

A Breath of Fresh Air for Egypt's Opposition

Egypt's opposition parties still cry foul over last year's elections, but Managing Editor Michael Dunn, an "old Cairo hand", finds that the atmosphere of political life has changed considerably in the Mubarak era.

Visiting Egypt approximately once a year may be the best way to spot the real changes that do occur in what, on the surface, often seems to be a timeless and unchanging society: the gradual accumulations of change are more visible if the observer has been away for awhile. Certainly a recent visit to Egypt confirmed that most of the country's problems endure: the rioting at Kafr al-Dawar last Fall underscored the continuing problem of how to reduce Government subsidies, as international lenders demand, without provoking domestic unrest, and the endemic problems of population, shortage of housing, and bureaucratic inefficiency have not gone away.

But there is one very noticeable change, which has come about gradually over the more than three years since Husni Mubarak succeeded Nwar Sadat. Political discourse is freer and more open than at any time since the Revolution of 1952. The opposition newspapers are vigorous, challenging, at times a bit sensationalist, but what is remarkable is that they exist at all, and are allowed to say what they do, in a country where monolithic Government authority has been the rule more often than not since the first pharaoh.

In a sense, it was Anwar Sadat who first opened the windows to let in some of this fresh air: it was he who, in 1975 and 1976, began moving away from the one-party system inherited from Nasser, first dividing the old Arab Socialist Union into three "forums" — right, left, and center — and then actually permitting the rebirth of political parties.

But the Sadat opening did not last long. In 1978, stung by the strong criticisms of his policies (including his trip to Jerusalem) in some of the opposition press, and concerned by the surprising strength of the reborn nationalist party of the *ancien régime*, the Wafd, Sadat called one of his trademark "referendums" and, to all intents and purposes, put both the Wafd and the left out of business. Then in 1981, a month before his assassination, Sadat made a sweeping crackdown on all his opposition, from Muslim fundamentalists to the Coptic Pope, from the rightist Wafd to the leftist *Tagamma'* (National Progressive Unionist Rally) Party.

When Husni Mubarak came to power, he freed most of those arrested by Sadat, and began meetings with the opposition parties' leadership. Soon the opposition newspapers began to reappear. By 1983 the opposition press was livelier, and more outspoken, and — perhaps most important of all — easier to find on sale than at any time during Sadat's brief spring of liberalism.

THE ELECTIONS

BUT THE REAL test was the elections of 1984. Late in 1983, an Egyptian court ruled that the New Wafd Party, the heir of the old nationalist party which opposed the British from 1919 until the Revolution of 1952, could legally resume its activities. Since the Wafd is the only Party in Egypt which has a genuine grass-roots constituency (other than the National Democrats, Mubarak's ruling Party, which enjoys local support because as a ruling party it has patronage to offer), the return of the Wafd was seen as a major development.

As the May, 1984 elections approached, the political climate clearly was different from any previous time. While opposition parties had participated in previous elections, never before had they so extensively plastered the walls of Cairo with posters, and never before had they been allowed to present their programs over the state-owned television.

In the end, however, the opposition did not do very well. The Wafd won 58 seats, the National Democrats all the rest. (Of the Wafdist seats, eight were held by members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the fundamentalist group who, forbidden to run on their own — political parties based on religion are banned — ran in alliance with the traditionally secular Wafd.) The opposition cried foul; even President Mubarak said he wished the opposition had won more seats. (The President has the right to name 10 MPs; when he did, he named four members of the Socialist Labor Party, which had won no seats because it fell just short of the eight percent required to win a seat. These including Labor Party leader Ibrahim Shukri. Also appointed was a member of the leftist National Progressive Unionists — the

Tagamma' — Milad Hanna. Hanna's seat has been "frozen" by the Party.)

In recent conversations with several opposition leaders, *Defense & Foreign Affairs* was repeatedly told that it was not President Mubarak, but the old "Sadatists" remaining in the Party leadership who "rigged" the elections. (Many of those old "Sadatists" left the Party leadership in the reshuffle of late 1984.) Only one opposition party figure — a *Tagamma'* spokesman — suggested that Mubarak was himself aware of the alleged irregularities, and he suggested that the President had gone along only under pressure from the "Sadatists".

Whatever the fact, few expected a genuine opposition party with a chance to defeat the National Democrats to emerge just yet. Egypt has long been a centralized, one-party state, and the multi-party experiment will take some time. In the meantime, the parties appear to be flourishing.

The largest opposition party, the Wafd, is facing serious internal troubles of its own. A progressive wing of the party has split off and applied to form a new "Future" Party, while a more conservative wing has recently submitted papers seeking approval for a "conservative Wafdist" party. Several key leaders of the party are Coptic Christians, and they are unhappy with the alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood. (The "Future" Party of Farag Foda split partly for this reason.) In addition, Party leader Fuad Serageddin had a (highly publicized) battle with his brother Yasin in late 1984, in which Yasin was, at least temporarily, ousted from the Party.

The Wafd publishes a weekly newspaper, *al-Wafd*, which mixes criticism of the Government, investigative reporting, and nostalgic articles about the Party's great days half a century ago.

The only other opposition party officially represented in Parliament is Socialist Labor, led by Ibrahim Shukri. Like the Wafd, it is a descendant of a pre-Revolutionary party, in this case the "Young Egypt" movement. All four of its parliamentary seats are held by appoint-

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ment. Its weekly newspaper, *al-Sba'ab*, is a vigorous, lively, investigative paper which frequently exposes Government corruption and bureaucratic errors.

