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Opposition Alliances and Democratization in Egypt

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Overview

What is the future of democracy in Egypt? What are the prospects for cooperation between the country's Islamist and non-Islamist political opposition groups? How can such cooperation be strengthened?

These questions were at the forefront of discussions at the Second Annual Wasat Generation Dialogue, held in Cairo Egypt May 27-29, 2008 and hosted by USIP, the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, and Georgetown University's Center for Democracy and Civil Society. An outgrowth of USIP's Arab Political Oppositions Project (APOP), this not-for-attribution dialogue brought together a select group of Egyptian political leaders, American academics and U.S. democracy-promoters. The conference provided a unique venue to explore the prospects for enhancing political cooperation across the ideological/religious divide in the Egyptian political arena. It also highlighted the potential to build bridges of cooperation among a new generation of political activists.

The meeting featured participants from a diverse group of Egyptian political parties[1] and organizations, including:

- The Democratic Front Party
- The Al-Karama Party
- Kifaya Movement
- National Democratic Party
- The New Wafd Party
- Al-Tagammu Party
- Al-Wasat Party

The following discussion summarizes the meeting's major points of consensus and disagreement.

Islamists and Secularists: Issues of Contention

There is little doubt that the persistence of authoritarianism in Egypt is at least partially attributable to the continued fragmentation of the political opposition. Absent substantive, credible and

sustained intra-opposition cooperation—particularly across the Islamist/non-Islamist divide—domestic pressures for political reform will remain muted.

Many Egyptians, both within the opposition and the ruling party, believe that a swift democratic opening of the country's political system could lead to a decisive Islamist electoral victory. However, intellectuals of various political leanings view the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Egypt's largest organized Islamist political group, with suspicion, contending that the MB ultimately aims to replace one undemocratic political system with another.

In addition, there are deep ideological and intellectual differences between Islamists and secularist opposition forces over a host of social and political issues, which have generated a great deal of mistrust and continue to hinder the ability of these various groups to work together to advance a common democratic reform agenda.

Moreover, the regime's attempts to undermine the MB's electoral prospects through legal constraints, electoral manipulation and outright repression have hurt Islamists and secularist political groups alike.

Therefore, the question of how to build bridges of understanding and cooperation between Islamists and secular political forces is at the heart of any discussion about the future of democracy in Egypt.

Who Are the Secularists?

One of the biggest challenges in identifying the issues of contention between Islamists and secular opposition groups is finding precise definitions for "Islamist" and "secularist" in the context of Egyptian politics. Demarcating the boundaries within the so-called "Islamist" and "secular" communities, as well as the boundaries separating the two, is hotly debated inside the Egyptian political arena.

The "Islamist" camp, although easily identifiable to observers of Egypt's domestic scene, contains a great deal of intellectual diversity. Of equal importance, "secular" remains a highly contested term. What is often described as the "secularist" camp consists of a diverse group of nationalist, socialist and liberal trends that differ on numerous issues, despite a shared adversarial relationship with Islamist groups.

For many, the term "secular" is virtually nonexistent in Egypt. One participant remarked that all Egyptians, regardless of religion, recognize the nation's Islamic cultural identity and history. It is unimaginable, therefore, that any Egyptian government, secular or not, would deny the country's Islamic cultural heritage or cease its obligations toward the Arab and Muslim world. Even if Islam and the state can be separated, Islam and society cannot. In other words, Egypt's Islamic identity will inevitably play a role in any democratic system that mirrors the values and culture of its own society.

On the other hand, one participant adamantly rejected the assertion that secularism holds no relevance in Egypt, proclaiming that numerous Egyptian Muslims reject the role of religion in the state.

Source of Legislation, Political Rights, and Identity

The contention between Islamist and secular trends in Egypt is rooted in doubts about the commitment of the former, particularly the MB, to democratic values and principles. The Brotherhood's credibility continues to suffer due to claims that it offers no real national project that can respond to the needs and aspirations of Egyptians. Others assert that the MB still seeks to establish an Islamic state that rules society by the sensibilities of Islamic jurists rather than by the rule of law.

While the Brotherhood's position on a range of issues have evolved in the last few years, the group's basic position on the relationship between mosque and state continues to worry secular intellectuals, many of whom insist that no politics or political party should be based on religion. These secularists often assert that free electoral politics, coupled with religious parties, are a recipe for sectarian conflict in Egypt's religiously diverse society. Although some members of the non-Islamist camp accept Islam as a belief system and as one source of legislation, they adamantly reject setting these principles as the *only* basis for laws. Forming a state whose mission is to implement strictly Islamic law would undermine the rights of many citizens, including religious minorities and women.

