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# The Leftists and Islamists in Egypt

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The political opposition in Egypt had, until recently, been characterised by bitter rivalry and mutually antagonistic ideological positions. Collaboration between Leftist and Nasserist elements took place sporadically in the second half of the 1990s. The turning point for joint political activism came in September 2000 with the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada which gave rise to a very strong spontaneous reaction on the Egyptian street. It created a general sense of anger among large sections of the general public, most of whom had never participated in organized politics before. The Egyptian Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI) established by some twenty Leftist civil society organizations and activists became a locus for a variety of political activism. It drew both Islamist activists and Nasserists who participated either as individuals or union representatives. The Committee organized campaigns for fund raising for medical convoys to the Palestinian areas stimulating unprecedented grass root participation. A first public demonstration organized on 10 September 2001 in Cairo was followed by a series of demonstrations in support of the intifada in squares of central Cairo, major mosques, and almost all Egyptian universities.

With the threat of war on Iraq, and later the outbreak of the war, more demonstrations and public rallies were organized by EPSCI all over Egypt at a level unknown in over two decades culminating in the massive demonstration of 20 March 2003 in Cairo. Almost all political groupings and opposition parties took part. It became a common sight in Cairo's main squares and universities to see banners from the banned Communist party next to, for example, Muslim Brotherhood controlled unions and professional syndicates, side by side with copies of the Quran and Nasser's photographs, all condemning the war on Iraq. Elements of different political groups intensely collaborated and negotiated to plan demonstrations, campaign to boycott US and British products, send relief convoys to the Palestinian territories and issue joint statements to prominent politicians worldwide.

While the main focus of political activism in the last three years has been the intifada and Iraq, this new mood of joint activism has led to the rise of initiatives, networks, and forums for political action around different, yet related issues. For example, the Anti-Globalization Egyptian Group (AGEG) founded in June 2002 by a group of Leftist activists brings together people from different, if not conflicting backgrounds such as, factory workers, leftist intellectuals, medium-size businessmen, underground socialist activists, and unaffiliated individuals. In an interesting development, the Muslim Brotherhood, for the first time since the re-emergence of political activism and street politics three years ago, participated as a group in a joint activity with the Left, the Nasserists, various trade unions, and some civil society organizations at the Second Cairo Conference held in December 2003 under three slogans: "No to Capitalist Globalization and US Hegemony," "No to the Occupation of Iraq and Zionism in Palestine," and "No to Authoritarianism in the Arab Region." Furthermore, there are recent signs of the rising potential of an "Islamic Left" such as Islamists who are starting to articulate their ideas more clearly along lines of class conflict and adopt a more pluralist emancipatory approach partly in reaction to an aging and rigid leadership.

Significantly, this new political activism is no longer organized within formal, bureaucratic, and hierarchical political or civil society organiza-

**The political opposition in Egypt has recently been showing growing forms of cooperation, especially at the grass root level. The nationalist Nasserists, Leftists and Islamists are infamous for their internecine conflict and none are a homogeneous political group representing a monolithic political front.<sup>1</sup> Recent attempts to forge new types of collaborative political action, particularly between the latter two groups, should, therefore, not be understood as a coalition representing three discrete parties under their official leaderships, but as loose networks comprising members or sections of different political camps as well as unaffiliated sympathizers.**

tions but within loosely-established horizontal networks with often fluid and interchangeable memberships and no hierarchical leadership structures. Moreover, activities are organized by individuals belonging to disparate political camps, though mostly from the Left, and not by organizations or political parties. Finally, the value of individuality and the possibility of retaining one's independent programme is one of the main principles upon which alliances between previously rival political groups have been taking place.

## Principles of cooperation

Building an alliance between the traditional enemies of the political opposition has not been easy. The differences in the political programmes and ideologies of the two groups are deeply rooted and might often seem unbridgeable. It is interesting, therefore, to explore the foundations upon which representatives of both groups have based their negotiations for joint action in the last three years. Two basic principles have been employed in the process: consensus and independence. Consensus implies that no slogans or positions are adopted that are not supported by all participants. For example, in all demonstrations, organizers emphasize the need to avoid sectarian slogans and adopt only those which do not offend the sensibilities and ideas of participants. For example, the famous slogan of the Islamists: "Khaibar Khaibar Oh Jews, Muhammad's army will be back," which is often enthusiastically endorsed by the nationalist Nasserists, but deeply abhorred by elements on the Left, has been discarded by the organizers at every demonstration. Achieving a consensus, besides being time-consuming, is very limiting as certain contentious issues, such as Palestinian suicide bombers and how to react to 11 September, are simply dropped, causing considerable frustration to many participants who do not always want to compromise on their priorities. The second principle is not "programmatically co-operation" or achieving a "third way" but coordinated work for specific short-term goals. Each side retains its independent political character and its activities reflect its particularity.

## Alliance as a necessary tactic

The rising cooperation between the Left and Islamists has also come about as the result of the Left's serious reconsideration of its overall strategic approach and, in particular, its relationship with opposition religious forces.

Based on the work of several Leftist authors,<sup>2</sup> many leftist activists, in Egypt have undertaken a self-critical analysis which has led them to regard political Islam as an ambivalent political force which could play either a radical and progressive role, or a conservative and reactionary one, depending upon the historical moment. The conclusion drawn by the Left is that it can neither unconditionally support the Islamists nor ally with the repressive state against them, which were the two dichotomous positions adopted by various Leftists in the past. It is acutely aware of the need to analyse Islamists' (and others') potential at each specific historical phase to devise a new formula for working with, or, opposing them. Furthermore, Leftist activists stress the pragmatic need to work alongside religious groups when they make up part of the opposition, particularly as religious activists have become much closer than the secular Left to the grassroots.

