



Situation Report

Date Issued: 23 June 2008
Author: Issaka K. Souaré*
Distribution: General
Contact: asap@issafrica.org

Egypt: The political process between 'opening up' and 'control'

Introduction

On 8 April 2008, Egyptians voted in municipal elections to elect some 53,000 local councillors. The ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) claimed a resounding victory. Yet the huge margin of its victory begs many questions. It won with a stunning 97 per cent of the votes, having won 80 per cent of the seats unopposed, even before the elections took place. This is understandable given that the ruling party had fielded 53,000 candidates, or a candidate for every single seat. A further 4,000 or so members of the party stood as independent candidates. The combined registered candidates of the 22 opposition parties¹ that took part in the elections stood for only five per cent of the total number of seats.

How many people actually voted is a disquieting issue in these elections. In fact, the whole story is very telling about the state of democracy in Egypt. This report looks at recent political developments in Egypt and assesses the political process in the country in light of these developments. While the recent municipal elections are used as the entry point for this assessment, this report wishes to go further and look at a number of other events and factors that provide a better evaluation of the political situation in the country.

Unless we want to reduce the discourse on democracy in Africa to what some have termed 'electoral democracy', we must look beyond electoral processes and consider other factors that create and/or influence conditions that lead to, or hinder, genuine democracy in a country. In the specific case of Egypt, and for the purposes of this Situation Report, in addition to the elections the report will look at three other issues that might even be of more importance for Egyptians than those elections. These issues are, first, the general human rights situation in the country; second, the state of press freedom; and third, the socio-economic situation. But even before dealing with the recent elections, it is important to take a general look at the process of political reform in the country since 2002. This divides the report into five main sections.

This Report follows field research undertaken in Egypt in early April 2008. During this visit, the author interacted with political actors, civil society and professional groups as well as academics from across the board. In addition to the empirical data collected during that visit through one-to-one interviews with these actors, the study also draws on the reports of various Egyptian organisations, such as the National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) and the various publications of the Al-Ahram Foundation, as well as Egyptian newspapers.

* The opinions expressed in this Situation Report do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute, its Trustees, members of the Council, or donors. Institute research staff and outside contributors write and comment in their personal capacity and their views do not represent a formal position by the ISS.

These sources were consulted in their original language, be that Arabic (for the majority) or English. For example, apart from *Al-Ahram Weekly*, published in English, references to newspaper articles are almost all in Arabic with the English titles and quotations provided being the author's translation, unless otherwise noted.

Before dealing with the municipal elections, which were part of the ruling party's campaign programme for the 2011 presidential elections,² it is important to provide a short overview of political reforms in Egypt over the last few years. In this regard, February 2005 constitutes a significant date. That was when President Hosni Mubarak (in power since 1981), to the surprise of many in the country, asked parliament to amend Article 76 of the Constitution to allow direct multi-candidate elections for the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for 7 September 2005. Many consider the announcement of this decision as a turning point in the contemporary political history of Egypt, because it was going to be the first time Egyptians would choose among many aspirants for the presidency. Prior to this, it was parliament that chose the president by unanimous vote in the absence of any other candidate apart from the incumbent.

But whilst it is true that February 2005 marked a turning point in the political reform process in Egypt, the process had begun a few years back, particularly since 2003. As a way to get the support of the Arab street for their planned invasion of Iraq in late 2002 and early 2003, or at least secure its indifference, the US administration tried to justify its actions on the pretext of wanting to democratise the Middle East. This put almost all Arab countries under some sort of pressure to 'open up' the political space. The local dissident groups and intellectuals in Egypt found an opportunity in this call to make their voice heard, particularly through the media. On their part, as much as the various Arab regimes knew that the American call was not a genuine one, the public declarations of the Bush administration and these local voices put the onus on them to come up with strategies for dealing with this 'storm'.

But there was a problem in Egypt. Unlike his predecessors, President Mubarak did not have a Vice-President or a clear groomed successor, either a family member or a loyal party stalwart. Perhaps this is what lay behind President Mubarak's decision to create a 'Policies Committee' within the ruling party and entrust its chairmanship to his son, Gamal, in late 2002. That opened the door to suspicions about the President's intentions with regard to his son and his succession. In September 2004, many members of this Committee made their way into the new government formed by the Prime Minister Ahmed Nakhif, giving further credence to these suspicions.³

This led to more demands by dissidents, with a group of them joining hands, immediately after the formation of the Nakhif government, to sponsor a petition warning against any 'hereditary' succession in the country and demanding further and 'genuine' reforms. With the success of this petition, success at least in the number of its signatories and the popularity of its idea, the sponsors eventually created what they called the Egyptian Movement for Change, popularly known in Arabic as *Kifayah*, meaning "Enough!" Drawing its membership from a wide variety of social, political and professional groups, this movement adopted the bold slogan of 'No to Extension, no to handing down power: Illegitimate!' and chose to make popular but peaceful protests its preferred method for pushing for change.⁴

