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EGYPT

MUBARAK ATTEMPTS TO DEAL WITH DOMESTIC PROBLEMS

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[Article by Eric Rouleau: "Egypt in Ferment"]

[21 Aug 84 pp 1, 5]

[Text] I. A Society Out of Control

Cairo--A flock of kids, their faces devoured by flies, wade in the mire, scaling heaps of garbage whose odor mingles with the suffocating stench given off by waste water flowing nearby. The district of Shubra al-Khaymah, like others in the Egyptian capital, has no sewer system or any street department.

The ramshackle shacks stretching along the roads still have no drinking water or electricity. People live in a promiscuity almost unbearable. Entire families: parents, children and grandparents crowd together in two tiny rooms. Unable to find any housing of their own, young people put off marriage year after year or, desperate, simply give up starting a marriage and family. The problem is compounded in an Islamic country where morals and tradition forbid keeping company between the two sexes, not to mention premarital relations.

The housing crisis is undoubtedly the major problem on people's minds. One Egyptian out of three is poorly accommodated. Authorities admit that there is a shortage of at least 3 million housing units but, lacking the means, build only 160,000 a year. In the meantime, those without homes take refuge in haphazard shanties made out of wood or sheet metal, thrown up on vacant lots or uncultivated land. Or they live on the rooftops, where they sleep outside, or live in cemeteries. Burial grounds in Cairo have tens of thousands of "death squatters" -- 500,000, according to a survey made this summer by one daily -- and despite the discomfort, the lack of any structures or services and the lack of safety resulting from gangs of criminals, the prices charged for a grave site are said to be prohibitive!

The small amount of livable space -- 5 percent of the national territory -- the burgeoning population, growing at a rate of 1.3 million a year, the limited means available to the government: All these factors combine to worsen the crisis. To relieve it, former President al-Sadat deemed it useful to give the private sector free rein, in keeping with his extreme liberal doctrine known

as *infitah* (the opening). However, real estate promoters use credit facilities, customs privileges and tax exemptions, not to build low-cost housing whose rent is controlled by the government, but rather, luxury housing, sold by the apartment, for companies or wealthy private parties. Since the profits thus realized are considerable, the supply has exceeded demand, meaning that the finer districts of Cairo now have some 150,000 unoccupied homes.

Outlandish fortunes were built under the Louis Philippe-type liberalism instituted in 1974 to take over from Nasir's socialism. With the help of real estate speculation, the price of land went up 10 to 30 times over, depending on location. One well-known journalist who had invested his savings in the purchase of a small plot of ground told us that he has become a "millionaire, without lifting a finger." Bought for 50,000 Egyptian pounds, his modest property is now worth 1.2 million pounds, or over \$1 million (value of the pound varying between \$.89 and \$1.19). Tens of thousands of landowners have joined him in being what is common called here the "parasitic bourgeoisie," made up of entrepreneurs, importers, merchants dealing in foreign products, businessmen and middlemen of every stripe who, starting from scratch, benefited from the government's generosity in order to make exorbitant profits in a very short time. The tax administration has counted, it is said, some 150,000 millionaires (in dollars). Given the extent of tax evasion, other estimates vary between 200,000 to 500,000.

Whatever the case may be, the "infatih bourgeois" do not go unnoticed. They live in palatial residences, drive high-powered automobiles, carouse in night clubs, host splendid receptions, preferably in the big hotels. One of these establishments declared a turnover of 6.5 million pounds last year for wedding receptions alone.

One can imagine better the frustrations thereby engendered when one learns that the average per capita income is under 450 pounds a year, that 5 percent of all families at the top of the social pyramid have over a quarter of the national income and that 10 percent of all Egyptians consume nearly half of the products sold.

The most deprived categories are without a doubt those of the civil servants, blue- and white-collar workers in the public sector, some 4 million persons or one-third of the active population, whose salaries are scarcely related with the ever-increasing cost of living. The minimum monthly wage of 35 pounds, paid to a beginning teacher, for example, would only be enough to buy either 6 kilograms of meat or 8 kilos of fish. An assistant lecturer at the university would have to devote his entire salary (60 pounds) to buy a readymade suit. The great majority of all government employees earn under 80 pounds a month.

