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The Kefaya Movement

A Case Study of a Grassroots Reform Initiative

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Summary

The United States has professed an interest in greater democratization in the Arab world, particularly since the September 2001 attacks by terrorists from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Lebanon. This interest has been part of an effort to reduce destabilizing political violence and terrorism. As President George W. Bush noted in a 2003 address to the National Endowment for Democracy, “As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export” (The White House, 2003). The United States has used varying means to pursue democratization, including a military intervention that, though launched for other reasons, had the installation of a democratic government as one of its end goals.

However, indigenous reform movements are best positioned to advance democratization in their own country. This monograph examines one such movement, the Egyptian Movement for Change, commonly known as Kefaya (*kefaya* is the Arabic word for *enough*). At first, Kefaya successfully mobilized wide segments of Egyptian society, but later it proved unable to overcome many impediments to its reform efforts and political participation.

This monograph examines Kefaya’s birth, its accomplishments, and the challenges that led to its decline to better understand why reform has not taken hold in Egypt. For a broader context, it also reviews the recent history of Egyptian politics, including U.S.-Egyptian relations, and perceptions of the role of the United States in advancing

democracy in the region. It relies on analyses of the work of Egyptian scholars and Arabic-language media reports.

The Context: U.S.-Egyptian Relations

The relationship between the United States and the Arab Republic of Egypt has undergone a two-fold transformation in recent decades. First, and perhaps most significantly, the United States has come to consider Egypt a significant strategic ally in the region. This view stems from the efforts of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat during the 1970s to reposition Egypt to favor the West, giving the United States another option in its efforts to contain the ambitions of the Soviet Union in the region. It was further boosted by the negotiation of a formal peace between Egypt and Israel, making Egypt and the United States partners in securing stability in the region. The relationship deepened further after the Cold War, with Egypt aiding the United States in its military activity in the region, including occasional use of Egyptian air bases and access to Egyptian air space for transiting U.S. forces.

Second, although the United States has sought political reform within Egypt as a means to promote political stability there, it has been reluctant to take some concrete actions to push Egypt toward democratization. In part as a result of this reluctance, by some accounts Egypt was less democratic in 2001 than it was in 1981, when Hosni Mubarak succeeded to the presidency.

Kefaya's Origins and Initial Success

President Mubarak's eventual desire for an unprecedented fifth six-year term to begin in 2005 and the possible succession of his son Gamal Mubarak to the presidency led to discontent within Egypt, culminating in the emergence of Kefaya. Kefaya united several political parties in demand for rotation of power. Although it did not have the financial network of organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the media platforms available to the state, or the legacy many older par-

ties enjoyed, it helped focus discontent on the Mubarak regime. To do so, Kefaya employed means not previously seen in Egyptian politics, means that may have some promise for future democratic movements.

There are several reasons for Kefaya's initial success. First, it kept its message simple. Its very name, "enough," crystallized Egyptian frustration with the government. Its slogan, *la lil-tawrith, la lil-tamdid* [no to inheritance, no to extension], helped focus public attention in Egypt on the issue of hereditary rule raised by Mubarak's plans. Kefaya presented a simple analysis of the situation that any citizen could understand.

Second, Kefaya was able to unite diverse groups in its pursuit of broadly acceptable democratic reforms. It appealed to reform-minded individuals and parties of all social backgrounds and political persuasions. Its peaceful demonstrations were also appealing in a Middle East ravaged by extremism.

Third, Kefaya ably exploited information technology. It used electronic messages, including text messages between cell phone users, to publicize its rallies among members and the general public. It pursued a multifaceted Internet strategy to disseminate its message. It published advertisements online, finding these to be more effective than print advertisements in publications the authorities could confiscate. It propagated banners and political cartoons using its own Web page and those of sympathetic bloggers. It documented abuses by state security officers using digital photography and distributed the images online.

Kefaya leaders see their greatest accomplishment as having broken down the population's aversion to direct confrontation with the regime. Prior to the Kefaya movement, Egyptians never dared to openly oppose their government. Kefaya has also inspired other social reform movements, particularly those of workers, in Egypt, and similar reform movements in other nations.

Causes of Kefaya's Decline

Though succeeding where others had not, Kefaya eventually faltered in the face of intimidation by the state, as had earlier movements. State security agents harassed and abused Kefaya members. The government

also manipulated reform laws to thwart democratization. The constitutional amendment allowing multiple candidates for president, for example, also made it virtually impossible for any candidate to run without the approval of the ruling party.

Although Kefaya was adept in its use of electronic media, the more prevalent state-controlled media managed to overwhelm Kefaya's message. Leading Egyptian newspapers insinuated that Kefaya's leaders were traitors who were carrying out orders from the U.S. government to undermine the stability of the country. Egypt's government-owned press continued to be blatant in its bias for the ruling party.

One of Kefaya's early strengths, its ability to work with all parties, including Islamists, eventually contributed to its decline. Ideological differences divided Kefaya from Islamists. For example, when some secular Kefaya leaders supported a statement by the Minister of Culture against the wearing of *hijab*, many Islamist senior leaders withdrew from the movement, decrying it as an attack against Islam. More generally, Islamist and secular leaders within the movement had differing interpretations of democracy, with these varying notions underlying fissures between them.

Other internal conflicts also led to the decline of the movement. Political parties that had joined with Kefaya in pursuit of common goals eventually jostled for position within it. The political-reform goals of the movement also may have been too far removed from the concerns of average Egyptians, most of who live in or near poverty. Some support also fell away over concern that Kefaya had no goals beyond its opposition to Mubarak.

Lessons for Reform Movements and the United States

The challenges that Kefaya and other reform movements in the Middle East have faced, and that the United States may face in supporting them, point to several policy options.

First, the United States should urge authoritarian regimes in the Middle East to initiate democratic reform in a consistent and unambiguous fashion. This would send a clear signal over time to both the

regimes and populations of the Middle East that while the United States values its long-standing partnerships in the region, it equally values those that are moving toward greater freedom for their citizens. The United States should also develop a means of identifying incipient democratic initiatives so that it can facilitate their growth and guide them toward viable and constructive action.

Second, the United States should develop the means to better assess and understand local political conditions and to support the reform movements emerging from them. Although Islamist opposition movements present a challenge to the United States, they sometimes have the most credibility with the local population. The United States should help protect all reform movements that eschew violence and seek peaceful change away from politics based on repression and intimidation. It can also help reform movements develop their own international or transnational messages. Kefaya imitators in other nations, for example, could help the movement re-emerge as a transnational one that is less susceptible to pressure from any one government.

Third, the United States should also recognize that nongovernmental organizations have an important role to play in fostering democratic change, particularly in efforts to mediate between groups and train organizers. It would be best if these nongovernmental organizations were created within rather than outside Egypt. The United States can play a role in encouraging such organizations and protecting their right to function.

Fourth, the United States should help reformers obtain and use information technology. The ability of Egyptian activists to document and expose human-rights abuses forced the government to prosecute some of the perpetrators of such acts. Disseminating the messages of reformers in international online forums can also help thwart state repression of reformers.

Fifth, the United States should help reformers foster effective social-service programs that offer practical help to the peoples of their nations to make inroads into areas that have been increasingly claimed by antidemocratic organizations. Offering education, health care, and financial support to the population can help build strong grassroots relationships, relationships that may be later leveraged into political support and recruitment.