

# Civil Society

and Democratization in the Arab World

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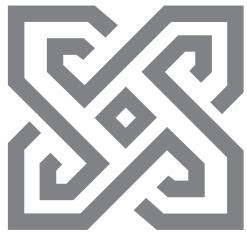
**Mubarak and Human Rights in a Quarter Century?!**

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# Civil Society

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## Mubarak and Human Rights in a Quarter Century?!

In April 2008, the Arab Organization for Human Rights celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. On this occasion, the organization granted me an achievement award as one of its founders and first Secretary General from 1983 to 1987. This is the twentieth award with which I have been honored during the last ten years, having received awards from Egyptian national organizations (2 awards), Arab organizations (3 awards), and international organizations (15 awards in total). These awards were granted in appreciation of my role in defending Egyptian, Arab and global human rights and basic freedoms.

The current Egyptian regime has been threatened by my role. President Hosni Mubarak threw me into the darkness of his jails three times on charges that the Court of Cassation, in a historic, unprecedented ruling issued on March 18, 2003, found to be entirely fabricated. The court did not only rule in favor of acquitting me and the 27 other defendants who work with me at the Ibn Khaldun Center, but went further and examined the present political system, condemning the enormous concentration of power in the hands of the Executive branch of the state.

It happened by chance that during the same week in which I received the award from the Arab Organization of Human Rights, two of the world's most important presidents, past or present, visited Egypt. These two presidents were and continue to be among the heroes defending freedom and human rights.

The first is Jimmy Carter, former American President and recipient of the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize, who deserves credit for

supporting peace efforts in the Middle East and throughout the world. He is also one of the strongest advocates of the Palestinian cause in the United States and the Western democracies.

The second is Victor Yushchenko, the current president of the Republic of the Ukraine, who founded and supported the famous "Orange Revolution" in 2004. Yushchenko ended the holistic rule of his country and inaugurated an efficient transition into a system of democratic rule.

The two men met with Hosni Mubarak, and during their discussions with him, they raised the issue of human rights in Egypt, and specifically what thinkers suffer at the hands of the state, from legal prosecutions, fabrications, and mock trials, ending with the state of supporters of human rights and the challenges of their situation after being arrested. The two visiting presidents also addressed the cases of Ayman Nour, Ibrahim Eissa, and Saad Eddin Ibrahim, as well as the issue of the trial of members of the Muslim Brotherhood in military tribunals.

To the amazement of the two visiting presidents, Hosni Mubarak asserted with the utmost confidence that I, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, am not a proponent of Democracy, nor a defender of human rights, and that everything I have done has been for the sake of monetary gain.

The two men were surprised, because it seemed to them as though the Egyptian president inhabited a different planet. It seemed as though his continuous efforts to delude and anesthetize his audiences had finally ended in his falling victim to these



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delusions, which numbed him and caused him to lose touch with reality completely.

After the presidents' adventure in Cairo, they continued on to a meeting with me. The two presidents asked with all seriousness, "Is President Mubarak misled, or is he intoxicated?"

I said, "Maybe both! Maybe he is a victim of both deception and narcotics." One of them commented that my use of the word "victim" was inapplicable. "How can your president be a victim? Who would be the perpetrator against him?" My first guess was, "Maybe the military machine." The president with the most experience on the subject said, "I don't believe that. For the Egyptian president, like all other presidents, appoints the leaders of that apparatus, and his is the ultimate say in all such matters."

I thanked the two presidents for their concern in bringing up the issue of human rights in Egypt with President Mubarak, and their willingness to take the time to brief me of their discussion with President Mubarak, despite their busy schedules.

The reality of the situation is that this is the same broken record which President Mubarak has been playing to all international and human rights delegations that

broached the subject of Ayman Nour or Ibrahim Eissa with him. I remember a long discussion I had thirty years ago with Mrs. Suzanne Thabet Mubarak, the first lady, when she asked me to be the advisor of her Master's thesis in sociology at the American University of Cairo. I asked her about the subject of her thesis, and was happy to learn that she was interested in studying the phenomenon of poverty and the manner of containing and reducing it through education and volunteer activity. I asked her about her background in volunteer work, and she seemed truly excited by the subject, and the prospect of her engagement with it. Moreover, she informed me of a network of organization that she and others had created for "integrated development."

Intrigued by her enthusiasm, I asked her about the opinion of the then vice-president, her husband Hosni Mubarak, concerning her volunteer work. Mrs. Mubarak responded that he did not believe that there exists a person who volunteers solely for the benefit of God, country or any other issue. She added that he did not forbid her from participating in volunteer work, as it was an innocent entertainment, better than playing Poker!

I return to this conversation with the president's wife---my former student---because it gives some insight into President Hosni Mubarak's convictions about the world and people's motivations. In his view, all activity, including those related to the promotion of human rights and democracy, are never undertaken save for material gain, and material gain only. This man does not believe that there are individuals who would volunteer time, effort, and possibly their life,

for the sake of a general principle, without regard to any special benefit!

I once met two college peers of Hosni Mubarak. We were brought together by the coincidence of finding ourselves sharing a prison cell in the Mazra Tora prison (2000-2003). These two men were the minister and former parliament member Tawfik Abdou Ismail, and the broadcaster and film producer Gamal El-Leithy. They had been peers of Hosni Mubarak in the War College, but they were separated from him after graduation. After Hosni Mubarak graduated from the War College, he enrolled in the Aviation College, and Tawfik Abdou Ismail and Gamal El-Leithy went on to join the secret society of the Free Officers. I asked them if Hosni has been a part of that society, and they were nearly amazed by my question. One of them said, "What sense would that make? Perhaps, if Hosni Mubarak had been even a remotely competent employee. But he never went beyond his short news briefs, or the bare minimum assignment!

The other said, "Because of that, Hosni was not a pilot in any air combat unit that was engaged in important maneuvers, or quick decision-making. He was a pilot in the Bombers squadron, and he didn't make any risky decisions. The high commanders in the staff were the ones who made the decisions about the bombing's targets, the duration of the bombing, and what type of bombs to use. After all, what use are the bombers without the proper leadership? Pilots in this sense cannot be more than carriers of cargo. They do only what is asked of them..."

More than a quarter of a century has passed between my talk with Mubarak's wife (Suzanne, 1978) and my conversations with my school mates (Tawfik Abdou Ismail and Gamal El-Leithy, 2002) and the two presidents Jimmy Carter and Victor Yushchenko who both met with Hosni Mubarak in April, 2008. From these discussions about Hosni Mubarak, we have gathered pieces of his personality, and these snippets undermine any deserving quality that would make



him a worthy candidate to be president of Egypt. Yet he did become president and has continued to rule for the past 27 years, making him the third longest ruler of Egypt---after Ramses the Second, who ruled for 44 years, and Muhammad Ali, who ruled for 40 years.

So, what indeed are Mubarak's qualifications?

1. He is an exceptionally disciplined government worker.
2. He is a cautious and clever person, neither adventurous nor willing to take any risks.
3. He has not participated in his life, all 80 years of it, in any volunteer activity, and never joined any society or political party.
4. He was not elected into any position, in any competitive activity, but was always appointed by a mediator or by higher leadership.
5. He has never in his life resigned from any work or position to which he was appointed by others.

