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## Egypt's Opposition Parties: A "loyal" Opposition

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**Abstract:** Opposition parties are often labeled as a loyal opposition rather than competitor, due to their inability to formulate an alternative policy to the government and create a strong popular base. These shortcomings can be traced back to the foundations of the Egyptian multi-party system. This paper attempts to examine the opposition party from another perspective and examines the oppositional New Wafd party in terms of democratic party structure and the degree of popular appeal.

### Introduction

In spite of internal and external pressures of reform, which have been accelerated since the War on Iraq, opposition parties in Egypt remain paralyzed, unable to take positive action in the process of reform. Opposition parties may be hindered by the government from participating in the decision-making process and from playing an active role in Egypt's transition to democracy on the political level. Many studies in the literature have focused on blaming the regime for restricting and curbing down political parties with all possible means, so that the dominant party system remains intact. This school of thought neglects the fact that opposition parties have not yet established democratic institutions, which would be able to create a popular base and formulate alternative programs. Moreover, researchers explain the weakness of opposition in terms of the strength of outer-parliamentary movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which was successful in mobilizing different societal forces dissatisfied with Egypt's political system. This perspective gives a partial answer to the ineffectiveness of political parties but neglects the fact that the opposition parties' contradicting policies towards the Muslim Brotherhood have led to a drastic mistrust in their party ranks.

This research paper evaluates the internal effectiveness of opposition parties and questions their ability to advance a reform agenda. While the paper does not deny the constraints imposed upon political parties within the existing political system, it assesses the internal structures of opposition parties, focusing on issues such as board selection, party ideology and program and organizational structure. Reforming the opposition parties would create a legitimate channel for expression of popular discontent. In addition, people would not turn to outer-parliamentary movements like Islamic fundamentalism and Leftist activism to ensure that their views are aired. Securing a competitive multi-party system will also ensure that political forces are ready to embrace broader public support. The goal of this paper is thus to identify the defects of opposition parties as well as to propose strategies to enhance their political role.

### **Historical Origins of Political Parties**

Before the emergence of political parties in Egypt, secret societies started as a forum for elite groups and intellectuals who shared similar opinions and interests on certain topics (Ebeid, 2003). However, due to the high rate of illiteracy amongst the population and the absence of a representative assembly, those political clubs did not have a potential to become a mass movement or rise to a level of electoral organizations (Ebeid, 2003). Motivated by European principles, those political groups assumed that the adoption of liberal principles would curb foreign influence in Egypt and improve the standard of living. Therefore, there was an assumption that the concept of political parties, representing the interests of the people, would be as successful in the Middle East as it is in Europe. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Nationalist Party (Hizb el Watani), which was composed of underground groups and rich landowners, was circulating their ideas of reform, despite press censorship and political persecution (Ebeid, 2003). However, this party was more of a conglomerate of different civil society interests, rather than an institution with a clear economic and social program (Ebeid, 2003).

On the other side of the spectrum, the British established the Umma party, which was created to counter the national party or, rather, to contain it (Ebeid, 2003). The Umma party only consisted of a newspaper without any organizational organs, let alone any members of the population. It was led by a small Western-oriented group of elites wishing to preserve the status quo and block any attempts of reform. Therefore, after Egypt's independence, the *raison d'être* of the existence of such parties disappeared and either dissolved themselves or were incorporated in the State apparatus.

### **Lack of Partisanship**

One of the factors hindering the opposition parties in being a credible forum for political expression and an alternative to the regime lies in the lack of partisanship that has plagued them since their establishment. Many opposition parties were created in a hasty ad-hoc manner resulting from a political decision from above rather than by a popular demand to challenge the status quo. This clearly does not fulfill the requirements of being an opposition party, which according to political scientist Nasr Mohamed Arif's (2004) definition, "represents a specific public interest [in] trying to be a competitive alternative to the existing regime through legal electoral processes" (p.1). Instead, appears that loyalty to the nation is prioritized over party goals even if it requires the subordination to the existing regime. Indeed, for most of the opposition parties, national coherence remains essential, so that the unity of society remains intact. Because the notion of this emphasis on national unity, there is an antipathy to the word 'hizb', which is the Arabic word of party (Ebeid, 2003). Even under Nasser's authoritarian rule, the sole political party, known as the Arab Socialist Union, was not regarded as a party but as a mass movement to include all classes and movements under its umbrella in order both to control them and preserve national unity. As the Arab Socialist union became a symbol for Egyptians to rule themselves and determine their own fate, political opposition parties became increasingly irrelevant and political parties began to be seen as an instrument for certain forces to