Additionally, differences over the definition of the nation's history and identity deepen the chasm between Islamists and non-Islamists. One participant asserted that the Brotherhood's glorification of Islamic religious culture comes at the expense of Egypt's non-religious heritage and the rights of its non-Muslim minorities.

Has the Brotherhood Moderated its Position?

Responding to this criticism, a member of the MB stated that the group's current positions do not contradict the basic principles of democracy. The MB, he added, views democracy as the best political system that Egypt could enjoy, rather than any reactionary form of governance. The Brotherhood is committed to pluralism both in Islam and in politics and has publicly recognized the freedom of expression and belief.

It was clear in the discussions that ensued that critics of the Brotherhood remain unconvinced. Some participants questioned whether such pro-democratic proclamations are sincere, while others suggested that the moderate views that some MB members expressed are not representative of the group's true beliefs and intentions. The MB's political platform (released in October 2007), which calls for the formation of a council of Islamic jurists that would review government policies, provoked fears that the Brotherhood has yet to accept genuinely the principles of democratic politics.

Alleging that this program is still a work in progress, an affiliate of the Brotherhood indicated that the proposed council is meant to take on a consultative rather than an authoritative role in decision-making. Despite these assurances, however, the suspicions aroused by the MB's program have not been contained.

Other MB actions in the recent past have contributed to the crystallization of mistrust between the Brotherhood and its non-Islamist counterparts. Last month the MB supreme guide implied in an interview that Osama Bin Laden is a legitimate freedom fighter. In another incident late last year

supporters of the Brotherhood marched at Al-Azhar University in a training exercise that some participants compared to Hezbollah's flamboyant military parades in Lebanon.

Such actions helped reinforce the perception that the Brotherhood's moderate discourse is a smokescreen for its undemocratic intentions rather than an attempt to set forth a strategic vision based on peaceful democratic politics. Ambiguities in the MB's positions on important questions such as the legitimacy of marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men and the conversion of Muslims to other religions deepen these suspicions.

Many participants expressed concern that advocates of moderation and peaceful coexistence inside the Brotherhood remain weak and marginalized. Notwithstanding the shift in its discourse, one opposition leader remarked, the MB remains a hierarchical organization in which members are taught to follow their leaders without question. This view, coupled with the MB's own actions, continues to raise doubts in the minds of many Egyptian intellectuals and opinion-shapers about the Brotherhood's openness to democratic rules.

Thus, there is little evidence that the ideological differences between Islamists and non-Islamist oppositions have been contained. Despite the Brotherhood's attempts to proclaim moderate views on some contentious issues, secularists tend to perceive the MB's messages as nebulous. This has strengthened the position of those who assert that the MB is not a viable partner to advocates of democracy, but rather a threat that must be contained. This mistrust, as explained below, continues to undermine intra-opposition cooperation.

Past Alliances: Sources of Weakness

Egypt has witnessed several attempts at opposition alliance building in recent decades. Why have these attempts failed to build long term strategic cooperation inside the Egyptian opposition?

One common reason for failure is *asymmetry among alliance partners*. Alliances have tended to be more stable and relatively successful when no one powerful party dominated. For example, the 1984 alliance between the MB and Al-Wafd exhibited some promising signs arguably because each side enjoyed a significant electoral base.

Today, on the other hand, the Brotherhood's organizational capacity and public following exceed those of all other opposition groups. At the same time secular parties have been significantly weakened since the 1980s, partly due to the decline of their popularity, regime-imposed constraints, aging leadership and their failure to offer an appealing national program for the Egyptian voter.

These conditions have led to the marginalization the "Wasat generation leaders," a younger cadre of opposition activists who seeek to build serious alliances across ideological divides. The widespread dominance of an aging and ineffective leadership inside opposition parties and groups, including the MB, has prevented this generation from building bridges of cooperation between their respective parties. Similarly, through the imposition of legal constraints, the government has blocked all "Wasat generation" attempts to build an alternative to the MB monopoly over opposition politics.

Ideological differences have also diminished the fortunes of alliance building. Recent experience has shown that when alliance partners agree on contentious issues, their cooperation tends to be more durable. One example of this phenomenon is the alliance that surfaced between the Labor Party and the Brotherhood during the 1980s, when the former began adopting an Islamist stance on numerous issues.