Seeing – or partly seeing – the danger posed by this movement to his stay in power, President Mubarak announced a series of reforms (those of February 2005 being the boldest) that a *Washington Post* editorial cynically described as acts 'of minimalism intended to deflect domestic and international pressure'.⁵ But some saw in this decision and these reforms the sign of a new and dynamic era of political reform and development in Egypt.⁶

Certainly the Egyptian authorities strove to give the impression that their actions were to be seen in the context of the latter view, rather than the one

espoused by *Washington Post* and other sceptics. They did this through a series of constitutional amendments and by organising various events aimed at debating issues surrounding political reform. One such event was the Alexandria Conference from 12 to 14 March 2004. Sponsored by President Mubarak himself, who chaired its opening session, this conference on 'Arab Reform Issues: Vision and Implementation' was organised by the Bibliotheca Alexandria in collaboration with five civil society organisations, including the Arab Women's Organisation and the Arab Organisation for Human Rights.

Participants in this conference emphasised that reform is both necessary and urgent in the Arab world, that it stems from within Arab societies and should address the aspirations of the Arab peoples. In the sixth paragraph of the conference's final statement, participants boldly stated: 'As representatives of Arab civil society, when we talk of democratic systems, we mean, without ambiguity, genuine democracy. This may differ in form and shape from one country to another due to cultural and historical variations; but the essence of democracy remains the same.' They then elaborated on what they meant by democracy, underlying the need for freedom of thought and expression and respect for human rights as the 'paramount value that ensures actual sovereignty of the people and government by the people through political pluralism, leading to transfer of power.'⁷

Although presidential elections of 2005 went ahead with other candidates on the ballot paper and some reform programmes were acted upon – timid ones, such as allowing dissidents to express themselves through the media – the implementation of other programmes and the subsequent reversal of some have tended to vindicate sceptics.⁸ And it was in this context that the April 2008 elections were organised.

It was in early February that President Mubarak announced that the long-delayed municipal elections would finally be held on 8 April, putting an end to rumours that the polls could be postponed for a further two years or until 2010. The elections were supposed to have been held in 2006.

Both before and after the elections, the government, spearheaded by Abdel-Salam El-Mahgoub, Minister of Local Development, maintained that they were very significant in many regards. First, they claimed that members of elected local councils emerging from these elections 'will enjoy greater supervisory powers over executive councils in Egypt's 26 governorates.' Secondly, the government said the elections were very important owing to their link with the 2011 presidential elections. This claim was based on the amended Article 76 of the Egyptian Constitution, which requires political leaders aspiring to run in the 2011 presidential elections to obtain the signatures of at least 140 members of elected local councils (at the governorate level), with 10 signatures each from 14 of the country's 26 governorates.

While moving around the Egyptian capital before the elections, one had the impression that this event was important for the Egyptian people.⁹ Election posters were all over the place, with candidates from across the board urging people to vote for them come 8 April, all claiming that they incarnated change and/or improvement. But after a conversation with a high-ranking official, previous optimistic assertions that this was a very important election for the ordinary people in Egypt had to be rethought through. Subsequent conversations with other officials even generated more such doubt-raising assessments. It seemed as though, as the election day neared, enthusiasm waned¹⁰. Perhaps this is what explains the low turn-out on election day. The Cairo-based Maat Centre for Juridical and Constitutional Studies puts the figure between five per cent in some villages and just one per cent in cities and towns! This was in sharp contrast with voter turnout in emerging democracies, which is normally high.

The low voter turnout is attributed to a number of factors. First, as the aforementioned official told me, politics is very centralised in Egypt and there is nothing to prove the claims of the Minister of Local Development about devolution

of powers to local councils. Secondly, as we will see below, the elections were held in a very difficult socio-political environment.

But there is a third factor also: the claim of opposition parties that they were intimidated and that the bulk of their candidates did not have a chance to register. This is in contrast with the fact that the ruling party was able to register a candidate for every single seat.¹¹ In fact, the banned but tolerated Muslim Brotherhood and other parties boycotted the elections, arguing that they were a travesty of democratic process. Many independent analysts confirmed these allegations.¹² Moreover, most ordinary people that were interviewed just did not see the point in going to vote for councillors that they did not believe would do anything to alleviate their plight.

The White House put out a press release on these elections on 9 April, which the American embassy in Cairo displayed prominently on its website in both Arabic and English. In unusually strong language towards a friendly regime like Mubarak's in Egypt, and confirming the allegations of the opposition, the document reads in part: 'The United States is concerned by reports that Egypt's April 8 local council elections were characterized by widespread electoral violations. We have been troubled by the reports of harassment, detainment, and arrests of opposition candidates and campaign workers in the lead up to the elections, as well as the allegations that large numbers of opposition candidates were prevented from registering.'