undermine Egypt's unity and to mobilize its supporters through a single issue campaign. After the end of occupation, and despite the disappearance of nationalism as a sole issue for political parties to gain legitimacy, Nasser's regime had no problems in labeling parties as ant-nationalistic and counterrevolutionary and finding a variety of excuses to shut their activities down. Moreover, the state's administration, bureaucracy and military apparatus has replaced the relevance of political parties in deciding economic and social issues. One can conclude that there is a popular perception that membership in a party and the pursuit of national goals cannot be compatible and are, thus, mutually exclusive. As a result, political parties have learned to not address sensitive issues that could be misunderstood by the public and used to discredit them. Therefore, alternative policies remain difficult as long as there is an attempt by the parties to compete on minor issues and drop their distinctive party programs for the sake of national unity.

### **Opposition Parties are a Derivate of the Political System and adhere to its principles**

In Sadat's era, the return to a multi-party system did not end the dominant one-party rule but tried instead to incorporate other political fractions into the government. The creation of the so-called forums (*manabirs*) of left and right wing factions within the dominant rule can only be evaluated as a top-down approach rather than an evolvement from the strata of society (Ebeid,2003). President Sadat's decision was not motivated by an attempt to enhance the multi-party system and allow for people's participation within a pluralistic system, but rather to co-opt as many political opponents as possible to form a policy of "national consensus"(Ebeid,2003). Therefore, the leaders of these forums were former military officers who had carried out the 1952 revolution and were personal rivalries to Sadat (Ebeid,2003). The fact that these leaders all belonged to the apolitical military class hindered the rise of a new generation of independent leaders (Ebeid,2003). One can suppose that these leaders accepted these posts not to use them as a starting point for transforming these forums into opposition parties but rather as a vehicle to boost their own career and to get a place in this authoritarian system before being eliminated by Sadat. These half-hearted attempts of political liberalization were only effective in bounding together several ideological leaders into the system, and did not give the maneuvering space to express conflicting ideas. Therefore, it becomes obvious that opposition parties were not created from amongst society itself, but as a tool of the ruling party that aimed to more closely observe different views and opinions.

In order to demonstrate the weakness of opposition parties, it is advisable to analyze and evaluate one of the oldest and strongest opposition parties in Egypt, the Wafd Party. The Wafd became the symbol for the struggle against foreign domination in the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was regarded as a mass popular party, which transcended lines of class and religion. After the party was banned after the 1952 revolution, it reappeared in the political arena in 1987 (Hinnebusch,1984). However, the party's activities were again suspended after the regime tried to prove to the court that the party was not disbanded but

dissolved itself after the 1952 revolution and when prominent members from the old Were prohibited to act in politics (Hinnebusch, 1984). However, the higher administrative court independent of the political party committee in 1983 decided after a clear investigation that the Wafd is not a new party and has the right to reform itself (Hinnebusch, 1984) The following sections should demonstrate, why the New Wafd not have the tools to repeat its broad mass appeal and why it is not able to formulate a program which can be regarded as an alternative to the government.

### **Affiliation to Individuals shows a lack of trust in Political Parties**

The 2000 Parliamentary elections clearly demonstrated the inability of opposition parties to exploit the unpopularity of the government and form a strong opposition in the new parliament. In elections, the ruling National Democratic Party suffered a major setback after only 175 of its 444 candidates won, despite their use of local connections and the application of all the media channels for their campaign (Ebeid, 2001). This was quite a shock for Egyptian party institutions, because the elections were assessed as the fairest in the history of the country, due to the presence of a judicial review which prevented election frauds, intimidation and the manipulation of ballot boxes (Ebeid, 2001). One of the reasons behind peoples' reluctance to vote for an opposition party was their desire to elect individuals as independents, as opposed to those who belong to a party (Ebeid, 2001). 56% of the running independents won seats, which means that their sympathies exceeded those candidates who run in a party list (Ebeid, 2001). The trend in supporting individuals can be explained by the fact that the voters have no trust in political parties but prefer to give their votes to individual candidates with no party affiliation and who are not abided to represent outdated party principles which do not find solution to the current date socio-economic contemporary realities. One can say that three decades after the emergence of the multi-party system, opposition parties remain "parties without followers for people without parties" (p.86) as Makram Ebeid (2003) clearly infers.