Although basic commodities: bread, oil, sugar, rice, butter, tea, beans and fabrics, mainly, are subsidized by the government, inflation is about 20 percent a year, according to authorities, double that figure if one believes independent economists. The black market, the resulting scarcities and the mediocrity of the products sold at a discount often force citizens to pay the highest prices.

In order to survive, wage earners try to emigrate, resort to expeditious measures or succumb to the temptation of corruption. Bribes, the envelope passed under the table, "commissions" demanded by high officials tend to become common practice in the administration. The most scrupulous -- also the most numerous -- make ends meet by taking one and sometimes two extra jobs, to the detriment of their health and the proper functioning of public departments. Using various subterfuges to work fewer hours, civil servants undergo metamorphosis in the afternoon, turning into taxi drivers, shopkeepers, artisans or shoeshiners. One engineer explained in a letter published by a daily newspaper that that trade enabled him to triple his monthly salary of 80 pounds.

In the field of national education, this *debrouillardise* [living by wit] leads to excesses and particularly harmful trafficking. In order to earn a few extra dollars, professors guarantee that their high school or university students will pass their exams by forcing them to buy mimeographed notes or taking private lessons. Short of time, some go so far as to teach in private cars or in mass transport! More "dignified," famous professors rent auditoriums to give lecture courses, which have to be paid for in hard cash! Needless to say, the poorer students cannot afford to pay the ransom of success.

Brain Drain

The level of education constantly deteriorates as a result of democratization -- free education at all levels was expanded by Nasir -- and the "brain drain" that al-Sadat caused by making emigration legal in 1971. Tens of thousands of teachers and professors, generally the better ones, were then hired in oil-producing Arab countries, where they receive salaries seven and eight times higher. In general, it is thought that in four years, an expatriot will receive an income equivalent to what he would have obtained by working in Egypt for 20 to 30 years!

Although said to be sedentary and strongly rooted to their homeland, Egyptians, for the first time in their age-old history, are emigrating en masse, some to escape unemployment, others to improve their fate. They thus succeed in meeting the needs of their families, sometimes to build up a nestegg that will enable them, upon their return, to buy a house, pay for their children's marriage, or start a business. The some 4 million citizens -- out of a total of 46 million -- living in the Near East, Africa, North and South America and Australia, annually send \$3 billion home.

Emigration creates advantages, at least in the long run. It makes it possible to absorb the unemployed while injecting substantial resources in foreign exchange. It increases the purchasing power of part of the population and at the same time attenuates social tensions that remain potentially explosive, as shown by the hunger riots in January 1977.

Nevertheless, the disadvantages are patent. The departure of countless teachers, research workers, engineers, technicians, skilled workers and members of the liberal professions -- the cream of the crop -- has impoverished Egypt and created imbalances in many domains. In that of the wage earners, for example, a farm worker earns as much as an assistant lecturer, a mason or plumber more

than an undersecretary of state, an executive secretary in a private company more than double the salary of an ambassador.

Paradoxically enough, funds transferred by expatriates also help upset social balances. While giving a strong boost to inflation, they maintain an illusory prosperity in part of the population in a country that consumes more than it produces.

[22 Aug 84 p 6]

[Text.] II. Search for Identity

The extreme liberal doctrine known as *infitah* (the opening), instituted by al-Sadat, has helped worsen the economic crisis. The gap has widened between the poorest population groups and those that build outrageous fortunes thanks to liberalism. To survive, wage earners try to emigrate or succumb to the temptation of corruption. Emigration has made it possible to absorb unemployment and has increased the purchasing power of part of the population, thus attenuating social tensions. Paradoxically enough, however, the funds transferred by expatriates have upset social relations, worsening inflation and creating an illusory prosperity in a country that consumes more than it produces (LE MONDE, 21 August).

Cairo--If one had to go by appearances, one would promptly conclude that Egypt is one of the most prosperous countries in the Third World. Hundreds of thousands of vehicles crisscross the country, driving bumper to bumper in the cities, causing monstrous traffic jams in the capital, which alone has some 600,000 cars. The number of autos grows at a rate of 100,000 a year.