Based on these characteristics and descriptions, it is not surprising that it is difficult for Hosni Mubarak to understand and accept the idea of people who volunteer, those who are prepared to take risks, accepting the possibility of victimization in a noble cause. He doesn't believe that intelligent people can do any of these things. If he had to give a name to the people who do these things, he would call them either crazy or simply mercenaries.

All or most of those whom Mubarak appointed to posts within the general security apparatus are also like him. These employees have never volunteered, have never been elected, never risked anything, or participated in any political party during their lives. When they deliver their general security reports about political and human rights activity, thus from his perspective, people who do care of these things can only be agents of foreign powers, or are pure and simple mercenaries working for their own monetary interests.



These are thoughts and the vision that Mubarak believes in and which he repeats over and over like a broken record, to all his foreign guests.

It is clear that none of Mubarak's advisors inform him of the awards which I was honored to receive from numerous institutions in the four corners of the world; and thus, in ignorance of this, Mubarak continues to reiterate the same worn out record. ■

May the Almighty help us.



## What does a failed strike mean?

On May 4, 2008, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak celebrated his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. In a country such as Egypt---where 45% of the population survives on less than \$2 per day, people die while waiting in bread lines, and inflation of prices runs even more rampant than in the rest of the world---one might wonder what President Mubarak had to celebrate. But it seems that Mubarak got his birthday wish. The streets of Cairo were bustling as usual despite calls from opposition parties to stay at home to strike against rising prices and the corruption in the current regime.

The May 4 strike was planned in the aftermath of the April 6 strike, during which many Cairenes actually did observe in solidarity with the workers of the state-owned textile factory in Mahalla. These workers were continuing a year-long protest about their own wages while addressing the current economic issues plaguing Egypt: rising prices, depressed salaries, and a growing gap between the wealthy and the poor. The impact of that strike was certainly noticeable; Midan Tahrir, one of Cairo's busiest squares, was empty of people and traffic, replaced by groups of soldiers and generals sipping tea outside the shops lining the midan.

Both strikes were not as widespread as predicted and considered a disappointment by many. Others knew better than to hope for a positive outcome. However, neither strike could be dubbed a complete failure because of the important new developments that have occurred within the last month in Cairo.

One of the most important lessons from these strikes is that the government took the strikes---or at least the threat of the strikes---seriously. The police presence in the city, particularly in downtown

Cairo, was impressive. Numerous olive green trucks full of soldiers crowded Mohammed Mahmoud Street across from the American University in Cairo's campus. During the April 6 strike, soldiers actually lined the sidewalk and hurried along anyone who might pause for too long. Powered by the emergency law, the government preemptively arrested a number of opposition party leaders and others implicated in planning the strike on April 5.

Mubarak also responded to some of the demands of the strike. He recently ordered the army to help increase bread production and announced a 30% pay increase for public sector jobs during his International Labor Day speech on May 3. Unfortunately, this ended up being a temporary solution for portion of Egypt's suffering population. Two days later, a bill passed by the government raised oil prices by 58% and cigarette prices by 10% to cover the pay increase. Suffering Egyptians were hit where it hurts the most---their pockets.

Also noteworthy is that the strikes utilized new forms of communication and technology in order to mobilize a large group of people. A young Egyptian woman named Esraa Abd El-Fattah created a Facebook group for those participating in the April 6<sup>th</sup> strike and almost 70,000 people joined. She was arrested and detained for a number of weeks after the strike, emphasizing the importance of the Facebook medium.

Similar tactics (thankfully, without the arrests) were used on May 4. The Pan-Arab newspaper, *Al-Hayat*, reported that 150,000 people joined a group in solidarity with today's strike. Text messaging was also important in both strikes' coordination. When a frustrated friend realized she

couldn't text message from her phone, she was told by her service Provider that that the company was given orders to shut off the text messaging function on all unregistered phones in anticipation of their use during the strike. The use of the internet and mobile phones to mobilize participation in the strikes led one columnist in *Masri Al-Yom* to announce the end of the era of political parties in Egypt.

The strikes and their seeming failures prove two important points. The first is that there is a distinction between internet movements and actual movements. Editorialists here continue to emphasize the difference between the internet world of blogging, where words are sometimes just that, and the real world of street protest action. Egypt has a vibrant and critical blogging scene, yet it has failed to translate into cohesive opposition support and failed to help the strikes succeed.

The second point is perhaps the most important. Today, I asked my cab driver, the newspaper salesman and the fruit vendor near my apartment, the barista in Costa Coffee downtown the same questions about the strike. Few knew any of the details, and those who did said they would not and could not participate because of the economics of missing a day of work. Magdi, the cab driver, said that he couldn't afford it: "How can I afford to strike when I can't afford bread?" Those who most need the changes the strikes demand cannot afford to demand them.

Until the majority of Egyptians are economically stable enough to take a day off to protest, major change cannot and will not occur.

Perhaps, then, the current situation is something which Mubarak can celebrate. ■

\*Elizabeth Nugent is a Cairo-based US Fulbright Fellow, 2007-2008. This article is reprinted here with the author's permission, and originally appeared in Daily News Egypt.

*Hassan Elsawaf*

## Oppression, Face-Book and the Price of Freedom

Is it true that 'every nation deserves its ruler'? Is it fair to expect that people living under brutal tyranny bear the brunt of the burden of ridding themselves of their oppressors, with only themselves to blame for their predicament? Given the measures modern tyrants are prepared to take to thwart any attempt to oust them, is it realistic to wait for indigenous unsupported resistance from those whose main concern is usually where their next meal is coming from?

It is safe to assume that living in a developed democracy is everybody's aspiration and bizarre to think that some people prefer tyranny over freedom. This notion is perpetrated by those benefiting from tyranny and is purely about self interest. True that most nations now living in blissful freedom have never had it presented to them on a silver platter. Even so, the argument that freedom must be won the same way it was won centuries ago lacks weight in view of the evolution the world has gone through in the interim. Democratic accomplishments can now be replicated without undue suffering.

One of the important factors that give traction to freedom movements in oppressed societies is pressure from the outside world. International support for popular uprisings is invariably crucial if results are to be achieved. In today's communications-technology-infested world it is hard to imagine an indifferent international reaction to obvious abuse by a tyrant of his people. It is also true that the despots can seldom afford to live in isolation, especially when---as is usually the case in dictatorships---there

is strong reliance on the outside world merely to avert famine.

The next question to dwell on is: how much suffering must a nation fighting for its freedom endure before the outside world decides to intervene? In most cases the bar is rather high and horrendous stories are heard of dozens or even hundreds of protestors being culled by the security forces before any semblance of international sympathy can take shape. That is why Burma and, more recently Tibet, managed to attract much global attention

In order to better compare between nations fighting for freedom in terms of how much they are prepared to sacrifice, we must first understand the odds they face, meaning that some have more manoeuvring room than others. Therefore, the perception the world has of how far a people are prepared to go in their quest for emancipation can be skewed since it is a function of how daunting those odds are.

There are factors that strongly influence the odds, none more significant than the number of state security forces, since it is a direct reflection of degree of regime brutality. In this definition of 'security forces' traffic policemen and other officials in charge of crime investigation and all the jobs that have to do with the wellbeing of the common citizen are not included. The term refers to riot police and intelligence personnel and all the human elements needed to play big brother.

For the sake of this analysis, as well as for general reference purposes, let us concoct a standard called the 'oppression ratio', 'O.R.' It is a loose



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guideline obtained by dividing the number of security forces by the overall population, by no means an accurate measure of oppression, merely an approximate indicator of how to gauge it, designed to come closer to understanding how oppressed a country really is.