The *Tagamma*, as the National Progressive Unionist Rally is universally known (*Tagamma* means "rally"), is a mix of old Nasserists, Marxists, intellectual leftists, and others. Although, as mentioned, one of its members was named to Parliament, his seat is frozen and the party is boycotting this session of the People's Assembly. The *Tagamma* is led by Khalid Muhieddin, the only one of the original "Free Officers" of the 1952 Revolution still active in politics. It tends to be more pro-Soviet than otherwise, but its membership reflects a broad

mix of intellectuals, old leftists, new leftists, and various types of Marxists and Nasserists. Its weekly, *al-Abali*, is probably the liveliest of the opposition papers, and in recent months the various wings of the party have been debating, in their own newspaper, the party and the paper's future. (The radicals favor more opposition to Government policies; the moderates prefer working within the system.)

The Liberal Socialist Party was originally established as a right-wing free-enterprise party favoring an increased private sector. Unfortunately, that is almost precisely the economic position of the Wafd, which — once it made its comeback — promptly recruited much of the Liberal constituency. The Liberals were effectively wiped out in the elections, but they continue to publish a weekly newspaper, *al-Abrar*, which enjoys a far larger readership than the tiny voting record of the party would imply. *Al-Abrar* has a reputation for rooting out Government corruption, inefficiency, and boondoggling, and is widely read by a broad range of people.

Other than the ruling National Democrats, the one other party with legal recognition as this is written is the Umma Party, a small, religiously-oriented party run by an eccentric figure named Ahmad al-Sabahi. Umma has its own paper, too — *al-Umma* — but little real support, though as the Muslim Brotherhood members of Parliament become disenchanted with the Wafd, some believe they will drift to Umma.

There are several other parties in the offing. Two offshoots of the Wafd have been mentioned: the Conservative Wafdist and the Future Party are both seeking official recognition. A "Nasserist Party" has been fighting its way through the courts against Government opposition for some time, and the Wafd itself achieved legal recognition through just such a means. Several other, small parties may win recognition, but the main players seem likely to be the Wafd on the right, the National Democrats in the (very broad) center, and Socialist Labor and the *Tagamma* on the left.

If the electoral system — a curious proportional representation system with an eight percent minimum cutoff point and a gerrymandered district system which only a skilled lawyer can really understand — and the realities of Egyptian politics leave a full-scale democratic give-and-take a long way away, the vigor of the opposition press is nevertheless something new to Egypt. (What's more, the party papers are not the only non-Government papers these days: the Coptic weekly *al-Watani* has returned to the stands, and several private

ventures are also appearing. Pressure is mounting among the "semi-official" papers' journalists to allow the Government press the same freedom to criticize and muckrake granted to the opposition.)

How free is the press? In Sadat's day, *al-Abali* had its weekly issue seized more often than not in the few months it actually was allowed to publish. In the Mubarak era, there has been only one attempt to seize an issue of an opposition paper — when *al-Wafd*, during the election campaign, printed a story about how key evidence in the form of arms and explosives had been stolen from a trial of Muslim fundamentalists — and that seizure was overturned by the courts within a day.

Mohamed Sid-Ahmed, the influential and internationally-known leftist analyst (best known in the US for his book *When the Guns Fall Silent* and in Europe for his regular contributions to *Le Monde Diplomatique*), is an editor of the *Tagamma* paper *al-Abali*. In an extremely candid on-the-record interview with *Defense & Foreign Affairs* at his home in Cairo, Sid-Ahmed was asked about censorship. He flatly stated that there is none. "President Mubarak has asked us to go easy on the Army, and not to be so hard as we have been on the police. 'They are all I have', he told us. And we have been hard, sometimes even childish, about the police. But there has been no censorship."

It is hard to predict the future of democracy in Egypt. True, there is much hope in the present situation. But as the Sadat years showed, the nature of the state is such that at any time what the state has given, it can take away. And there is also the legacy of the 1952 Revolution. The only opposition party which could ever hope to challenge the National Democrats is the Wafd. Many people voting today grew up in an era when the Wafd was the nationalist party. (Even President Mubarak's elder brother, Sami Mubarak, is a Wafdist MP.) But the Wafd is also associated with the *ancien régime*, and while the Army is today clearly apolitical, it also sees itself as a protector of the legacy of the Revolution.

The Wafd today claims, with some credibility, to accept the reforms of the Revolution. But there are those who wonder if, should the Wafd ever be allowed to win a majority — and Party leader Serageddin has predicted it could do so by the next elections in 1989 — it would actually be allowed to govern. Wafd Party Vice President Wahid Raaiat told *Defense & Foreign Affairs* that the Wafd does not rule out the possibility of a coup. "That's why we do not want to attack the military, we don't speak about the military budget, which is devouring a large part of the country's budget."

But such a scenario is a long way away. The National Democrats are still very much the ruling party, and likely to remain so. They control patronage, and that guarantees that local village leaders (like Chicago ward heelers in a very different system) will deliver the vote to the dominant party.

It is not, then, such a fundamental change in the system, as the *air* of change that strikes the observer. The openness of attacks on the Government, the sheer daring of some of the political cartoons in the opposition press (usually tendentious but frequently quite funny), and the apparent confidence of the opposition

leaders at the present spring of freedom will not be as short-lived as the Sadat experiment of 1977, is what impresses anyone who knew the Egyptian press under Sadat.

Even the official press is showing signs of new life. What has long been the duller of the three Government morning dailies, *al-Gumburiyya*, has a new editor and a new bite to it. The two morning giants, *al-Abram*, the most respected "serious" paper, and *al-Akbar*, the more popular paper which has the largest circulation in the Arab world, are both still somewhat stodgy. But their editors are reaching retirement age, and new blood promises to bring some of the same spunk to the official press that now characterizes the opposition press. In a society so oriented toward the written word and the morning newspaper — the one great legacy of Nasser, one feels, is mass literacy — that is a promise to be welcomed. ✪