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## Government and Opposition in Egypt: Authoritarianism, De-politicisation and Stagnation

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By Katerina Dalacoura

The Egyptian regime is on the offensive. The BBC reported on 6 May that President Hosni Mubarak, 82, has emerged from months of illness and convalescence with a challenge to Egypt's opposition: they should reveal specific policy proposals for solving Egypt's persistent socio-economic and political problems. Coming from a regime which has consistently suppressed political opposition and presided over decades of stagnation in Egypt at home and abroad, this is rather bold.

It is very difficult if not impossible to formulate specific policy proposals for an opposition which remains amorphous and, for the most part, in a gray area between legality and illegality. The Muslim Brotherhood may be a coherent organisation but is still banned and recent developments suggest it may be turning to an apolitical stance. Mohammed El Baradei, former president of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, returned recently to Egypt and may attempt to contest the presidency in the 2011 elections. But his Coalition for Change is still ad hoc and his political future is uncertain. Civil society organisations such as the Kifaya movement continue to pressure the regime but only on the margins. Since 2004, a sporadic but persistent wave of labour protests has brought people onto the streets but they have not coalesced into a coherent movement as yet.

Mubarak's regime habitually uses the threat of instability to justify the suppression of political opposition and the continuous application (since 1981) of emergency law. 'In this delicate period there can be no room for those who confuse change with chaos,' said Mubarak. Referring to a recent protest, National Democratic Party (NDP) representative Hassan Nash'at el Qassas said that the Interior Ministry must not be lenient with the demonstrators. 'Instead of using water hoses to disperse them, the police ought to shoot them; they deserve it', he said. When a law which will give the president power to make arms deals without parliamentary oversight was discussed in the National Assembly, another NDP member, Muhammad Abdel Fatah Omar, stated: 'Even if Mubarak chooses dictatorship, we must still obey, since he would act as a benevolent dictator.' The Egyptian president is using such discourses to prepare the ground for the succession by his son, Gamal Mubarak.

Rather than inviting genuine political debate, the government in reality seeks to steer Egyptian society away from political engagement. Its preference is for a de-politicised citizenry and, more importantly, a de-politicised Islamist opposition movement. It favours pious conservative Muslims over politically engaged Islamists and would have been pleased with the marginalisation of pragmatic elements by a conservative leadership in the Muslim Brotherhood in December 2009. The regime has encouraged the wave of religiosity which has enveloped Egypt in the last few years and decades. It is, indeed bold, of Mubarak to demand specific policy proposals from the opposition.

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