In the heart of Cairo, in the better districts, the stores and supermarkets are stuffed with products, including those generally terms "luxury items" in developing countries. One can buy anything provided one is willing to pay the price: clothing by the best foreign designers, West German household appliances, French perfumes, Dutch cheeses, American furniture, Swiss watches.

The rural areas, where the standard of living is generally primitive, exhibit even better the upheaval that has occurred in mores because of the advent of the consumer society. The sights are sometimes quite unusual. In a town some 100 kilometers from Cairo, television antennas stick up on the rooftops of hovels and air conditioners hang out over the mud walls. And yet, electricity came here scarcely six years ago and there is still no drinking water (not an exception: Some 80 percent of the rural population has no electricity and 36 percent no drinking water).

In a neighboring village, just as delapidated, a "boutique" -- the term has been incorporated into the Arabic vocabulary -- displays, among other things, Japanese video tape recorders, transistors, tape recorders from Cyprus, fabrics and gadgets from Hong Kong.

Consumers are usually the beneficiaries of funds transferred by emigrant workers, farm workers overpaid because of the scarcity of labor, artisans equally sought-after. On the other hand, farmers, small landowners or tradesmen complain that they cannot make both ends meet. Prices for basic products, set arbitrarily by the government since the time of Nasir, no longer correspond to production costs, which are constantly rising. Some farmers have therefore given up growing such essential commodities as wheat, corn and rice, going into fruit, more profitable because free of any control.

Laissez-Faire Strategy

In addition, the arable land area is shrinking at a rate of 25,000 hectares a year because of the rural exodus and urbanization. Consequently, with the help of stagnant production, Egypt has in a decade become one of the leading world importers of food. This year, it will devote \$5 billion dollars, or half of its foreign exchange income, to that purpose. The worst part is that it is dependent on other countries for nearly 60 percent of its food needs.

More generally speaking, the frantic consumption has largely been encouraged by the uncontrolled liberalism, the *infitah* introduced in 1974 by former President al-Sadat in order to do away with, he said, the "vices" of Nasir's socialism. Actually, the plan of the second great leader included several inseparable aspects. Above all, it sought to earn the good will of the United States, especially by turning the back on the communist camp, to end the conflict with Israel, to reassure both foreign backers and Egyptian owners by attributing a leading role to the private sector. Al-Sadat also thought he could revive the economy by bringing in Arab capital, plethoric after the 1973-1974 oil boom, and joining it with Western technology and the resources of Egypt, which was to supply relatively cheap labor and abundant raw materials (cotton, iron, oil gas, and so on).

The laws set forth for this purpose heaped privileges on owners, rarely granted in other lands. Fields of activity that Nasir had reserved for the public sector, such as foreign trade, heavy industry, banking, insurance and transportation, were made accessible to private enterprise. The ceiling on profit and real estate fortunes was done away with. Free convertibility of the pound, exemptions from customs duties and taxes for a period of 8 years, renewable on certain conditions, the right to export capital and profits, guarantees given against the risk of nationalization were among the many advantages conceived to incite backers, especially foreigners, to invest.

However, the *laissez-faire* strategy did not yield the desired results. Arab capital boycotted Egypt as early as 1979 after it made peace with Israel. Against all expectations, neither the Americans nor the Europeans invested massively in a country which, politically isolated, could no longer serve as a relay station to Near Eastern markets and which, whatever the case, did not offer ideal operating conditions: a cumbersome bureaucracy, outdated, failing infrastructures, limited productivity and labor, the survival of a vast public sector and an arsenal of social laws inherited from the Nasir period and deemed too restrictive.

Dilemma of President Mubarak

Only two fields found the favor of foreign capital: oil and finance. The some 50 Western banks established in the country thanks to infitah turned their backs on agriculture and industry. They derive most of the profits from loans and credit granted to Egyptian enterprises, which also devote themselves to non-productive activities, the importing rather than the manufacture of common consumer goods, speculative, even sometimes illicit, operations corresponding more to the mentality of a new bourgeoisie seeking immediate profits. Thus the service sector has developed over the years, some three to five times more rapidly than oil, agriculture or industry, whose decline has only worsened.