Not surprisingly, the Egyptian government promptly rebuffed these allegations, claiming that the Americans do not understand the internal dynamics of Egyptian politics. It is now to these internal dynamics that we turn in a bid to better understand the situation, perhaps unlike the Americans.

Just about two weeks before the elections were organised, the Egyptian National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), chaired by the former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, released its fourth annual report on the situation of human rights in Egypt. The 326-page report covers developments in the domain of human rights in the country over the year 2007. The NCHR was established in June 2003 as an independent but subsidiary organ of the Shura Council aiming at promoting and developing human rights, consolidating their values, spreading awareness of these rights and ensuring practical respect for them. The Council presents its reports and recommendations first to the Head of State and the Speaker of the Shura Council before it releases them into the public domain.

Its subsidiary status notwithstanding, Council members were very bold and, to a large extent, objective in their candid assessment of the human rights situation in Egypt, often quoting other local, regional and international human rights defence organisations. The report highlights the many human rights violations and acts of torture that took place in the country over the year under review. For example, in its introduction, the Council

... expresses concerns and preoccupation with regard to serious and repelling human rights abuses that were recorded in the year 2007. Of particular concern were acts of torture to which many ordinary citizens were subjected in detention centres and police stations, and these acts were reported by various media organs and confirmed by eyewitnesses. Some victims died as a result of this maltreatment.¹³

The report acknowledges the government's efforts in dealing with these acts, such as the decision of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to take disciplinary action against some police officers or even charge them to court for their actions. The Council, however, does not see these efforts as adequate, simply because the repeated occurrence of these acts of torture fails to convince the observer that government efforts or declarations are more than window-dressing.

A very worrying finding of the Council was the discovery of some torture instruments at the Al-Muntazah police station in Alexandria during a surprise visit

there by its members. They also found some detainees who were not registered in the station's official records, something that can facilitate the disappearance of such people without any trace. The authorities would normally tell worried relatives of such detainees that they do not know their whereabouts. Yet this weakens the claim of the government – through the Attorney General – that legal instruments pertaining to regular inspections of police stations and detention centres are being followed.¹⁴

The Council received some 6,677 complains from the public in relation to human rights violations. The report relates the Council's concern about the proposed replacement of the emergency law (applied in the country since 1981) by anti-terrorism legislation that is liable to infringe many basic human rights of the Egyptian citizens in the same way as the emergency law does. The new legislation was expected to come into force from 1 June 2008 after the emergency law expired at the end of May. But on 26 May the Egyptian parliament approved the extension of the emergency law for a further two years starting from 1 June 2008, giving further credence to the arguments of critics.

In fact the NCHR is not the only body that has expressed concern over aspects of this law, nor was it the first to do so. Expressing concern over the draft of the legislation, Anneli Botha wrote in February 2007:

The growing fear that in Egypt new counterterrorism legislation will be used to replace legislation sanctioning the state of emergency in place since 1981 has been fuelled by the security forces' announcement that 40 members of the Muslim Brotherhood arrested recently will be judged by military tribunals and not by criminal courts ... In light of this, there seems every reason to fear that the counterterrorism legislation presently being drafted will simply replace the current state of emergency, thus limiting the real impact of political reform [initiated by President Mubarak in 2005].

She therefore recommended that the authorities should ensure that the primary aim of legislation is the protection of ordinary citizens and that the conduct of the security forces pursues that objective and does not constitute a source of controversy or even contribute to instability. Such a policy, she suggested, is more likely to immunise the country against violence or even terrorist attacks and would prove more effective in this regard than 'focussing exclusively on counterterrorism legislation'.¹⁵

Similarly, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) has warned against many risks that the new law could pose. In an 11-page *Policy Paper* released in July 2007, the Cairo-based organisation expresses preoccupation over 'the use of broad and vague language and definitions' in the law and the new legislation's 'excessive or impermissible derogation from human rights obligations, undermining the absolute prohibition against torture and ill-treatment, sustaining abusive arrest and detention policies and the violation of fair trial guarantees, restricting freedom of expression to criminalize incitement of terrorism, and allowing arbitrary and unlawful interference with the right to privacy'.¹⁶

It is imperative that the Egyptian authorities heed these calls and ensure the protection of citizens' fundamental rights. This does not apply only to the anti-terrorism law, but should apply to the general conduct of security and law enforcement forces of all categories. Evidently, without such a serious reform, elections will be of no utility to the millions of Egyptians who are yearning for genuine political and socio-economic reform.

On 13 September 2007, a state court in Cairo sentenced the editors of four of Egypt's independent newspapers to one year in prison and fined them each 20,000 Egyptian pounds (about US\$3,500) for publishing, in 2006, false information 'likely to disturb public order'. They were all released on bail pending their appeal but each had to pay a further 10,000 Egyptian pounds for this bail. The four editors are Ibrahim Issa (of the daily *Al-Dustur*), Adel Hammouda (of the weekly

Al-Fajr), Wael Al-Ebrashi (of the weekly *Sawt Al-Ummah*), and Abdel Halim Qandil (former editor of the weekly *Al-Karamah*).