### **The Wafd's drop of its traditional secular character revealed the internal crisis of the party**

The chairman of the Wafd party, Nooman Gomaa's predictions that the party's 273 candidates would win 100 seats out of the 444 ones available in the People's Assembly were drastically contradicted when the Wafd just won 7 seats, including two in the run-off elections (Ebeid,2001). The Wafd's defeat in the 2000 elections demonstrated that the party's internal rivalries, the resignation of essential segments of society, and its failed campaigning did not allow it to be a strong competitor to the government. The Wafd openly dropped its historical secular orientation in order to achieve certain party goals, which antagonized its closest supporters. Popular in the pre-1952 days for attracting broad segments of society, in particular women, the recent election saw only twelve women running for the party, a figure which does not reflect the diversity of party candidates (Ebeid, 2001). One can suppose that the low number of female nominations is a reflection of the party's opportunistic belief that women are a liability and could endanger the party performance (Ebeid, 2001).

Likewise, the Wafd's refusal to nominate many Copts due to its fear of the Islamic trend has compromised the party's secular position. Throughout its history, the Wafd's secular orientation gave Copts the opportunity to be mobile in a country with a Muslim majority. Hinnebusch (1984) claims that Coptic membership decreased in the New Wafd Leadership in comparison to their representation in the old Wafd due to the chances given for Muslims in the Nasser years to fill important ranks in the government, bureaucracy and parties. But such an assumption remains questionable, due to the ability of the leadership to place Copts in constituencies of a Coptic majority or in urban centers. On the other hand, it is quite possible that Coptic members left the Wafd due their experience of the 1984 election, in which the Wafd paradoxically joined forces with the Muslim Brotherhood in order to get seats in the parliament, thus demonstrating an "Islamic infiltration" of within its leadership (Ebeid,2003). The Wafd's leadership has rejected accusations that the party has given up its secular character and has described the move as a pragmatic one intended to challenge the government. However, such an alliance which would have been unthinkable decades ago seemed presumably the only solution for the Wafdist to benefit from the grassroots support of the Islamists, while giving the banned Islamist movement the opportunity to use the Wafd as a jumping board to enter the parliament. Undoubtedly, however, the departure of many Copts not only derived the party of the largest minority in Egypt as voters and members, but also lost the party essential financial contributions due to their connections as traders and businessmen.

### **Loyalty to individuals rather than competence in party board selection**

An examination of the Wafd's Board illustrates a generational conflict between members of the historical Wafd and those who entered the party after its revival. The board selection is therefore a matter of "clan" loyalty rather than a reflection of the most competent candidates. After the death of charismatic head Fouad Serag el-Din, a rift in the party became clear and increasingly hampered the party's efforts to unite forces for the 2000 elections. Indeed, the race for succession of the party's leadership was a rivalry between allies of Serag el Din and 'newer' members who had joined the party after its revival in 1978 and lacked political experience in comparison. Because they were not part of the old guard of the party, many younger members have attempted to downplay the historical Wafd, while maintaining that the party must reform in order to adapt to Egypt's current political system and socio-economic reality (Shehab,2000). In contrast, advocates of the "Serag El Din Clan" have used their name and historical achievements in the Wafd party in order to gain legitimacy and hinder younger party members from climbing the party ranks. Therefore, historical Wafdist members like Abdel Fatah Hassan and Ibrahim Farag, who held ministry post before the 1952 revolution, were rehabilitated in the party leadership at the expense of newer members who expressed dissatisfied with the regime and tried to use the Wafd as a political forum to counter the regime (Ebeid,2003). Indeed, the centralized decision making process at the Wafd does not allow for the distribution of power to lower level positions held by middle-class members, with no ties to Serag el Din and his allies. As a result, many lower-middle class members of the party have left the Wafd, accusing it of being an elitist party with no interest in garnering grassroots support.