One therefore arrives at an unhealthy situation that explains the structural imbalances: Egypt invests, imports and consumes more than it produces, does not export or save. Its trade balance and balance of payments grow steadily worse. Its foreign debt of \$2 billion in 1973, the year preceding the liberalization of the economy, has increased tenfold without thereby contributing to any productive development. Funds have mainly been squandered on the purchase of consumer goods.

Foreign creditors are not worried, however. Loans were contracted for on easy conditions -- for the most part, at 3 percent interest for 30 years -- and service on the debt absorbs 25 percent of the foreign exchange receipts, compared with 62 percent in Brazil and 140 percent in Poland. Nevertheless, the situation is disturbing. Egypt will probably continue to live above its means, while its main foreign resources are deemed uncertain: Receipts from the exportation of oil, funds repatriated by emigrants, royalties from the Suez Canal and tourism all depend on the regional and international situations that are beyond the control of Egypt.

Whatever the case, austerity measures are indispensable in order to check imports and make up the budgetary deficit. The United States and the International Monetary Fund have found nothing better than to demand the elimination of subsidies helping basic products, lacking which -- they pointed out -- Egypt would not be able to receive new loans. Reasonable in absolute terms, such a measure is politically risky in a country where, it is estimated, some 37 percent of the people were already living under the poverty line. Did it not cause hunger riots this year in Tunisia, Morocco and Brazil? The defenders of "economic orthodoxy" perhaps have short memories and undoubtedly lack imagination. They have suggested neither the abolition of the exorbitant privileges granted to foreign enterprises or the institution of a strict system of taxation that could bring in several billions of dollars. One must add here that tax evasion alone cost the government from \$2 billion to \$3 billion this year that it should have received.

The dilemma which this problem poses for President Mubarak is on a par with the situation his predecessor left to him. The Sadat policy of infitah in its two main aspects: economic liberalism and close cooperation with the United States, helped only a minority of the population. Peace with Israel cut Egypt off from its Arab hinterland, while giving the Hebrew state more means to pursue its war against the Arab belligerents. Likewise, the "American dream" vanished

as the Egyptians realized that Uncle Sam was not, as they had been led to believe, going to inundate their country with dollars to reward the prodigal son for returning to the Western fold!

And yet, despite his determination to rectify the situation, President Mubarak will have a difficult time changing directions. "Egypt's dependency on the United States," one Western diplomat privately states, "is irreversible." "We are a country under tutelage," says one Egyptian chronicler. Whatever the case, the government's room to maneuver is singularly limited. Egypt depends on Washington, among other things, for most (70 percent) of the financial aid it receives for its supplies (75 percent of its wheat consumption, for example), to equip its army, to work and market its oil, to modernize its infrastructures. Having ended the diversification of its trade following the break with the East, Egypt exports 70 percent of its products to the West and buys from it 80 percent of its products, many of them not indispensable.

A cautious man if ever there was one, President Mubarak has still managed to make slight corrections in the operation of the infitah. He has stepped up control of credit, limited the importation of luxury products and slightly reduced some subsidies.

In addition, he is trying to keep more of a distance from American policy, while trying to avoid a confrontation. He has restored diplomatic relations with the USSR at the embassy level after a 3-year quarrel. Going against Washington's wishes, he has "frozen" the Camp David Accords and normalization with Israel and refuses to send his ambassador to Tel Aviv before the total withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon. He has made up with Yassir 'Arafat, while advising the president of the PLO to build bridges with American diplomacy.

Speaking more generally, President Mubarak presents himself as an "authentic Nasirian," a defender of nonalignment of the public sector and of the "gains of the workers and peasants." In order better to express his determination to return to the sources of the Egyptian revolution, al-Sadat's name and his accomplishments are generally stricken from official discourse.

It remains to be seen whether rhetoric and timid reforms will suffice to dissipate the confusion, even disarray stirred up by a society in the midst of change. Egyptians no longer know which direction to face when they pray. In the space of a generation, scarcely three decades, they have gone from a monarchy to a republic, from socialist austerity to capitalist free-handedness, from egalitarianism to social polarization, from enlightened despotism to a guided democracy, from anti-Zionist activism to a separate peace with Israel, from an alliance with the USSR to the "Catholic marriage" with the United States, from militant Arabism to a frantic "Westernization," diametrically opposed to the Arab-Islamic culture.