This case was filed by some militants of the ruling party accusing the four editors of defaming President Hosni Mubarak and some senior officials of the party. In the 13 September ruling, however, the court dismissed the defamation charges, but upheld the charges pertaining to publication of false news in bad faith, which, according to Article 188 of the Egyptian Penal Code, carries a maximum one-year prison sentence and a fine of up to 20,000 Egyptian pounds.

Two days earlier, in a separate case, Ibrahim Issa was charged with 'publishing rumours' regarding the alleged poor or deteriorating health of President Mubarak. He was due to appear in court on 1 October 2007 but this was postponed until 26 October. He was finally sentenced to six months in prison on 26 March 2008 with the possibility of appeal.

As a Human Rights Watch press release shows, these developments follow similar cases in Egypt in the past few months.¹⁷ Just to mention one such case, in May 2007 a Cairo criminal court sentenced the Al-Jazeera journalist Howayda Taha Mitwalli to six months in prison *in absentia* (as she was in Qatar) for a documentary she had made about alleged torture in Egypt. About five months earlier, she had been briefly arrested and her videotapes confiscated at Cairo airport.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, these developments have led to heated debate both within Egypt and outside the country, especially among human rights and press freedom organisations. While there is near unanimity amongst the latter that what is happening in Egypt is an attack on the free press, the Egyptian government and its supporters put the blame on the press professionals concerned. How do we explain this situation, what are its possible ramifications for the evolving political process, and what is the best way forward?

Attack on the free press, or press irresponsibility?

As noted above, the recent developments in the relationship between the Egyptian government and the media, and particularly the court judgment against the four editors, have received widespread condemnation among human rights and press freedom organisations, both within and outside Egypt. Speaking to the local Arabic language *El-Osboa* newspaper two days after the court judgment, President Mubarak claimed that he was committed to the principle of freedom of expression and that 'there is no going back on press freedom'. Putting the blame on the convicted editors, Mubarak said that 'freedom means commitment, responsibility not instigating chaos.'¹⁹

But the independent press and human rights organisations see things differently. In a statement released the day after the court ruling against the four editors, the Egyptian Press Syndicate considered the sentences a 'declaration of war on press freedom'.²⁰ It must be noted, however, that the Syndicate is dominated by the opposition. Without necessarily insinuating that these assessments are biased, the composition of the Press Syndicate explains such 'audacious declarations' in a country that is criticised for its crack down on the freedom of expression.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch described the sentences as a continuation of a 'series of attacks on free press in Egypt,' with the latter calling on the Egyptian government 'to repeal laws that allow authorities to imprison writers and editors solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression.'²¹

Reporters Without Borders (RSF from its French acronym) made a similar statement, claiming that what was happening in Egypt was a 'crack down on independent publications which had enjoyed a relative respite in recent years'.²²

Indeed, the past few years have seen some improvements in Egypt, in terms of freedom of expression and a relative tolerance for political dissent, as noted above. The recent developments therefore beg the question: what explains the

apparent change? Karim El-Khasab, of the *Al-Ahram Weekly*, tries to explain the situation. He argues that

... the number of daily and weekly papers has increased dramatically in the last decade, with many adopting a critical position towards the government and regime. Hitherto uncrossed red lines have been repeatedly crossed, and now, argue many commentators, the backlash is setting in. The battle lines have been drawn: on one side are those who complain that press freedom is being curtailed, on the other those that complain such freedom is being abused.²³

Ammar Ali Hassan, the Director of the Cairo-based Middle East Studies and Research Centre, offers an even more insightful analysis of the situation. In his view, the reforms that critics think are being reversed were adopted by the Egyptian authorities in response to 'pressures' that Washington put on Arab regimes to democratise, especially during the preparations for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. 'As much as they realised that Washington was acting out of self-interest,' argues Hassan, 'the Egyptian government's need not to anger the US brought some positive developments, notably a broader margin for freedom of assembly, some freedom to organise protests and relative fair parliamentary elections.'²⁴

Indeed, as noted above, the Americans were never sincere in these calls, simply because they are aware of those who would be likely to benefit from a level playing field and free and fair elections in many Arab countries, particularly Egypt. Those who are likely to emerge from such open contests are not generally of the type of people that Washington would like to see in charge of these 'strategic' countries. In response to Republican Party criticisms that the US was putting undue emphasis on democratisation in the world as one of the key principles of its foreign policy – though this has in fact been more in rhetoric than in practice – Strobe Talbott, US Deputy Secretary of State in the Clinton Democratic administration, wrote back in 1996: 'Support for democracy is not an absolute imperative that automatically takes precedence over [our] competing goals; rather... [we adjudge] our *circumstances and our interests* to justify giving priority to the promotion of democracy'.²⁵

Yet opposition parties and independent journalists seem to have taken these calls seriously and at face value. With the assumption that Washington, the main foreign backer of the Mubarak regime, is on their side, they have made more demands and even crossed some red lines. But now that the American 'pressures' seem to have waned, because the rationale behind them is no longer as it was, the authorities in Cairo do not feel 'obliged' to preserve the reforms that were instituted because of that external momentum.