I would like to propose an O.R. of 4 per mill, or 0.4%, as a threshold above which a country is to be considered oppressive. The figure has been selected on an arbitrary basis and is based purely on personal judgment; it can be modified, if found wanting. By taking a look at the advanced nations of Europe, say, you will actually find it lower, which is a clear sign that when people are free, state security is needed less and is therefore lax. Plainly, there is a strong link between the degree of oppression and the number of security personnel required. Moreover, not all dictatorships can be judged on an equal footing when it comes to tolerance levels of opposition, since some are more tightly controlled than others.

The primary aim of using the O.R. methodology is to make it easier for the outside world to judge when to intervene on behalf of freedom-seekers. If the O.R. is high, the bar must be lowered in determining when to

apply international pressure, which means less can be expected in the way of sacrifice and willingness to take risks by the masses demanding their rights. If the ratio is lower, then the local population is evidently required to do more to demonstrate its commitment.

The Ukraine probably had a much lower O.R. at the time of the Orange Revolution than present day China has; which means that the Chinese, under Ukrainian security conditions, could well have achieved a similar result, leading to the conclusion that judging how much the Chinese yearn for freedom must not be based on the same parameters as the Ukraine.

In that sense Egypt is in a situation resembling China's.

Why can't the people of Egypt rise and insist on ending their authoritarian way of life? It is a question that has baffled many a political analyst and continues to haunt the enlightened segment of Egyptian society aware of how much better life can become with the end of tyranny. It has also confounded foreign observers keen to push Egypt ahead with concerted international support for political reform that only stems from popular uprising and much local suffering. Perhaps invoking the O.R. concept can make matters simpler.

In the never-ending discussion to come to terms with how to deal with Egypt's myriad problems there is no escaping the firm assertion that any change can only spring from within Egyptian society, a sort of 'do-it-yourself' mentality. Egyptians, the argument continues, do not deserve their freedom because they have not fought for it with

sufficient zest. Look at the nations of Eastern Europe in the wake of the collapse of communism and, more recently, the Ukraine. They rose in droves to oppose their oppressive rulers and managed to make an impression that resulted in having their voices heard and in forcing change. Even the oppressed of Zimbabwe are struggling to get rid of their tyrant. So are the monks of Tibet and Burma. In order to earn the respect and support of the international community, there must first be a clear determination by the masses to purge the despots, or so goes the theory.

In Egypt, the month of April, 2008 witnessed a new trend that could well put paid to that theory. In the wake of steep food rises and widespread discontent, a young woman issued a call through the internet for a mass protest by means of a strike and invited others to take part. The response was quite astonishing with over seventy thousand answering the call and unabashedly giving their names. What came to be known as the 'Face-Book Movement' managed to attract enormous following and was spreading like wildfire. It was not a strong political uprising, merely a means of expressing widespread disgruntlement and a demand for action to be taken to arrest spiralling prices; but it was certainly a challenge the regime could not ignore.

The regime has been ranting for a long time on the hazards of impetuously diving into the abyss of fair voting on the grounds that religious forces are lurking ominously and would immediately capitalise. It is an

excuse exploited skilfully to frighten both the apprehensive local population and an ignorant international community. So, when the Face-Book incident showed wide popular anti-regime cohesion excluding the Islamist element, it became clear that Egypt does possess the ingredients needed to effect change without plunging into the ravine of the religious state.

The Face-Book Movement did not, unfortunately, last long. With its customary brutality, the regime quickly rounded up the ringleaders, the brave young woman being the first on the detention list and, with no more wind in the sail, the momentum rapidly faded. Despite being set free by the state prosecutor for lack of any incriminating evidence, the young mastermind was summarily rearrested under the law of emergency, which the strongman had solemnly promised to abolish before his latest 'election' and which was introduced 'only' to fight terrorism and drug trafficking. Even so, the sceptics would argue, if freedom is desired strongly enough, the movement would have persisted and regime intimidation would be helpless in the face of popular uprising.

There is definitely a critical point beyond which even the vilest oppressor will have to succumb and bow to the demands of the masses. Every nation on earth living under oppression faces such a conflict: the oppressed against the oppressor. The issue to deal with is who is stronger. It is, almost literally, a 'tug of war'.

In Egypt the regime wields far more power. The gap is closing but is still wide. In other countries such as North Korea



and a few Arab countries, the gap is even wider. Nations that have managed to wrest their freedom have faced daunting odds but have always managed to narrow that infamous gap through concerted effort.

Now, is it true that Egyptians lack the resolve of others who have surmounted that hurdle at enormous cost, or is the gap too wide?

The fact remains that the Egyptian security forces now number in excess of 1.4 million, having soared dramatically in recent years, looming over a population of around 80 million, lifting the O.R. into the danger zone, thereby placing the country in the category of those needing special treatment.

**Calibrating present regime dissent with an O.R. of 1.75%, the Face-Book Movement is easily the equivalent of the Ukranian Orange Revolution or Tiananmen Square. The international community ought to deal with it in that light.**

The Egyptian regime is fully cognisant of the fact that the degree of discontent among the

masses---especially the young--- is so high that a demonstration or strike, if left unchecked, could swiftly reveal the country's true colours, hurling the regime out in the cold in no time. That mentality has led to a vicious regime agenda devoted almost exclusively to quashing whatever faint signs of dissent appear on the horizon, a priority in a league of its own.

When a movement, no matter how small and ostensibly ineffective, has the courage to rise in opposition to tyranny and injustice it is imperative that the whole world also rise in staunch support and be prepared to go a long way to help. The way things stand today, many western Governments are too effete to back such movements, claiming risks involving trade and jeopardising national interests. Little weight is given to the cogent and practical argument that a confrontation

with an oppressor invariably results in the oppressor backing off if the stakes are raised to a sufficiently high level. The crucial obstacle is that nobody with the power has the stomach to raise the stakes.

The Egyptian regime is weak and corrupt to the hilt. It will not take much outside pressure to force it at least to refrain from arresting those who have risen peacefully against it. It can come in many ways from the Europeans or Washington, not discarding the option of trade-boycott threats which would send the Egyptian strongman scurrying for fear of inciting food riots.

It is not fair to blame the Egyptian people for being complacent when the only issue of concern to the regime is to crush opposition ruthlessly and when virtually no real support is forthcoming from an international community long duped into the preposterous claim that the only real opposition in Egypt wears bellicose religious garments.