Televisions brings into homes American series that have nothing to do with the thinking or concerns of Egyptians deprived of the most basic comfort. The latter are totally disconcerted by foreign advertising that boasts the merits of some 40 different brands of shampoo whose very purpose they do not know.

The half-naked girls with the languid gestures showing their bikinis or some alcoholic beverage shock them. In this eminently prudish country, the most shocking thing of all is the recent proliferation of private projection rooms where pornographic films imported from abroad are projected on video cassette recorders.

The dissolution of morals, the disintegration of traditional values going hand in hand with alienating living conditions, are generally attributed to an immoral, depraved capitalist West. The cultural shock gives rise to contradictory behavior. The girls one sees, some dressed in skin-tight bluejeans and their hair streaming loose, the others in long robes and their heads hidden behind the *hijab*, the Islamic scarf, bear witness to a schizophrenic society in which everyone is seeking an identity, each in his own way.

[23 Aug 84 p 4]

[Text] III. The Buoy of Islam

The frantic consumption encouraged by the policy of *infitah* has not put the economy back on its feet. In order to try to rectify the situation, President Mubarak has made slight corrections in the operation of the *infitah* and is trying to assume his distance from American policy. However, the disarray roused by a schizophrenic society in the midst of change has engendered an identity crisis that feeds the constantly expanding Islamic current (LE MONDE, 21, 22 August).

Cairo--"In a year, in two years, the Muslim extremists will be in power in Egypt," murmurs Husayn Amin, director of the Diplomatic Academy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a disillusioned way. Amin is mainly known for his writings favoring a secular state. Farag Fouda, who wages the same fight, is just as pessimistic: "Either we shall fall under the rod of men of religion, as in Iran, or we shall plunge into a Lebanese-type religious war or -- and this is more likely -- we shall suffer a combination of the two calamities."

One Copt politician (name given to Christians in Egypt and Ethiopia, most of whom belong to an Eastern "schismatic" church) wishing to remain anonymous confides his distress: "I scarcely dare to admit it, but for the first time in my life, I am afraid, very afraid. The shadow of a uniformed Khomeyni hangs over this country and in the near future, perhaps, the Copts will perhaps be forced to take up arms to defend their right to full citizenship." A brilliant lawyer, rich and famous, our interlocutor had always felt "totally integrated, as Egyptian as the pyramids and the Nile." He once repeated what an illustrious predecessor, Makram 'Ubayd Pacha, one of the leaders of the nationalist revolution, proclaimed in the 1930's and 1940's: "I am a Copt by religion, a Muslim by national affiliation." Our friend continued, in an aggrieved tone: "I fear that the unfolding of the Islamic wave will make me a 100-percent Copt, a supporter of a religious extremism as regressive as that of our adversaries."

Everyone agrees: Islam, in this country where secularism has been the mortar of national unity, is now becoming the main force on the political scene.

Since the law forbidding the creation of a party based on exclusively religious criteria, all authorized groups vie with one another claiming themselves to be the champions of the precepts of the Prophet. In the May legislative elections, they had all included militant shaykhs on their lists of candidates, sometimes at the very top. The New Wafd went so far as to leave out its secular and liberal traditions and sacrifice a goodly share of its Copt voters, presenting under its label members of the Muslim Brotherhoods and more radical Islamic associations, at least eight of which sit in the current Parliament.

The organ of the Muslim Brotherhoods, AL-DA'WAH (the preaching) has been banned since September 1981 and all newspapers thus provide space in their columns for the fundamentalists. The National Democratic Party (NDP) in power has gone one step further: It has put out an additional publication, AL-LIWA' AL-ISLAMI (the Islamic standard), in principle in order to fight the positions of the maximalists, but often going them one better on its own! The same is true of AL-NUR (the light), published by the Liberal Party (Nasirian right), a recent survey of which nearly led the Club Mediterranee to close one of its resort villages, the Magawiche, accused of spreading "debauchery" and "depravation" among young people. The Socialist Labor Party calls for the closing of distilleries and a ban on the consumption of alcohol.

