition viewpoints. In turn, this has prevented the more progressive democratic trends within these Islamist groups from bearing political fruit. The March 2007 constitutional amendments only succeeded in fuelling the revival of militant Islamic fundamentalists, whose only vehicle of political debate is via militancy and violence.

5. The Succession Debate

Critics contend that the constitutional amendments constitute the latest move in an intricate set of highly orchestrated plans to ensure the political dominance of Mubarak's National Democratic Party, and curb the power and political ambitions of the Muslim Brotherhood, while paving the way for a dynastic transfer of power to Mubarak's son, Gamal. Mubarak, who is 79, has repeatedly refused to appoint a vice-president. Opposition groups and independent analysts in the country argue that the aging leader's insistence of leaving the post of vice-president open is a ploy aimed at the subsequent installation of his son as vice-president in the near future. Gamal Mubarak, aged 43, has been described by Egyptian captains of industry as a pragmatic business-oriented personality who wants to see Egypt integrated into the global economy. Western educated and a former investment banker, Gamal has repeatedly called for the strengthening of trade and economic relations with the West, as opposed to a continuing reliance on Arab co-operation, economic assistance, and investment, which has failed to produce the much-needed economic improvements the country hoped for in the past.

Gamal Mubarak was appointed to the General Secretariat of the ruling NDP in February 2000, and in 2002 he was promoted to

become head of the newly created Policies Secretariat of the NDP. The role of the Secretariat is to oversee the gradual transformation of the party into a modern majority party, managed by highly educated and driven intellectuals who will address the needs of the people. According to Abdel-Halim Kandil, editor-in-chief of the opposition weekly *Al-Karama* the Policies Committee, headed by Mubarak, enjoys excessive influence over the legislative process and party policy. Ahmed Thabet, who is a professor of political science at Cairo University, argues that draft laws, drawn up by the Policies Committee, go straight to Parliament, where they are rubber-stamped into law by the NDP-dominated Assembly (Morrow and Moussa al-Omrani). In 2004, a major ministerial cabinet reshuffle brought to the fore figures closely associated with Gamal, including trade and industry minister, Rachid Mohamed Rachid, finance minister, Youssef Boutros-Ghali, and investment minister, Mahmoud Mohieldin. Gamal further extended his involvement in party politics following his appointment as assistant secretary-general of the NDP in February 2006.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that many Egyptians are increasingly trying to come to terms with the inevitable "republican heir," who will be forced upon them by Mubarak in due course. The much talked-about wedding in May 2007, of Gamal and Khadiga, a sports-loving 23-year old with a business degree and daughter of one of Egypt's wealthiest construction magnates, Mahmoud al-Gamal, has further fuelled speculation that it is yet another sign, which should be seen as building on the constitutional amendments, aimed at promoting Gamal's popularity. This is viewed as the beginning of a major grooming process, designed to consolidate Mubarak's political ambitions for his son when he has to leave office or in the event of his sudden death.

However, both the president and his son have consistently rejected allegations that Gamal Mubarak is being groomed for

the presidency or, in so doing, following the Syrian pattern after the sudden death of President Hafez al-Assad in June 2000. A number of Egyptian political analysts have rejected the idea that a similar arrangement would be made in Egypt. They point out that the country prides itself on having taken the first steps toward a more representative democracy, and that the idea of a hereditary succession is an anathema to a large segment of the population, which continues to revere the 1952 revolution in which President Nasser and his "free officers" overthrew a corrupt monarchy led by King Farouk.

Rather, they believe that, when the time comes for a presidential successor, the army will provide a president for the country. Independent commentators, such as Makram Mohammed Ahmed, a veteran journalist known to be close to the president, have argued that, as with past presidents, there is a lot of opposition from the army to Gamal's possible political appointment, due to his lack of military credentials. The name of Omar Suleiman, head of intelligence services and best known of late for his cease-fire efforts between Palestinian factions, has been mentioned in some government circles, particularly among the military, as a more credible candidate to succeed Mubarak – at least for the short term.