The Face-Book movement has resoundingly refuted that, once and for all. ■



# The Status of Democracy in the Arab World In 2007

The following is a brief overview of the status of democracy in the Arab World during 2007 as noted in the Annual Report of the Ibn Khaldun Center. This report was prepared by the Senior Advisor of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, Moheb Zaki

## **Abstract**

*The status of democracy in the various Arab countries has hardly improved in 2007 from what it was the previous year. Indeed in several instances it has regressed.*

*Regimes in all Arab countries, whether republics or monarchies, share common socio-political features that impact and are reflected in their score on the democracy index.*

*All Arab countries are ruled by authoritarian regimes of varying shades and their societies are "saturated with patriarchal values, religious dogma, ideological and political extremism, and narrow economic interests." These factors constitute an enormous impediment to expanding freedoms and implementing democratic reforms.*

*While all Arab leaders advocate democracy and claim that they have indeed embarked since long on the road of democratic reforms, yet in fact the actual results are meager. Arab rulers are far more concerned with retaining rather than sharing power. Thus they continue to wield near-absolute power, and often substitute the rhetoric of democratic discourse for real tangible political reforms that would liberalize their regimes. Nonetheless, very modest improvements did occur in some Arab countries, and the regimes in most have oscillated between opening up (in modest steps) and closing down political*

*reform depending on changes within the climate created by the interaction of domestic and external factors.*

## **The Impediments to Democratic Reforms**

Most Arab countries have been living in a state of crisis, for at least the last two decades, under authoritarian regimes that precluded any real participation by the people. But in the last four years or so, the Arab world has been witnessing the beginnings of a notable change in some countries, characterized by an increasing effort at introspection to determine the causes of their malaise. The Arab Human Development Report published annually since 2002 under the auspices of the UNDP is a singularly frank and perceptive example that analyzes the failings, and points the way to overcome them. The preponderance of the evidence it marshals clearly show that the fundamental cause of the Arab predicament is the failure to establish the institutions of a genuine liberal democracy.

But cracks are beginning to show in the authoritarian structure of most of the Arab states, as people came out into the streets, in defiance of emergency laws, calling for freedom and reform. Citizens' pressures are therefore mounting on the incumbent autocrats to open up their system to greater participation by the various opposition forces.

In 2004 up to mid 2006 a sea change seemed to be taking place in the region. It seemed that the entire region was witnessing a marked democratic stirring. Pro-democracy activists, despite repressive measures by state security forces, became more aggressive, spoke more openly and took to the streets in demonstrations demanding

radical changes in terms of democracy and individual freedoms.

This was most notable in Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, and Morocco, but there were also significant signs in many of the Gulf States, particularly in Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. Although the authoritarian Arab regimes—both republics and monarchies—continued to wield supreme political power, the increased public demand during that period for reform and greater participation, backed by an increasingly critical and outspoken press, promised to develop into a genuine counterforce that the ruling elite could no longer ignore or lightly dismiss. In that period even though little was done by way of creating stable democratic institutions that would allow the rule of law and the implementation of the will of the people, including that of changing their government. Yet some democratic gains were made in most Arab countries, which were reflected largely in a greater measure of liberalization that involved greater freedoms of speech and association.

This development was primarily due to the confluence of two forces: American pressure and rising discontent within the Arab world. But this spring opening soon came to an end around mid 2006. This was due to two major factors. The first was the waning of American interest in pushing democracy in the region when it was seen that free elections, either brought illiberal Islamists to power or enhanced their representation in legislatures. Hamas in Palestine and the Muslim Brothers in Egypt were striking examples; but there were strong grounds to believe that the ballot box will bring the same outcome, or at least a strong

showing of the Islamists, in many other Arab countries. The second factor was the instability within important areas in the region due to numerous conflicts and tensions — that interlocked with American strategic policies — within and between various Arab countries.

And thus in all Arab countries semi-authoritarianism still remains firmly entrenched and resilient. And the heads of state, whether monarchs or presidents, continue to dominate the entire political arena, wielding near-absolute power. Although multiparty competitive parliamentary elections have taken place their effectiveness in terms of leading to regime change is practically nil. Nevertheless, these elections have opened a space for expression for opposition forces and democracy activists. But the basic structures of the Arab regimes remain unchanged.

High barriers obstruct the formation and activities of political parties, and winner-takes-all electoral systems and campaign restrictions strongly favor the incumbent regimes, thus preventing opposition parties from developing significant strength to constitute a challenge to the ruling elites.

There can be no doubt that the weakness and fragility of political parties — except the Islamist — in all Arab countries is a major obstacle to any democratic transition no matter the laudable liberalizing steps taken by several Arab regimes. Therefore, to build up a democratizing momentum the constraints on the formation and activities of political parties must be diminished in order to allow secular liberal parties to develop in strength and create real constituencies.

Of great importance to the development of domestic pro-democracy pressures is the necessity that its forces negotiate coalitions that would garner their collective strength vis-à-vis the ruling regimes. This suggests that

secular parties would do well to cooperate with the much stronger Islamist parties and movements in the common cause of pushing for democratic reforms.

The worn-out excuses of autocratic regimes to delay significant reform in the name of fighting terrorism now seem palatable to the United States. The claim of exceptionalism of each Arab society — justifying reforms at a glacial pace — and the bogeyman of Islamist fundamentalists coming to power in the wake of a rapid democratic opening which were always rejected by domestic opposition forces, and for a while also by the United States, are now taken as valid arguments by the democratic West.

The present US predicament that undermines its credibility could be largely avoided if it clarified and stressed that a free election is but the procedural element of a democracy — necessary, but by itself insufficient to classify a regime as democratic. The US should, besides elections, strongly uphold the core principle values of a democracy, which include the rule of law, political and civic freedoms, rights of women and minorities, religious freedoms, and the recognized standards of democratic governance.

As things stand now, in wherever elections were relatively free, Islamist parties and movements have registered striking gains despite governmental constraints. Clearly, the Islamic movement is organically rooted in the political and cultural life of the Arab people, and Islamic parties are now generally acknowledged, even by their adversaries, as the most potent opposition force in almost all Arab countries. Thus, ironically, despite their intensely negative image in the West — mainly because of their heavy anti-Israeli stance on the Palestinian issue, and their anti-American position on Iraq (standpoints that are dismissed by

the United States as irrelevant and insincere) — they are effectively the major force calling for political reform, and pressuring the region's authoritarian regimes to democratize.

It is not expected, nor should the West seek, that the Muslim worlds establish democracies that exactly mimic those of the western world. Democracy in the Muslim countries should take into account local traditions, and in order to take hold and develop must draw heavily upon values in the Qur'an that extol plurality and tolerance. Hence, the urgent need for an Islamic reformation that would debunk the ossified, narrow doctrines of medieval scholars and show that Islam's holy text easily lends itself to liberal interpretations that are not compatible with democratic values. This would also preempt the standard argument of the Arab autocratic regimes for resisting democratization by disingenuously propagating the myth that should the Islamists come to power the door to democracy will be permanently closed for the foreseeable future.

Of course a crucial question is: what kind of democracy would the Islamists establish if they come to power? Is the West justified in its present policy of supporting the incumbent so-called secular authoritarian regimes and frustrating the will of the Arab masses if they choose to vote the Islamists to power? Under such a state of affairs can one wonder why the credibility of the United States as a champion of democracy is called into question by most people in the Arab countries?

The US classification of Arab countries along a democratic continuum has now given way to a simple dichotomous differentiation: the radicals (e.g. Syria, Hamas and Hizbollah) and the moderates (e.g. Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia). Now it looks that the ceiling of Western democratic aspirations for the Arab countries is simply to

maintain stability in the region while discouraging their autocratic ruling allies from flagrant human rights abuses.

On their part the Arab leaders have sought to mute the highly vocal and popular Islamic opposition by allowing them limited power. This has meant allowing them to form legally recognized political parties and run for national elections advocating an explicit Islamic platform, and in some cases even hold minor cabinet posts. This tactic is adopted in Jordan, Morocco, Yemen and Algeria. However, in all these countries the ruling regimes, through a mixture of covert suppression, co-optation and alliances with tribal chiefs, have so far managed to limit the gains of the Islamists.

