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

Principles of cooperation

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

Alliance as a necessary tactic

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

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

Another debate influencing recent forms of joint activism is the Left’s reassessment of its role within non-class politics. Class-based move-
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ments have been receding worldwide and replaced by more issue-ori-
ented activism that cuts across class interests due to the changing
structure of the global economy and the ensuing changing class
configurations. The Left in Egypt, as elsewhere, has found itself forced to
choose between concentrating on its “historic” class-based mission
and expanding its scope to include non-class activism. Those who
choose the latter are attempting to construct a language that will pro-
vide an element of universality in order to appeal to elements from
contrasting political programmes.

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

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

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

A new challenge for the state

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

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

The future of a “coalition”

This new joint political activism is clearly not easy to realise. The time
consuming nature of consensus building has already been mentioned.
Even the simplest logistical steps can become battlegrounds. Argu-
ments over the details of a demonstration or a conference can exhaust
the time and energy of the organizers. Issues of who gets to talk first in
a conference or a rally, choosing slogans acceptable to everybody, and
male/female separation in demonstrations have been some of the
most contentious and time consuming points of disagreement. This
does not augur well for quick and flexible decision-making in a crisis.
There is also no doubt that antagonism between Leftists and Islamists
is very deeply rooted. Many Leftists still feel uncomfortable about the
presence of the Islamists in any activity in which they participate. Areas
of disagreement between the Islamists and the Left are numerous, not
least of them being the fundamental differences on issues of class
analysis, women, and the rights of minority groups. For their part, Is-
lamists still cannot forgive the Left’s siding with the regime against
them in the early 1990s. This deeply-rooted antagonism poses the dan-
ger of deepening internal conflicts within each camp. On the Left, in
particular, the old guard and certain factions are increasingly critical of
those who seek the Islamists’ cooperation and to dilute the working
class struggle. Some observers and activists fear that the already divid-
ed Left might become even further polarized because of the new ap-
proach they are taking towards Islamists.

The still experimental nature of this new activism makes any projec-
tions about the future difficult. The phenomenon is still very fluid and
how it develops depends on various factors. Hence, over-optimistic ex-
pectations about significant results being delivered in the immediate
future are unjustified. On one hand, the nascent coalition holds the po-
tential to become the precursor of a vibrant, broadly-based, and de-
ocratic grouping. But on the other, efforts at cooperation have been
slow and beset with major obstacles. For the most part, collaboration
has taken place at the initiative of individuals rather than organiza-
tions. The future of collaboration, therefore, remains fragile and vul-
nerable to party leadership withdrawal. Moreover, initiatives for coop-
eration have mostly come from the Left, which is objectively the weak-
er group in the coalition, rather than from the Muslim Brotherhood.
Without the will on the part of the Brotherhood, the achievements of the last three years will be an
isolated chapter. While there are signs that the
Brotherhood is engaged in self-reassessment, po-
litical observers can only speculate on how the
process will evolve.

Notes
1. The Left is a case in point: it consists of
various factions and groups including the
banned Communist Party, the Tagammu’
Party, and the Revolutionary Socialists.
2. A widely read author in Egyptian Leftist
circles is C. Harman, “The Prophet and the
Proletariat,” International Socialism 64
(Autumn 1994): 3-64.

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