### **The Wafd's undemocratic structure hampers its call for democracy**

Analyzing the internal structure of the Wafd, one notices that the lack of separation of power between the executive and legislature branches does not differ from the government's absence of a check and balance. The centralized power of the party chairman, who has the power to circumvent the party's general assembly and direct the party by decrees without legislative backup does not differ from the strong executive in the Egyptian government, who can veto and overrule the decisions of the Egyptian parliament (Ebeid,2003). Furthermore, criticizing the chairman of the party is often labeled as breaking the bonds of the party and endangering its unity and the Wafd party has become the property of Serag el Din supporters who are not willing to separate their party from their personal policies. These policies were exacerbated with the ascension of Gomaa to party leadership as he has not only refused to consult party members by announcing unilateral decisions contrary to the party's principles, but has also dismissed party members for criticizing his authority. In describing these practices, Mona Makram Ebeid (2003) states that the Wafd's inability to mobilize the people and to use the party platform as a channel to challenge the regime is an indication that the Wafd is closer to the ruling regime than it is to the people it should represent.

In response to the above, it is recommended that the power of the chairman is reduced, and the assembly allowed to veto his decision or to withdraw confidence from him in case of his passing unconstitutional decrees. Another proposal, which would force the chairman to adhere to the decisions of the assembly, is to limit chairmen's terms of power, and hold democratic elections that would rotate the power at the top post of the party. Moreover, the assembly should not only include members which are loyal to the chairman but should incorporate people from different wings within the party. As a result, the assembly's decision would try to create a consensus decision, which would favor most of the wings of the party, instead of just approving the decisions of the chairman or the old guard.

### **The Wafd collaborates with the government instead of confronting it**

Rather than oppose the regime's policies, Gomaa has made a policy of pleasing the government into accepting the Wafd's existence. In May 2003, the party Gomaa dismissed Mahmoud El-Shazly, a Wafdist member of parliament from the party (Essam El-Din,2003) after accusing him of violating the party course and abusing his post for personal interests (Essam El-Din,2003). This, in addition to Gomaa's decision to withdraw the party membership from Gamal Heshmat, an apparent Muslim Brother within the party, have lead many to criticize Gomaa for weakening the position the Wafd in the parliament in order to please the government. This opportunistic move does not correspond with an opposition party, which tries to discredit the government. Moreover, the two dismissals demonstrate that Gomaa does not accept any party "dissidents" and tries, instead, to disqualify his opponents and place his own associates into the parliament.

### **Wafd's membership focuses on narrow class interests**

Historically speaking, sectarian, religious and geographical divides of society were irrelevant in the Wafd's representation of the people and its fight for independence. An examination of at the Wafd's membership composition now, however, demonstrates a majority of upper-middle class professors and academics. A survey conducted about the occupation of the Wafd leadership showed that 62.8% have a doctorate in law, while only 5.7% belonged to the military or the military technocrats (Hinnebusch,1984). Therefore, not only connections to the Serag el Din clan is a key to a top-position in the party ranks, but also a well-respected academic job is guarantee for a career in the post. Raymond Hinnebusch explains the high percentage of academics and professional background of the party as a reflection of its liberal policies. Moreover, the fact, that 52.9% of members own land and 70.6% were born in provincial areas demonstrates that most of the Wafdists are landowners and belong to the high bourgeoisie (Hinnebusch,1984). This formula can never transform the Wafd in a mass popular party within Egypt, a country where the majority of people are farmers and workers. It is doubtful that the party's "intellectuals" can serve the interests of the middle and lower middle class.

### **Conclusion**

In examining the opposition parties in Egypt today, one can infer that they have not yet proved to the public that they are a viable actor in the reform process. The emergence of the opposition parties from within the system explains their weakness in confronting the government and their choice of a cautious approach. The Wafd, historically one of the strongest opposition parties in Egypt is plagued with internal rivalries and issues personal loyalty which clearly affects its identity as an opposition party. In order to gain the trust of a broader segment of society, the Wafd should formulate a party program which reflects the current socio-economic needs of the citizens, instead of playing with its old legacy as an elite party. Moreover, it needs to reform its internal structure, so that the board selection is not based on past achievements and clan loyalty but on the readiness to enhance the party's image as an opposition party.



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