Total Enforcement of Sharia?

All the groups, with the exception of the underground Communist Party, still preach in their programs the application of the Sharia (the law of God, based on the Koran, the Sunna and the different legislative texts drafted over the centuries) instead and in place of existing legislation, mainly based on the Napoleonic Code. But their hearts are not in it. The issue, scarcely brought up during the election campaign, is handled with obvious mental restrictions. The PND, loyal to the constitutional text introduced in 1971 by former President al-Sadat, would make the Sharia "the main source of legislation."

As for the Neo Wafd, its president, Fouad Serageddine, told us: "Our legislation is already based on the precepts of the Koran. Slight modifications will be needed here and there to make it totally in keeping with the Sharia." And if one insists on knowing whether the penal code should "be adapted" so that theft will be punished by the amputation of the hand, adultery by stoning, and the consumption of alcohol by flogging, Fouad Pacha evasively replies that "the matter is not on the agenda," then vehemently exclaims: "Whatever the case, we shall never accept the establishment of a theocratic state!" This is not the opinion of his fundamentalist "allies," loyal to the nature of Islam, which does not distinguish the temporal from the sacred. What would be the attitude of the leaders of the Neo Wafd on the day when Islamic members of its own group in Parliament demand, as they will not fail to do, the overall application of the Sharia?

The challenge will be formidable, even for a party like the Progressive Rally, led by Marxists and leftist Nasirians. Also forced to support the principle of Islamization, out of respect for the constitution just as much as for election calculations, the group of Khalid Muhi-al-Din has created its own way out by stating that the Sharia should only "inspire" the lawmaker and that it was nevertheless subject to *ijtihad* (the effort of interpretation prescribed

by Islam) and therefore to evolution. In spite of everything, one of its main leaders explained to us, it would be very difficult, even impossible, for the Progressive Rally to openly oppose the prohibition of alcohol, for example, given the massive popular support that such a measure would gain.

The hour of reckoning cannot be far away. Those in the worst position will be those with the power to make decisions. Actually, the eight committees responsible under al-Sadat for amending the different legal codes to make them compatible with the Sharia concluded their work in December, after five years of beating around the bush. The series of bills they drafted should normally be submitted to this legislative session. Will the NDP, with an absolute majority of the seats in Parliament, be able to deny the legitimate offspring of its own policy? Will it again pass a law whose text has already been backed by the Council of State, instituting censorship over writings dealing with Islamic questions? According to the text, drafted at the prompting of Shaykh Al-Azhar (rector of the Islamic University), no book could be printed without the previous consent of a commission of ulemas, lacking which the editor and author would be liable to a fine, a prison sentence or both.

State Indulgence Toward Clerics

"It is an inquisition! They are in the process of insidiously building a church, a clerical system that Islam itself condemns!" Husayn Amin angrily exclaims, complaining of the excessive indulgence of the government toward the clergy. Following the pressing demands of Shaykh Al-Azhar to the president of the republic, reports the director of the Diplomatic Academy, the weekly AL-MUSAWWAR, in which he waged a campaign against the fundamentalists, has refused to publish his articles since April.

And yet, the government wants an ideological confrontation, hoping that it will end with the discredit of its Islamic adversaries. But the televised debates organized for the purpose have generally served the cause of the fundamentalists. The representatives of "official" Islam actually defend the most regressive convictions, out of conviction, demagoguery or one-upmanship. Shaykh Sha'rawim for example, probably chosen because of his great popularity throughout the Arab world, came out for the prohibition of alcohol, including foreign diplomats, and for the exclusion of women from the working world. One day, he deplored the introduction of electricity into rural areas, claiming that it encourages laziness. Another government "supporter," Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali, in response to a fundamentalist contradictor who asked him whether or not it would be "legitimate" to assassinate the president of the republic if the latter should deviate from "God's law" (the Shariah), calmly answered: "The question is worthy of debate."