In Egypt, while the Muslim Brothers are denied party status, they were lately permitted to run as independents and campaign openly under their own slogan "Islam is the solution." The Egyptian regime, however, was rudely surprised when the Muslim Brothers, despite brutal suppression and vote rigging in numerous districts, gained 20% of the parliamentary seats though they competed in only one third of the districts.

In general, however, Arab leaders justify their closed systems to the West by portraying the only available options are either the current quasi-liberal secular regimes or the totally illiberal anti-Western Islamists. In short, a choice between the autocrats and the theocrats.

But are Islamic regimes necessarily illiberal and hostile to democracy? And if indeed the majority of the Arab people wish to elect regimes with an Islamic bent, would it not be patently a subversion of democracy for the United States to endeavor to thwart that wish?

If we assume that a democratic and stable Arab world is in the interest of both the United States and the peoples of the region then it would seem that to attain that

state pressures must be applied from within each country augmented by strong external support. This means that the United States should support all domestic forces that call for genuine democratic reform no matter whether they are secularist or moderate Islamist. After all, empirical evidence from the Arab Countries that permitted the political participation of Islamist parties—as in Morocco, Jordan, Algeria, Yemen, and Kuwait (political movements in lieu of parties)—shows that the Islamists played by the rules of the democratic game, and were moreover generally the most potent player pushing for democratic reform. It is precisely for this reason that they are perceived by the incumbent autocrats as their only dangerous challenger, and hence are targeted in all the Arab authoritarian regimes. All the current incumbent dictatorial regimes disingenuously portray their ongoing struggle for power with the Islamists as a campaign between the “liberal secularists” and the “illiberal Islamists” when in truth the ruling autocrats are obviously far from liberal and are equally far from being secular. Indeed how can they be secular when they all use Islam to legitimize their rule by saturating public discourse with Islamic symbols, mandate that Shari'a be the primary source of legislation, apply Shari'a in all family codes, discriminate in one form or another, and in varying degrees, against their non-Muslim citizens, and enshrine in their constitutions that they are an Islamic state? No. It is all too obvious—despite the prevalent misconception that the state-Islamist controversy is between two dichotomous ideologies—that the entire conflict is over political power *per se* and nothing more. Consequently, it can truthfully be claimed that societies in most Arab countries are currently being gradually Islamized even while under their current so-called

“secular” regimes.

Despite the denials of the American administration there is no contesting that a major impediment that prevents domestic democratic forces from full utilization of Western pressures on Arab governments to effect reform is America's total support of Israel in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This has led to the perception among many in the Arab world that the conflict is in essence between Muslims and a largely hostile Judeo-Christian West. This perception has driven a wedge between large segments of the Arab Muslim people and the West, and has cast doubt on the credibility of the West's, particularly America's, vehement proclamations of its dedication to the goal of democracy in the Arab world. Unfortunately, this total U.S. bias in favor of Israel has played into the hands of the Islamists—whose commitment to democracy is not above suspicion—who have used this as a rallying cause against the West and its motives in the region. Worse still, the plight of the Palestinians, coupled with the humiliating developmental failures of many Arab regimes, fuel the recruitment of militant Islamic *jihadists*.

While the Palestinian problem does not in any way justify the delaying of democracy in the Arab countries, as many of its rulers have tried to argue, yet no doubt the settlement of this festering problem, that has lasted for more than three quarters of a century, will go a long way to stemming an important source of anti-Western anti-democratic feelings in the Arab world.

Such a settlement will thus open the door for America and Europe to play a vitally effective role in the battle for the hearts and minds of the Arab people in the interest of democracy.

# Extract of a statement by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)

1. The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) calls on the international community to increase its efforts to urge Arab governments to reform legislation, policies and practices in order to bring them in line with international human rights obligations. These obligations necessitate the protection and promotion of the freedom of assembly and expression, including the freedom to establish and operate non-governmental organizations; these rights are protected and secured by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and other relevant conventions.

2. Within the Arab region, governmental legislation regulating NGOs is increasingly used to extend governmental control and guardianship over NGO activities. In most Arab-speaking countries, the right to establish an NGO is conditioned by the requirement to obtain a prior license from administrative bodies, usually the Ministries of Interior and/or Social Affairs. NGO laws include numerous restrictions impossible to legally regulate. Accordingly, such restrictions represent a recurring means of depriving new associations from obtaining licenses and/or of dissolving and shutting down currently existing ones. These Draconian restrictions allow for the classification of a vast amount of legitimate objectives and activities as a danger to social peace and security, national unity, public interest, public order and all what may be considered as being involved in political, party or even trade unions activities.

3. In addition, administrative bodies under the jurisdiction of the executive authority are vested with

enormous powers that enable them intervene in the daily operations of associations. Such legislation also places tight constraints on the right of organizations to raise funds, accept donations, and/or receive foreign grants without having the prior consent of an executive controlled administrative body. Repressive Conditions Imposed on Human Rights Defenders in the Arab Region:

4. Institutions and individuals in the Arab region involved in the defense of human rights face an increasing amount of laws restricting their ability to establish organizations and the freedom of assembly. Simultaneously, "exceptional" laws are propagated to restrict the freedom of expression and information in an effort further suppresses civil society organizations and human rights defenders. Governments often resort to vague and general penal provisions to prosecute activists under a bevy of lawsuits.

5. In Syria for example, the authorities refuse to recognize any human rights organizations. As such, these organizations remain under constant threat of closure. Human rights defenders are often banned from traveling abroad and commonly subjected to unfair trials. In February 2008, a leading member of the Arab Organization of Human Rights in Syria (AOHR) was court-martialed due to an article he wrote on the internet on the current status of education in Syria. In this case the Syrian authorities charged the individual with "threatening the dignity of the state and weakening trust in the public authority, in accordance with Article 378 of the Penal Code." Furthermore, government authorities launched a massive crackdown on civil

society in December 2007, detaining dozens of attendees at the meetings of the "National Council of the Damascus Declaration"; a Declaration which called on Syrian authorities to undertake a comprehensive program for political and democratic reform and to promote human rights. At least ten detainees, almost all leading members in human rights organizations and civil society, were placed under investigation at the end of January 2008, and then prosecuted for a number of accusations, including "weakening the national feeling", "inciting sectarian discord", "acceding to a secret underground association", and "establishing an association with the aim of changing the economic and social structure of the state". Throughout 2007, many human rights and democracy activists were imprisoned in Syria for periods of time ranging between 3 and 12 years.

6. In 2007, the government of Egypt issued a decision to close the Center for Trade Union and Workers' Service (CTUWS) which has played a prominent role in defending the rights and freedoms of unions and employees since its establishment 18 years ago. Meanwhile, CTUWS's General Coordinator faces a preliminary court ruling sentencing him to a year in prison on the charge of slander and defamation for publishing information on the manipulation of funds in one of the state-run youth centers. Also in 2007, the authorities have also closed down the Association for Human Rights Legal Aid (AHRLA) an association active in exposing crimes of torture claiming that it received foreign funding without having the consent of the Minister of Social

Solidarity. Although it was hoped that the Egyptian authorities would reconsider the legal constraints facing civil society, reliable information has indicated the intention of the government to further repress civil society organizations by increasing restrictive measures included in Associations Law #84(2002), including in the fields of licensing, acceptable activities, financing, networking and others.