Another debate influencing recent forms of joint activism is the Left's reassessment of its role within non-class politics. Class-based move-

# Political Participation & Activism

ments have been receding worldwide and replaced by more issue-oriented activism that cuts across class interests due to the changing structure of the global economy and the ensuing changing class configurations. The Left in Egypt, as elsewhere, has found itself forced to choose between concentrating on its "historic" class-based mission and expanding its scope to include non-class activism. Those who choose the latter are attempting to construct a language that will provide an element of universality in order to appeal to elements from contrasting political programmes.

The Muslim Brotherhood, a banned yet tolerated political organization which advocates the establishment of an Islamic state and society, was established in 1928. Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya is Egypt's largest militant group since the late 1970s. Its primary goal is to overthrow the Egyptian government and replace it with an Islamic state. It has carried out several armed attacks on various targets such as tourists, Copts, security and state officials, as well as opponents of Islamist extremism. It is equally important to locate reasons for growing political cooperation within political Islam. Both reformist and radical Islamist groups have altered some of their tactics in recent years. Al-Jama'a, for example, has renounced violence while the Muslim Brotherhood has been adopting a more general discourse of democracy and political freedom rather than its traditional emphasis on implementing its goal of shari'a. While both streams of Islamists might have ulterior motives for these recent redefinitions of objectives and tactics, there is little doubt that they have been instrumental in creating a potential for alliance with the Left.

Furthermore, internal crisis within the Muslim Brotherhood could also play a role in encouraging some of its members to seek new opportunities for political action. Growing dissatisfaction with the ageing leadership's rigid approaches and inflexible ideas, as well as the leadership's conciliatory approach to the government, is leading some younger members to seek new forms of activism which offer space for freer thinking and progressive ideas. The 76 years old leader elected in January 2004 Muhammad Mahdi Akif, replaced the late Ma'un al-Hudaybi, who died as acting leader, at the age of 82.

Finally, the Islamists have taken the brunt of the regime's repression in the last decade, which has weakened them organizationally. Perhaps the Brotherhood feels the need to work more in the shadow of other groups that are not so persecuted.

## A new challenge for the state

These new forms of opposition cooperation with their loosely organized political activities are presenting a novel challenge to the state which is somewhat confused by the absence of clearly-defined political organizations or leadership. The presence of various forums for political action, on the other hand, has offered activists the space to move their projects and activities easily from one network to another, and to have different events organized under different umbrellas without being easily identified by the authorities.

In its earlier stages, the ECPSPI had the implicit endorsement of the regime. Later, as the Committee rapidly gained popular support and its activities became the locus of mass rallies, the regime grew suspicious. Only a few arrests of the more active members were made in the months subsequent to the establishment of the Committee. The more violent and extensive crackdown did not come until the aftermath of the 20 March 2003 demonstration when about 1500 people including organizers and ordinary demonstrators were arrested. Interestingly, in contrast with usual practice under the infamous Emergency Law in effect for over twenty years which gives the authorities extensive powers, including detaining suspects for prolonged periods without trial, trial of civilians under military courts, and prohibiting demonstrations and public meetings, the majority of the detainees were released very shortly after their arrest. This could indicate the state's weakness and indecision regarding the best course of action against a widely-supported and difficult to identify opposition.

## The future of a "coalition"

This new joint political activism is clearly not easy to realise. The time consuming nature of consensus building has already been mentioned. Even the simplest logistical steps can become battlegrounds. Arguments over the details of a demonstration or a conference can exhaust the time and energy of the organizers. Issues of who gets to talk first in a conference or a rally, choosing slogans acceptable to everybody, and



PHOTO BY PAUL SCHEMME, CAIRO TIMES, 2003

male/female separation in demonstrations have been some of the most contentious and time consuming points of disagreement. This does not augur well for quick and flexible decision-making in a crisis. There is also no doubt that antagonism between Leftists and Islamists is very deeply rooted. Many Leftists still feel uncomfortable about the presence of the Islamists in any activity in which they participate. Areas of disagreement between the Islamists and the Left are numerous, not least of them being the fundamental differences on issues of class analysis, women, and the rights of minority groups. For their part, Islamists still cannot forgive the Left's siding with the regime against them in the early 1990s. This deeply-rooted antagonism poses the danger of deepening internal conflicts within each camp. On the Left, in particular, the old guard and certain factions are increasingly critical of those who seek the Islamists' cooperation and to dilute the working class struggle. Some observers and activists fear that the already divided Left might become even further polarized because of the new approach they are taking towards Islamists.

The still experimental nature of this new activism makes any projections about the future difficult. The phenomenon is still very fluid and how it develops depends on various factors. Hence, over-optimistic expectations about significant results being delivered in the immediate future are unjustified. On one hand, the nascent coalition holds the potential to become the precursor of a vibrant, broadly-based, and democratic grouping. But on the other, efforts at cooperation have been slow and beset with major obstacles. For the most part, collaboration has taken place at the initiative of individuals rather than organizations. The future of collaboration, therefore, remains fragile and vulnerable to party leadership withdrawal. Moreover, initiatives for cooperation have mostly come from the Left, which is objectively the weaker group in the coalition, rather than from the Muslim Brotherhood.

Without the will on the part of the Brotherhood, the achievements of the last three years will be an isolated chapter. While there are signs that the Brotherhood is engaged in self-reassessment, political observers can only speculate on how the process will evolve.

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**Demonstration organized by different political opposition groups, Cairo, 20 March 2003**

## Notes

1. The Left is a case in point: it consists of various factions and groups including the banned Communist Party, the Tagammu' Party, and the Revolutionary Socialists.
2. A widely read author in Egyptian Leftist circles is C. Harman, "The Prophet and the Proletariat," *International Socialism* 64 (Autumn 1994): 3-64, <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org>.