Complacency, a cautious style, the use of obscure arguments in order to fight radical Islam have all turned out to be futile. "We are warning people against secular habits that copy the habits of Islam in order to alienate Muslim young people from their religion by a discourse as sweet as it is poisonous," wrote 'Umar al-Talmasani, the supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood ("Le Prophete et Pharaon (les Mouvements Islamistes dans l'Egypte Contemporaine)", by Gilles Kepel, Editions La Decouverte, 1984). The defenders of an

evolutionist-type Islam, adapted to the realities of contemporary society, just as much as the supporters of a secular society, are combined in the same infamy, denounced as "impious" and "atheists." Nearly all the newspapers hesitate and often refuse to publish their arguments. Some of them, particularly Husayn Amin and Farag Fouda, receive, in addition to moving letters of support, death threats. Thus, "intellectual terrorism, claiming divine right," to use the phrase of the famous writer Tawfiq al-Hakim, silences many intellectuals and journalists, while damaging the capacity of the government to resist the thrust of the fundamentalists.

To accommodate the latter, the government has increased its concessions. Religious instruction in the schools, radio and television programs devoted to theology have been intensified. Real estate promoters enjoy tax exemptions when they endow a mosque with housing. The patriarch of the Copt Church, Shinuda III, arbitrarily removed from office and banished to a monastery by al-Sadat in 1981, is under house arrest, essentially, it is thought, in order to keep in time with the repression exercised against Islamic associations, mainly dissolved. It will be necessary to await the outcome of the trial of some 300 members of the Djihad, who risk the death penalty for armed sedition, in order for the fate of Shinuda III to be settled. The latter is accused of "religious fanaticism" endangering national unity.

Time Bomb

In spite of everything, the Islamic associations, whether or not they are banned, proliferate and sow the "good word" thanks to the thousands of mosques they use as platforms and rallying places and thanks also to the many philanthropic societies they have set up to provide needy citizens the social benefits that the government does not have the means to offer them. Taking advantage of the political vacuum created by 30 years of authoritarianism, exercised under the single-party system or under the cover of an illusory liberalism and the continuing absence, since al-Sadat's regime, of an overall national or social design, the fundamentalists present the alternative of an Islamic state as a panacea for all the evils afflicting Egyptian society. The new order, the very one the Prophet and his companions, the "founding fathers," instituted 14 centuries ago, would bring equality and social justice, do away with the "vices" and "turpitude" introduced by the Christian West or the impious East, would restore the people's traditions, mores, identity and certainties that Nasir's "socialism," al-Sadat's "liberalism" or "atheist" Marxism undermined, even destroyed. None of the fundamentalists set forth any precise political, economic or social program and do not clearly indicate the means which they intend to use to found their ideal society. Simplicity and vagueness are undoubtedly conceived to rally and mobilize the greatest possible number of people.

They are thus doubly incomprehensible, a close adviser to President Mubarak confided to us. They infiltrate everywhere, get themselves elected in the trade unions, corporate and sociocultural associations, trying to make up the core of the armed forces. "It is easy to tell a Marxist soldier," our interlocutor said, "but how can you spot militant Islamists? They are pious and practice their religion, which is common. They lead a virtuous life, which is not

a crime. They rise up against corruption, social injustice, the dissolute life, which makes them attractive to their comrades." Recruitment, the formation of cells independent of one another, done in the greatest secrecy, often makes them invulnerable.

"The wells are poisoned; it is too late to purify them," some secular intellectuals say in despair, like Farag Fouda. Others, less alarmist, believe, along with Ahmad Baha'-al-Din, that the very real danger is tempered by "the profoundly tolerant nature of the Egyptians." Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal expresses the unanimous view: "We are in the presence of a time bomb. The recipient is Islamic; the content, highly explosive, is a mixture of dissipated dreams, disillusionment, frustration, the repressed anger of a people overwhelmed by economic, social, cultural and national problems." More than a refuge, Islam is perceived as a lifesaver in a society adrift.

The remedy? Repression, dialogue, concessions tend rather to give increased value to the Islamist trend. The crisis feeding it is too complex to be absorbed so quickly. The general opinion is that only a democracy worthy of the name, permitting all ideologies -- including the Islamic -- to express themselves in complete freedom, all parties, whether legal or currently banned, to operate normally, could encourage change, outside of any sedition or violence.

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