7. In Bahrain, the chairman of the "Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights" is currently under trial for engaging in the activities of an association prior to publishing its registration statement. More than ten associations in Bahrain, working in fields relevant to human rights face grave difficulties in their operations as a result of abstaining from registration, including the "Bahrain Child Society", "Committee of Unemployed and Low-Paid Labor", "Committee for the Returning of Exiles", "Committee of Adequate Housing" and "Committee of Feminist Petition". In addition, seven activists were taken into custody on the 17th of this January 2008 for taking part in a protest. These activists were charged with "participating in an illegal gathering and creating disturbance." CIHRS has received credible reports indicating that these human rights defenders have been subjected to torture, including sexual abuse, electric shocks and beating. Bahraini authorities have previously shut down the "Bahrain Center for Human Rights" in 2004, an organization that played a leading role in representing human rights victims, and fighting corruption and discrimination at work places.

8. In Tunisia, the authorities have made it almost impossible for the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH) and other civil society institutions to

operate. Tunisian human rights defenders have not been allowed to travel abroad; furthermore, judicial bodies controlled by the executive issued a sentence in December 2005 annulling the sixth general assembly of the LTDH. Afterwards, these bodies put LTDH's headquarters and branch offices in security quarantine for almost two years. In May 2007, Tunisian authorities also put the headquarters of the National Council for Liberties in similar quarantine for approximately a month and a half, and undertook measures to freeze LTDH's grants received from the European Union. Moreover, members of International Association for the Assistance of Political Detainees (IAAPD), established in Tunisia five years ago, have been subject to frequent intimidation by state actors. One of the association's lawyers was disbarred last December and received threats alleging he was practicing illegal activities on the grounds that the IAAPD is not recognized by the state. The IAAPD had submitted a request for legal recognition 5 years earlier but had received no official reply during the period specified by the law. The Tunisian authorities claim that they refused to register the association because its name insinuates that political detainees exist in Tunisia.

9. The reference to specific countries in this report does not imply that the situation for human rights defenders and organizations in the remaining Arab countries is better. Many Gulf countries, as well as Libya, do not allow for the existence of human rights organizations or civil society activists. The long running Algerian military influence has severely limited civil society organizations. Since the topple of Sudan's democratic government in 1989, Sudanese civil society has been deprived of many legal and political protections and rights. Furthermore, civil society

institutions in conflict affected countries, such as Iraq, come under constant violent attack; the same applies to the situation in Palestine whether due to the occupation or in-fighting between its two political parties.

10. Morocco, due to limited but noticeable advancements in the field of human rights as of the mid-nineties, remains the most lenient and open Arab government towards civil society institutions. Nevertheless, In May 2007, 4 members of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights were arrested on charges of "violation of sanctuaries" and brought before a court. They were then sentenced to prison for periods ranging between 2 and 3 years for taking part in a peaceful protest during Labor Day celebrations at which slogans were expressed considered by the authorities to be detrimental to the king and monarchy.

11. To conclude, CIHRS expresses its deep concern towards the constraints and violations surrounding freedom of association, freedom of expression and the treatment of human rights defenders. CIHRS stresses the fact that putting an end to these circumstances requires a comprehensive reconsideration of the legislative measures negating the right to associate, as well as those contradictory to freedom of expression and of information. Furthermore, the protection of human rights defenders and organizations will require working to foster independent judicial systems, including the elimination of exceptional courts. Efforts to promote the rule of law and accountability mechanisms, including combating impunity for human rights violators, must be renewed and strengthened in order to promote and protect the ability of human rights defenders in the Arab region to operate.

*\*This statement is printed, with permission, from the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies.*

Mona Eltahawy

## Generation Facebook\*

NEW YORK --- On any given day, the social networking site Facebook connects long lost friends and allows you to “poke” attractive strangers you wish would be your friends. But in Egypt, Facebook is the stage for the latest twist in the generation gap, playing host to politically hungry young Egyptians eager to take on their aging leader.

On May 4, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak turns 80. To mark the big day for the man who has ruled them for 26 years, Egyptians who have known no other leader and who are increasingly going online to challenge him have urged their compatriots to go on strike, wear black, and write “No” to Mubarak on their money. I know all of this, not through news stories, but because activists publicized the details and demands of the strike on Facebook.

I don't know most of my 724 “friends” on Facebook, but their messages and their status updates have become invaluable to me --- especially my Facebook friends from Egypt.

A group promoting the May 4 strike has almost 74,000 members, up from about 60,000 a month ago. Its demands are a minimum wage, salary raises linked to inflation, and legislation and other measures to control prices. As admirable as those goals are, I am just as in awe of the creativity that pours into Facebook.

One Egyptian posted a rap song in colloquial Arabic that sounded as if it was recorded at a coffee shop -- complete with the sound of water pipes and the click-clack of teacups hitting saucers. While the coffee shop patron's rap lists the country's woes, pictures of t-shirts illustrate the target of the song and the May 4 strike: A black one tells Mubarak simply “It was a black day when you arrived.”

To understand how rattled Mubarak's regime is by the increasing popularity of what one young man called the “Political Party of the Internet,” look no further than Egypt's queen and king of Generation Facebook:

Esra Abdel Fattah, 27, and Bilal Diab, 20. Esra was detained for more than three weeks for forming a Facebook group calling Egyptians to take part in an April 6 general strike. Her group collected more than 60,000 names. She was released after her mother personally appealed to Mubarak and his wife.

What but desperation would inspire a regime with 26 years under its belt to detain a 27-year-old over a Facebook group?

That was essentially what Bilal told Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif when the latter gave a speech at Cairo University urging Egyptian youth to go online to express themselves. The student interrupted the older man to remind Nazif that there were several young Egyptians in jail for doing exactly what the premiere was calling for. Police promptly whisked Bilal off for several hours, and turning him into a hero for the independent media. The state-owned media did their best to ignore him.

No doubt Esra and Bilal's run-ins with Mubarak's security forces were meant to teach their online cohorts to swear off the internet. Not likely. We are all Esra became the name of a popular group on Facebook.

Young activists like Esra and Bilal are uniquely positioned to step into the cracks that have widened in Egypt lately: An ageing dictator and his out-of-touch cabinet are rumored to be the richest men in Egypt's modern history, at a time when spiraling food prices are grinding most Egyptians deeper into misery. Recently, at least 11 people have died while lining up for bread.

Another active Facebooker, Mohammed Abdel Hai, who posted that rap song in support of the May 4 strike, told a television show host recently that he turned to the internet out of sheer frustration. At university he wanted neither of the only two options available --- Mubarak's National Democratic Party or the Muslim Brotherhood, the political Islamist movement that is Egypt's largest opposition group.

Generation Facebook is the godchild of two important developments that took off over the past three years in Egypt --- an increasingly bold blogging movement and street activism.

In 2005, activists breached not just laws against public demonstrations but taboos against protesting against Mubarak himself, with street protests that focused on Egypt and its internal discontents. But that 2005 movement was criticized for being out of touch with the needs of ordinary Egyptians and for failing to rally the masses.

This year's internet-inspired activism has flipped the script --- the needs of the masses have sparked a wave of unprecedented activism among young Egyptians.

When I asked my younger sister Nora, 21, why she joined the April 6 strike in Cairo, she said watching people crying on television because they didn't have 35 Egyptian pounds (less than \$7) to feed their families broke something in her. Two of her friends, also women in their early 20s, were detained for two days for taking part in a downtown Cairo demonstration in support of the strike.