But does this mean that the authorities are justified in stifling the free press, or that they must always wait for foreign pressure before initiating reforms which are, after all, in their own interest? Certainly not, and this is why it is important that the authorities protect these fundamental rights. It is true that media professionals ought to be responsible in their reporting. However, most of what the authorities currently describe as 'irresponsible reporting' does not seem to be so.²⁶ The authorities should therefore revise laws pertaining to freedom of the press and in doing so rethink questionable judgments, especially about 'irresponsible' acts by media professionals.

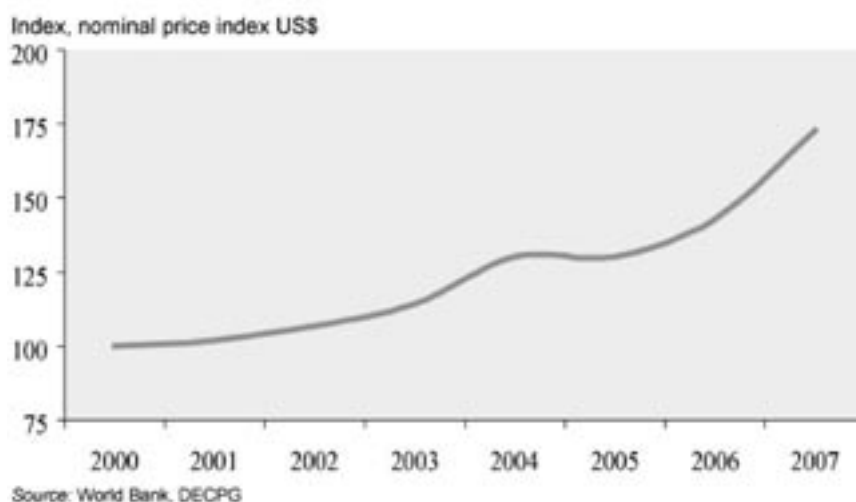
The elections were organised in a very difficult social-economic environment. Just two days before the elections, scores of angry people took to the streets to protest against the rising cost of living and high prices of basic commodities, particularly of a special brand of bread popularly called *aish* (food or livelihood). It must be acknowledged however that the ongoing problem of rising food prices is a global phenomenon that is not limited to Egypt; and the new price of the *aish* is equivalent to just under three US cents. The government is doing its best to deal with this issue, but all its policies are not consensual.

In its *Crop Prospects and Food Situation* report released in February this year, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) announced that as many

as 36 countries around the world were in crisis as a result of higher food prices and would require external assistance. Of those 36 countries, 21 were in Africa. Although Mauritania is the only North African country on the list, the report notes that North African countries rely heavily on wheat imports from the international market to cover their consumption needs; it points out that countries such as Egypt are expected to import from 47 to 56 per cent of their domestic wheat consumption this year.²⁷ This situation has undoubtedly led to a rise in prices of bread and other basic food in Egypt, causing the unrest in early and late April.²⁸

The World Bank attributes the situation to many factors, including higher energy and fertiliser prices; increased demand for biofuels, especially in the US and the European Union; and droughts in Australia and other countries. As shown in the graph below, the Bank notes that wheat prices have increased by 200 per cent, and overall food prices have risen by 75 per cent since the turn of the century. While it acknowledges that adjusting for exchange rates and domestic inflation reduces the price increases faced by developing countries, it argues that these increases are still severe for millions of poor consumers.²⁹

Overall food prices (US\$) up 75 percent since 2000



In their attempts to handle this crisis, governments of affected countries have put in place a series of measures aimed at offsetting the sharp increase in world prices, including tariff exemptions, price controls, and subsidies. Many measures announced by the Egyptian government in March this year were in line with this policy. For example, Ali Meselhi, Minister of Social Solidarity, announced that the government had decided to increase the quota of subsidised flour in governorates with denser population. He announced that the government would severely punish any baker found in violation of this measure, for example by reselling subsidised flour at a higher price. He warned that such people would be prosecuted. Moreover, some governors ordered the reopening of a number of bakeries that were previously shut down for violating regulations. The intention was that opening these outlets would help minimise crowding in front of bakeries.³⁰

But these measures do not seem to have succeeded in solving the problem, especially the impact of the price rises on the poor. The number of strikes or attempted strikes seen in the country since the beginning of the year attests to this. One of the main strikes was the general strike on 6 April over price increases and low wages, which was sponsored by a coalition of political parties, movements and professional groups, including the Lawyers' Syndicate.³¹ Other events include the peaceful 23 April protest by medical doctors, and the 4 May strike which, even though it failed for various reasons, added to this chain of events.