Additionally, several technical features have enfeebled past alliances among Egyptian opposition groups:

First, most past alliances were no more than agreements between the leaders of political parties; *the grassroots role was highly limited*. In fact, one participant suggested that the term "committee" might better describe these loose coalitions than "alliances." In some instances, individual leaders managed all the funds and resources designated to alliance activities with no transparency or accountability.

Second, these alliances were limited to political parties at *the exclusion of relevant NGOs and associations*, which reduced the effectiveness of joint political action.

Third, most proclamations made by these alliances *lacked credibility*. For example, past alliances often threatened wide electoral boycotts when the government failed to reform unfair electoral laws. Even with their demands unmet, parties to these alliances usually backtracked on their initial threats and participated in flawed elections.

Fourth *alliances were often short term and tactical rather than strategic*, and alliance members had no genuine political will to launch a joint long term vision for reform.

Given the formidable constraints that have hindered intra-opposition cooperation, how can future alliances, particularly across the Islamist-secularist divide, be improved?

Restructuring Norms and Commitments of Political Opposition

- *Strengthening leaders' commitment to terms of alliances:* Promoting stronger alliances among the opposition will require changes in the ethical commitments of opposition parties. Experience shows that the regime will always offer valuable incentives to opposition parties to abandon their alliance partners. Unless opposition leaders commit themselves to the agreements they reach with their alliance partners, regardless of external pressures, cooperation initiatives will remain weak, short-lived and unsuccessful. Put simply, party leaders must not only clearly state the terms of their alliances: they must also stick to these terms rather than treat them as short term, tactical arrangements.

- *Restructuring the norms of inter-party relations:* Confidence between opposition partners will remain low unless political parties and groups agree to a common set of norms to govern interparty relations. For example, parties should seek to include all relevant opposition players when forming alliances. Past experience has shown that exclusionary measures only foster mistrust. Opposition leaders must also exhibit modesty and humility in their dealings with one another.

- *Acceptance of the right of the opponent to peaceful political participation, so long as all groups accept the rules and norms of a competitive, pluralistic political contest:* Even though the political opposition may be divided on tough intellectual and ideological questions, they must respect each other's right to participate peacefully in politics. One cannot expect any long-term cooperation among Egypt's diverse opposition without wide acceptance of these basic principles.

Strengthening Accountability of Alliances

- *Less ambiguity about representation in alliance talks:* Political parties and groups must explicitly name their spokespeople and the level of authority they hold in negotiating terms of alliances. This step will alleviate recurrent discrepancies between the words and actions of certain political groups.

- *Greater transparency about implementations and violations:* Parties that violate terms of alliance agreements must be publicly censured to discourage such behavior. Violators must be held accountable in the eyes of the public and the political opposition.

Involving a New Generation of Political Leaders

- *Promoting alliances from below:* Alliances are strongest when they garner wide support inside their relevant parties. Most recent party alliances in Egypt were the product of closed-door bargains that never received much support or attention from low-level party functionaries.

- *Increasing the role of the younger generation:* The historically adversarial relations amongst the older generation of opposition leaders have greatly reduced trust inside the Egyptian opposition. Overcoming this challenge requires the empowerment of a younger generation of opposition leaders to engender cooperation without being held hostage to the history of past failures.

Agreeing to Disagree

- *Debate the rules of the game, not ideology:* Attempting to fuse Islamist and secular ideologies is pointless, as some points of division are irresolvable. However, this is not to say that reconciling those differences is the only path toward successful partnerships for political reform. These differences can be managed and debated within the framework of democratic politics. While agreeing to disagree on intellectual questions, Islamist and non-Islamist political trends must agree to explicitly defined rules of democratic politics.

What the Regime Can Do

There is wide consensus that intra-opposition cooperation will remain futile until the Egyptian regime undertakes reforms that allow for serious political contestation. So long as the regime restricts participation in a manner that, by design or default, produces a two-way contest between the regime and an Islamist opposition, the political field will remain polarized and inhibit genuine democratization. Thus the Egyptian government must be encouraged to adopt reforms that provide

institutional, political and social space for new, moderate political voices—both Islamist and non-Islamist. These reforms should include, among others:

- *Lifting emergency laws;*
- *Easing restrictions on the formation of independent political parties;*
- *Instituting electoral laws that do not privilege the ruling party over the opposition;*
- *Encouraging freedom of expression and assembly through a formal legal framework;*
- *Separating the ruling party from government bodies and resources;*
- *Ending repression and electoral manipulation against peaceful opposition groups*

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[1] A listing and description of Egypt's political parties can be found at the Egypt State Information Service: http://www.sis.gov.eg/En/Politics/Parties/Parties/