In 2005, the Kefaya protest movement and the Muslim Brotherhood would announce demonstrations and hope ordinary Egyptians would join them. Now both those movements are joining the May 4 strike called by the Facebook activists.

The April 6 strike was sporadic and focused mostly on the Nile Delta town of Mahalla el-Kobra where at least two people were killed and more than 150 injured in two days of rioting. A Facebook group for the May 4 strike consoled Egyptians by reminding them that “God created the world in six days. We can't change Egypt in one day.”

Egypt's Generation Facebook, unlike its octogenarian leader, has time on its side.

\*Mona Eltahawy is an award-winning New York-based journalist and commentator, and an international lecturer on Arab and Muslim issues. This article is reprinted with permission from Agence Global.

# Twelve Egyptian Organizations Criticize the European Commission's Report on Human Rights in Egypt\*

Extract of a Press Release

Twelve Egyptian human rights organizations announced that the opportunities to strengthen democracy and human rights in Egypt have declined to a large extent under the European Neighbor Policy. There is a distinct absence of the government's political will to abide by its commitments set forth in the Egyptian-European Action Plan, which was approved last year, giving priority to economic, political, and security considerations at the expense of strengthening human rights.

This memo was presented by twelve Egyptian organizations, which commented on the first European Commission report on the joint action plan between Egypt and the European Union. The memo expressed the regret of the Egyptian organizations over the inability of the European Commission to produce any coherent diagnosis on the human rights situation in Egypt, and neglected the Egyptian organizations to a large extent. The report had also turned a blind eye to many of the concerns clearly expressed by the Egyptian Parliament in January 2008, which stressed the dramatic deterioration of the human rights conditions in Egypt.

The memo pointed out that this deterioration of human rights is corroborated by the reactions of Egyptian authorities, which the European Parliament considered an interference to international affairs, and as such decided to suspend Egypt's

participation in the Sub-Commission Meetings for political consultations with the European Union.

The organizations' memo noted that the European Commission's report gave scant attention to the recent constitutional amendments. In particular, the report did not comment on the executive authority's hegemony over the legislature and the judiciary, the removal of judges from supervising polling stations in the general elections, and constitutional constraints that prevent the running of a truly competitive presidential election.

The memo added that while the European Commission has expressed dismay that the amendments pertaining to the combating of terrorism refer terrorist cases to special courts, it ignored that these amendments grant security forces extraordinary powers, and allows them to circumvent the constitutional guarantees of freedom, personal safety, and the sanctity of private life. These amendments, in practice, virtually integrate the exceptional powers of the Emergency Law into the very body of the constitution, thereby making them a permanent feature of normal executive law. The memo took issue with the European Commission's report, which indicated that the sentences against a number of police officers are a testament of the authorities' seriousness in combating the practice of torture.

The memo said that this assessment is undermined heavily by the most recent report from the state-sponsored National Council for Human Rights, which emphasized that torture did not diminish, and that the government did not take into consideration the recommendation of NGOs to put an end to its prevalence. The memo also criticized the inability of the European Commission's report to address several issues relating to freedom of expression and information, freedom of religion, and the combating of corruption. It particularly failed to address the Egyptian authorities' 2007 decision to close the Trade Union and Workers' Service and the Legal Aid Society of Human Rights.

The Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies; The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information; The Association for Human Rights Legal Aid; The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies; The Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services; The Egyptian Center for Woman's Rights; The Egyptian Euro Med Civil Platform; The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights; The Land center for Human Rights; The New Women research Center; The Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement; The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights

\*Source: Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies

# Human Rights News from Around the Arab World\*

## Bahrain

A report released by a regional group, cooperatively with the “International Center for Information Support” in Denmark, demonstrated that information monitoring in the Bahrain's most recent elections revealed various failures in

Media performance, integrity, impartiality and professionalism. This held true both for government-controlled radio and television stations, and private daily newspapers. Moreover, the report stated that in spite of the relative freedoms

in Bahrain when compared to other states in the region, election monitoring findings revealed that the media nonetheless played an obstructive role against the democratic process.

## Tunisia

Reporters without Borders condemned the appalling treatment that Salim Bukhdair, a Tunisian Journalist, received while in prison. The organization stated, moreover, that Mr. Bukhdair suffers from Scabies, and has despite his illness started a hunger strike. The organization proclaimed: the case of Salim Bukhdair detention is intolerable, and his maltreatment aims only to deprive him of his basic dignity. RWB has pointed out that other journalists imprisoned in Tunisia have faced the same fate. Moreover, this fiasco was deliberately concealed during

the French President's visit to Tunisia, during which he discussed the 'progress' of the human rights situation in Tunisia. Reporters without Borders described President Zain el Abdeen Ben Ali as a “Press Freedom Predator,” and it demanded the Tunisian authorities to bring the suffering of the journalist Salim Bukhdair--as well as other political detainees---to an end. In another case the International Association for Political Prisoners Support said that plain-clothed security personnel in Tunisia arrested a group of girls after leaving a mosque last

Friday, simply based on their assembly to recite the Holy Quran. Moreover, security personnel had deprived these girls access to their families in the mean while. The International Association for Political Prisoners Support said in its communiqué that the administration of Al Amery Tower Prison persists to deprive prisoners, under the so-called “Terrorism Combat,” of the simplest rights guaranteed them by the prisons law. Functionally, the prison administration sees no value in international conventions.

## Sudan

Reporters without Borders have expressed, through a communiqué, its deep satisfaction with the release of the Gazira Channel cameraman Sami El Hajj, who arrived to Khartoum to be received by his family, after more than 6 years of detention at Guantanamo Bay since June 2002. The Secretary General of the organization,

Robert Minar, has congratulated the family of Sami El Hajj, whom he had met in Khartoum, where El Hajj's family had been waiting for his return for over 6 years. El Hajj thanked those who contributed to the campaign for his release, especially in the European assemblies. Reporters without Borders added by stating that Sami El

Hajj should not have been withheld for this lengthy period, since the American authorities could never prove his involvement in any criminal activity. No doubt this case is an apt representation of the ongoing injustices taking place in Guantanamo Bay, which should be closed down as soon as possible, RWB added.

## Syria

The Syrian Alliance for Defending Human Rights recently learned that the state security apparatus in Damascus has arrested Syrian citizen Essam El Hag Ahmed Al Dallu after he responded to a security summon he received upon his arrival to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on 18/4/2008. In this case, the Syrian Alliance demanded an immediate solution for the issue of voluntary and forced Syrian exiles, through a general pardon ending this humanitarian crisis in a clear and unambiguous process, and not through individual security arrangements that Syrian exiles undergo with Syrian Embassies abroad (which are not credible in most cases). In another case the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, has

awarded the Front Line Foundation Prize for Human Rights Defenders Confronting Dangers to Anwar Al Beni from Syria. His wife, Raghda Eisa Refqi, has received the prize on his behalf.

The human rights organizations in Syria are watching, with deep concern, the dangerous development regarding the detainees of the Damascus National and Democratic Change Declaration, and their trial before the Penal Court in Damascus. These detainees face charges of "harming the prestige of the state," "provoking racist and sectarian surges," and "founding an association with intention to change the state entirely." These charges are punished by articles 285, 286 and 306 of the Penal

Code. Syrian human rights groups condemned all the arbitrary measurements in place with the Syrian Security agencies against democracy and human rights activists, under the umbrella of the Emergencies Law, as they blatantly violate both the National Constitution provisions and the International Convention for Human Rights.