It comes to no surprise that a number of leading Egyptian political analysts in recent years have pointed to the increased likelihood of a successor to President Mubarak coming from the ranks of the military. Since the days of Gamal Abdel Nasser (i.e., during the 1950s), the military has formed an integral part of the political regime and has continued to do so throughout President Mubarak's administration. Thus far, the military has produced all the country's presidents and will certainly promote a successor from within its own ranks to take over the helm of government. The role of the military in Egyptian politics has never been stronger than it is today under Mubarak's adminis-

tration. In contrast to Anwar Sadat's policies, aimed at restricting the role of the military in public life and cutting the army's budget, Mubarak has welcomed the military's potential contribution to the country's economic development and its role as the ultimate guarantor of domestic stability – particularly in thwarting any possible insurgence of Islamic groups against the state. During the 1990s, the army was requested to assist the security services in responding to the threat of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism.

Today, it serves to strengthen Mubarak's hold on power in exchange for a privileged role as the most important source for government's power. Therefore, any future successor to Mubarak would undoubtedly need to acquire the military's unequivocal support right from the start. It is a well-known fact that the military is increasingly frowning upon the concept of a father-son hereditary succession when it comes to Mubarak relinquishing power to his son in the near future. Gamal lacks the connections and ties to the military that his father and his father's predecessors enjoyed. Gamal's appointment as president will ultimately depend on his father's success in persuading the military to show loyalty to his choice of successor. However, there is little indication that this has even started to take root.

6. Conclusion

Despite the wide range of opinions and speculations with regard to the succession issue, one thing is certain: the continuing battle for domination of Egypt's political landscape between the NDP, strongly supported by the army, and the Muslim Brotherhood has arguably taken a turn for the worse. Although the results of the constitutional referendum were largely predictable, their future implications for political discourse, particularly relating to the succession issue, as well as to the Brotherhood's aspiration toward

political domination, and to the future course of Islamization in Egypt, remain uncertain to say the least. Given the official clampdown, it is too early to indicate whether the Brotherhood will, in fact, abide by their official rhetoric of non-violent engagement with the state and work within the boundaries established by the constitutional amendments, or whether the MB will entertain other alternatives.

Even though the MB has renounced the use of violence since the 1970s, there is widespread criticism, both within the Egyptian government and among the international community, about whether this criterion alone should allow it to re-enter the political arena. On the one hand, some of its supporters at grassroots level contend that the group's leadership, particularly with regard to the older leadership, represents a reaffirmation of moral idealism and real religious expression. On the other hand, critics argue that is an outlet for resentment and frustration, combining to result in a destructive frenzy of deep-seated fanaticism. Although it is dangerous to entertain the notion of allowing fanatic elements within the MB to use the electoral processes to further their revolutionary religious zeal, it would be counterproductive to deny them the opportunity. This is the dilemma facing the Egyptian government as it tries to find a balanced approach of showing tolerance toward the MB while, at the same time, keeping it at arm's length regarding its participation in mainstream politics, as a means to retain its stronghold on power and maintaining 'secularism' in the country.

This 'Islamist dilemma' has compelled some analysts to question the depth of not only the Egyptian government but also of US commitment to democratization in the country. This is the situation at present, even though, since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the US administration has been preoccupied with the notion of promoting democracy and political reform, which are

deemed critical as a means of undercutting the tide of Islamic fundamentalism. The US has not seized the opportunity to put pressure on the autocratic, so-called secular governments to allow opposition groups, including Islamists, to operate freely and contest elections across the Middle East and certainly in Egypt. When faced with the question of whether the US should support a complete opening up of the political system in Egypt, with the understanding that the MB was by far the most credible opposition in the country, and therefore standing to benefit the most from this effort, it backtracked on its commitments (Hamid, 2007). As the Egyptian government has repeatedly pointed out to their American counterparts, to promote democracy in the country is a complex issue, needing to be developed in a way that safeguards its long-standing commitment to peace with Israel, its working relationship with the West, and the protection of its indigenous ethnic and religious minorities.

To its detriment, America's appeasement of Egypt's autocratic government thus far has left it vulnerable to widespread condemnation by the broader public, thereby shattering its credibility as a true champion of democracy and human rights. While the US and the Egyptian government are jostling with the question of how to address the looming political crisis of Islamist inclusion in the political system, the status quo leaves the country at the fringe of increased political uncertainty. With Mubarak's approval ratings among the general public at an all-time low and people increasingly critical of a possible hereditary succession taking place in the near future, support for the MB among ordinary Egyptians, frustrated with the slow pace of political reform and economic growth, surges with each legislative election.

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