In an attempt to assuage the concerns of thousands of state employees over this crisis and prevent any rebellion in their ranks, the government announced its latest measures aimed at curbing the effect of rising costs of basic commodities.

In his May Day address to the workers, President Mubarak promised a 30 per cent increase in the salaries of public sector employees. Although the President did not give details about how this would be implemented, it would seem that as he made the announcement, the Budget Committee of the People's Assembly was already working on this generous package. Measures needed to implement the package are contained in a 64-page report that the Committee presented to the Assembly on 5 May. But it seems the devil was in the detail; the measures and the way they were presented to the Assembly and adopted by the NDP-dominated house automatically led to a row between NDP deputies on the one hand, and opposition and independent MPs on the other.

The main focus of the new legislation is ways to raise funds for the government to be able to implement this salary increase for civil servants. The legislation aims to generate some £24 billion (about US\$4.4 billion) through an increase in some tax revenue or cuts in some government subsidies. The measures put forward by the government in the Committee's report include ending tax breaks for energy-intensive heavy industries, such as fertiliser and iron and steel plants situated in duty-free zones, and reducing the amount of tax exemption for private schools and universities. The first measure will certainly raise the price of natural gas supplied to cement and petrochemical plants. But the government estimates that these measures will generate some £2.3 billion in revenue. Other measures include an increase in petrol prices or a reduction in government subsidies for this product, and an increase in licence fees on vehicles with high-capacity engines. According to the government estimates, these latter measures are expected to generate about £7.5 billion in revenue.³²

Even though the report provides for a doubling of the number of families eligible for the government's subsidised food products, from 5 million to 10 million, these measures have proved controversial. The government is using this latest measure to argue that the new legislation will not affect the poor in any significant manner. It contends that what the legislation seeks to do is to take from the rich and give to the poor, while restricting the negative impact of ever-rising commodity prices in the country.

Considering that private schools and universities as well as vehicles with high-capacity engines are generally the privilege of the wealthy in Egypt, one has to accept this government claim as true. This is so particularly when the doubling of the number of those entitled to subsidised food products is also taken into account, as the beneficiaries of this are certainly the poor. But considering the very small percentage of the rich and state employees in Egypt in a population of some 75 million people, one has to give credence to the concerns of the opposition, especially as many ordinary people agree with them.³³

The majority of the population in Egypt is poor, and a significant portion lives under the absolute poverty line.³⁴ These price increases and subsidy cuts will inevitably have a negative impact on the purchasing power of that segment of society, who are neither state employees nor amongst the 10 million people that will receive food rations. Even among the latter, the rations do not cover all their needs, including their commuting fares that will certainly rise as a result of the increase in petrol prices. But again, one must acknowledge that the government is doing something, especially by comparison with many other African governments facing the same crisis.

This Situation Report looked at the political situation in Egypt over the last few years with the 8 April 2008 municipal and local council elections as the entry point. The report reveals that while there have been some positive developments and the Egyptian government has, on occasions, appeared to be willing to improve the situation, many challenges remain and the government should still do more to deal with these challenges.

Despite making the elections the entry point of the study, we warned against reducing our analysis of political processes in Africa to one that makes elections

Conclusion

'the' central issue. Without underestimating their salience – which actually explains why the report began with the municipal elections – the analysis must go beyond the voting process to look at other issues that shape, to a large extent, the importance and effect of elections. In the case of Egypt, this entailed looking also at the general human rights situation, the specific case of press freedom and the socio-economic situation in the country.

It would seem that there is a crisis situation over all these issues. Thus, after analysing the state of affairs, this report acknowledged the various timid initiatives of the government to deal with these issues but pointed out the challenges that still remain. To surmount these challenges, some analysts have called for direct outside pressure on the ruling regime in Egypt with a view to forcing it to liberalise the political system and the media. But who can exert such pressure? Hala Mustafa suggests that the United States should be the one to do so given its strategic leverage over Egypt, and calls on the Americans to focus their attention on supporting what she calls 'liberal' voices or (with Norton) 'Egyptian secular liberal intellectuals and reformers who espouse values friendly to the West.'³⁵

But this is problematic, simply because democracy, or any change for that matter, can hardly be imposed from outside unless the outside actor has a bona fide interest in inducing the change. Another condition for the success of outside pressure for change is that the foreign actor should refrain from any direct interference in identifying local actors that may drive or benefit from the change. The Americans, as things stand, do not seem to meet these criteria in the case of Egypt and the Arab world in general.