The Kurdish Commission for Human Rights has gotten news of the detention of a young Kurdish laborer, Bahrouz Sherif Yousif, residing in Damascus. Moreover, in a separate incident, yet another Kurdish young man, Hussain Beru Darwish, was detained. Both detentions were arbitrary, without a warrant of their activities in the public and Kurdish arenas.

## Palestine

On the International Day for Press Freedoms, the Ahrar Center for Prisoners Studies had implored the Reporters Without Borders organization, and the International Press Union, to defend six Palestinian journalists recently abducted, most of whom are languishing under administrative detention.

Says Fouad Al Khafsh, Director to the Ahrar center: "On such a day we should recall those who carried their souls in their hands, stood up behind their cameras to document the Palestinian nation's suffering and convey the truth. But instead, their destiny is imprisonment and detention." The National Monitor for Information and Communication stated, on the International Day for Press Freedoms: "The International Day for Press Freedom passes

during one of Palestine's worst times, when journalism and press freedom is being threatened daily because of internal conflict, in which freedom of expression and media were its first victims." Palestine had witnessed during the past two years some of the harshest junctures in Palestinian press history. Moreover, the national Monitor calls on all international press institutions and human rights groups to put pressure on the Israeli government, to oblige it to respect international law by providing protection and freedom for Palestinian and foreign journalists throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. At the National Monitor for Information and Communication, we look forward for the new year to be one of press freedoms in

Palestine, and the world at large, through all efforts collectively to protect press freedoms from any threat. In a press release of the Conscience Foundation (Al Dhamir), the organization said that closing the crossing and terminating the fuel supplies of the Gaza Strip constitutes a bona fide crisis, because of the semi-paralysis of basic utilities as a result. The Foundation watches with serious concern the crucial consequences of the Israeli occupation, which imposes a policy of economic blockade. Moreover, the overall occupation and its deleterious effects on Palestinian society make it frustratingly difficult for international relief organizations to perform any meaningful work in the region.

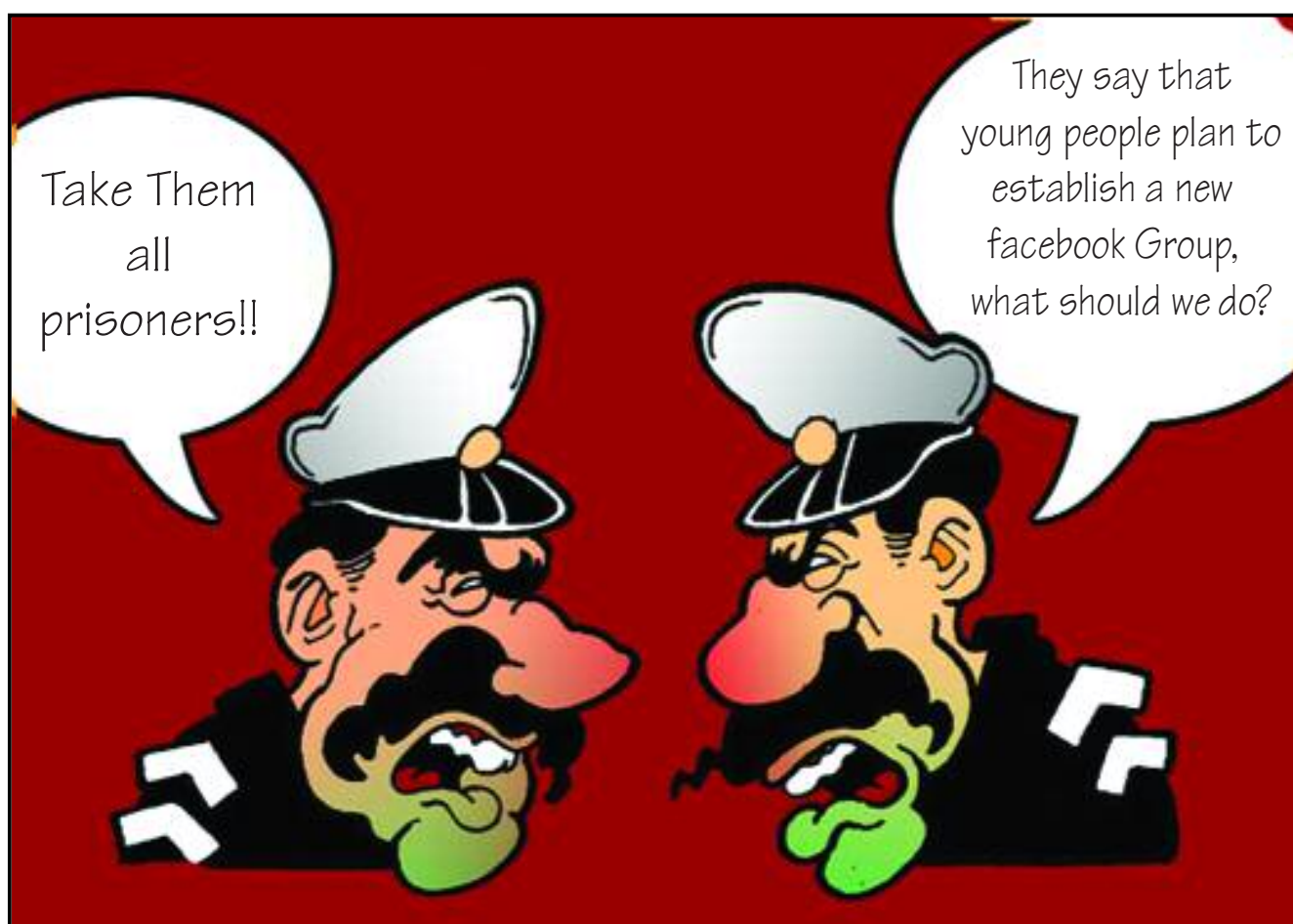
## Morocco

The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information has condemned the resolution of the Moroccan authorities to terminate the broadcast of Al Gezaira satellite news, previously broadcast from the Moroccan capital Rabat, considering this step as a blatant violation of free expression. This ruling came under the framework of the “Satellite Broadcast Regulations Document,” that was approved by all the Arab information ministers, except Qatar. Particularly after the alleged pretexts announced by Moroccan authorities that what happened is simply “suspension, and not prohibition, pending to

Gezira competence of the required procedures related to its legal and technical status with the Supreme Corporation for Visual Information.” Gamal Eid, the Executive Director of the Network, has confirmed his strong condemnation of the Moroccan governmental decree, which came just after a recent broadcast of prominent writer Mohamed Hassanin Haikal in his weekly program on the channel, in which the Moroccan ex-king, Hassan II spoke, declaring “a beginning of a stream of violations that will be following after the document of the Satellite Broadcasting Regulations, that aimed in the first place to impose a

governmental domination over the different satellite channels.” The Gezera Channel announced that it was prevented from broadcasting its Magrebi daily news program by the Moroccan authorities, without giving any clear reason. The technical manager of the Moroccan National Agency for Communication Legitimation, in a letter addressed to the Director of the Gezera Network Wadah Khafr, stated that permission to use portable land stations, and satellite broadcasting instruments and equipment, were effectively annulled.

**\*This survey is based in large part on material from the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, at [www.hrinfo.net/en](http://www.hrinfo.net/en).**



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