This puts the onus of engineering this change on the governing regime, with all the segments of Egyptian society playing their role in the process. This calls for an inclusive process that looks at the issues at hand and draws all the actors to the process without any discrimination. It also requires respect by the majority for the rights of the minority, whether political or religious. Fortunately, and all the control mechanisms notwithstanding, Egypt has a sizeable intellectual community, both at home and abroad. A number of civil society organisations and professional movements have also emerged in the last few years, some of which are mentioned in this report. The government should, at least to some degree, engage sincerely and swiftly with these actors in their various field of specialisation with a view to improving the status of the political space in Egypt. It could start by engaging a serious dialogue with them and a proper and regular study of their recommendations. The overall aim of all these efforts should be improving the living conditions of the masses and, generally, ensuring their human security.

* Issaka K. Souaré is a researcher in the African Security Analysis Programme at the ISS Tshwane (Pretoria) office.

- 1 Most of these parties are weak and largely discredited. Some are thought to be a mere creation of the government to give a semblance of competition in the political arena of the country. The only apparent effective party or rather movement – since it is not yet established as a political party – is the Muslim Brotherhood. Some analysts, however, cast doubt on the popularity of the group, arguing that the sympathy shown for the movement through its electoral victories in the legislative elections in 2005 stems more from its victimisation by the government than from any true appeal to the masses. Personal interview with Hala Mustafa, editor of the Cairo-based journal *Ad-Dimocratiyah* (democracy), Cairo, 5 April 2008. See also Sarah Ben Néfissa, 'Ça suffit? Le 'haut' et le 'bas' du politique en Egypte', *Politique Africaine*, no. 108 (December 2007), pp. 5–24. About the weakness and discrediting of the main political parties in the country, see Salama A Salama, 'A vicious tenacity,' *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 789; 6–12 April 2006, at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/789/op4.htm>.
- 2 See 'With the participation of Gamal Mubarak and the cabinet, NDP starts its electoral campaign tomorrow' [in Arabic], *Al-Ahram*, 22 March 2008 at www.ahram.org.eg [accessed: 22 March 2008].
- 3 Ben Néfissa, op cit.
- 4 For more information, see the movement's website: <http://harakamasria.org/english> [last access: 22 May 2008].
- 5 See "Kifaya' in Egypt", *Washington Post*, 15 March 2005, p. A22, also online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A35379-2005Mar14.html> [accessed: 22 April 2008].
- 6 Anneli Botha, 'Between the Devil and the Deep Sea? Political Reform in Egypt', *African Security Review*, Vol. 16, no. 2 (2007), pp. 54–58.

- 7 A copy of the 18-page, 37-paragraph Alexandria Statement of the conference may be found on the website of the Bibliotheca Alexandria at: www.bibalex.org/arf/en/Files/Document.pdf [last access: 22 May 2008]. A report on the event and a succinct analysis of this declaration may be found in the 25–31 March 2004 issue (no. 683) of *Al-Ahram Weekly* at: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/683/re28.htm> [last access: 16 May 2008].
- 8 For a general overview of political reform in the Arab world, including Egypt, and the role of civil society groups in this, see Ayman Assayyid Abdel-Wahab, 'Civil Society and the Issue of Reform in the Arab World' [in Arabic], *Strategic Papers*, no. 180 (October 2007), Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, Cairo.
- 9 I arrived in the country five days prior to the elections.
- 10 I asked a taxi-driver on the eve of the elections who he was voting for. To my surprise, he knew not when the elections were taking place – or he pretended not to know, but he seemed genuinely ignorant. If this man was typical, it is no wonder that the turnout was very low.
- 11 See Issaka K. Souaré, 'Crackdown on Opposition Ahead of Egyptian Elections', *ISS Today*, 3 March 2008 at http://www.issafrica.org/index.php?link_id=14&slink_id=5544&link_type=12&slink_type=12&tmpl_id=3
- 12 I refrain from revealing the names of these people because my conversations with most of them were possible only on condition of anonymity. Some of them are civil servants.
- 13 NCHR, *Fourth Annual Report, 2007–2008* [in Arabic], pp. 1–2. For the names and circumstances of the deaths of nine citizens who died in police custody or during their arrest, see pp. 16–19 of the report.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 15 See Anneli Botha, 'The threat of counterterrorism legislation', *ISS Today*, 27 February 2007 at http://www.issafrica.org/index.php?link_id=14&slink_id=4115&link_type=12&slink_type=12&tmpl_id=3
- 16 See EIPR, *Egypt's New Anti-Terrorism Law: A Human Rights Risk Analysis*, Policy Paper, 27 July 2007 at http://www.eipr.org/en/reports/anti%20terrorism%2007/anti-terrorism_report_main.htm [access: 20 April 2008]. See also, by the EIPR, *Personal Rights in Peril: The Constitutional Amendment Relating to Counter-Terrorism and Its Impact on the Legal Protection of Freedoms in Egypt* [in Arabic], 18 March 2007 at http://www.eipr.org/reports/179_07/179.htm (also in hard copy in 40 pages).
- 17 See Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Egypt: Four Editors Get Prison Terms, Fines', Press Release, 15 September 2007.
- 18 See 'Al Jazeera journalist sentences' at www.english.aljazeera.net 2 May 2007 [access: 20 September 2007].
- 19 See <http://www.elosboa.com/elosboa/issues/546/01001.asp> [Access: 17 September 2007]. See also 'President Mubarak: Press freedom is irreversible', Egyptian State Information Service at <http://www.sis.gov.eg/En/EgyptOnline/Politics/000009/0201000000000000008051.htm> 15 September 2007 [access: 19 September 2007].
- 20 'The Egyptian Press Syndicate condemns the conviction of four newspaper editors' [in Arabic], at www.aljazeera.net 14 September 2007 [access: 20 September 2007].
- 21 Amnesty International, 'Egypt: Freedom of expression under attack', Press Release MDE 12/031/2007 of 14 September 2007; and HRW, 'Egypt: Four Editors Get Prison Terms, Fines', *op. cit.*
- 22 'Four newspaper editors sentenced to a year's forced labour for libelling president and ruling party', www.rsf.org 14 September 2007 [14 September 2007].
- 23 See 'The changing face of the news', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue no. 864 (27 September – 3 October 2007).
- 24 See Ammar Ali Hassan, 'The Long March', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue no. 869, 1–7 November 2007.
- 25 Strob Talbott, 'Democracy and National Interest', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 1996), p. 52.
- 26 For more information about this, see the first annual report of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) on the status of freedom of opinion and expression in Egypt during 2007 at <http://openarab.net/en/reports/opinion/index.shtml> [access: 10 May 2008].
- 27 See FAO, at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/ah881e/ah881e07.htm#21> 13 February 2008 [access: 15 May 2008].
- 28 See Mona El-Fiqi, 'The heat is still on', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 890, 27 March – 2 April 2008 at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/890/ec4.htm>
- 29 See <http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/0,,contentMDK:21665883~pagePK:64165401~piPK:64165026~theSitePK:469372,00.html> [Access: 15 May 2008].
- 30 El-Fiqi, *op. cit.*
- 31 See the front page of the 7 April edition of all the major independent papers in Egypt [in Arabic], particularly *Al-Wafd* (vol. 22, no. 6585); *ElBadeel* (no. 261, 2nd ed.); *Nahdat Masr* (no. 1239); and *Al-Masry Al Youm* (vol. 4, no. 1394); and the 8 April edition of *Al-Dustur* (no. 325). See also Faiza Rady, 'A victory for the workers', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 892, 10–16 April 2008 at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/892/eg7.htm>. Being in the country at the time, the author was also an eyewitness of this event.
- 32 For an overview of the main measures contained in the report and the controversy about the way in which it was presented to the Assembly, see Essam El-Din, 'Surprise tactics', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 896, 8–14 May 2008.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 See particularly Chapter 2 "A Poverty Map for Egypt" of a 2002 World Bank report [no. 24234-EGT] on Egypt (jointly produced with the Egyptian Ministry of Planning): *Arab Republic of Egypt: Poverty Reduction in Egypt – Diagnosis and Strategy* (Washington DC.: World Bank, June 2002) at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTPA/0,,contentMDK:20208610~isCURL:Y~menuPK:435735~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:430367,00.html>. This report, presenting the results of a statistical analysis of

Egyptian household-level data for the periods 1995/1996 and 1999/2000, makes the following findings, amongst others: in 1999/2000, 50 per cent of all Egyptians were unemployed; of those who worked, 10 per cent did not receive a wage. The report also found that 50 per cent of workers went to work on foot and 20 per cent commuted on public buses. However, as the drafters of the report note, these figures 'are only indicative of the actual state of poverty in Egypt in 2002 and beyond, and it is possible that some of the headline numbers have changed quite significantly as a result of the economic slowdown since the time of the last survey", p. 2. I should add that some might have also improved as a result of some poverty reduction policies of the Egyptian government. You may also consult Mahassen Mostafa Hassanin, 'Egypt: A Poverty Profile – National NGO Commission for Population and Development,' at http://www.icsw.org/copenhagen_implementation/copenhagen_papers/paper2/egypt.htm (February 1999) [accessed: 18 June 2008].

- 35 See Hala Mustafa, 'A Policy for Promoting Liberal Democracy in Egypt,' *White Paper of the FDD* (Foundation for Defence of Democracies), May 2006; 'Promoting Freedom and Democracy: Remarks on the US Policy in the Middle East', *Al-Ahram Democracy Review*, no. 29, January 2008; 'Who Rejects Democracy?' Interview with Dr Hala Mustafa, *Al-Majallah* [Saudi weekly magazine], 8 December 2007; and, with Augustus Richard Norton, 'Let's help Egypt get democratic', at www.newsday.com 16 February 2007. Also, personal interview of the author with Dr Mustafa, Cairo, 5 April 2008.