

# Civil Society

## and Democratization in the Arab World

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# The Art of Smearing Names

Hassan Elsawaf\*



Mohamed al-Baradei

Name smearing in politics is an old practice. Whenever a political position is up for grabs, it attracts multiple sleaze campaigns that focus entirely on tarnishing the opponent's image, while ignoring the positive side of the attacker -if he or she possesses one- and directing a concerted dose of venom towards the rival.

Even in the advanced democracies in which circumspection must be used to avoid the headache of libel litigation, it is quite common to dig up an old brush with narcotics or a long-forgotten extra-marital relationship in order to subvert the mind of the voter with character assassination issues that usually have little bearing on the issues the average voter is concerned with.

It is not difficult when observing the American political scene, for example, to find many cases in which candidates for high office found themselves forced to step down over a long-buried infringement.

As a general rule, the more open and accountable the political system, the more credible the charges emanating from a name-smearing attack, even when highly distasteful. In a less than open climate in which elections are no more than a charade designed to portray a bogus image of fairness and respect for the basic rules of democracy, sleaze can be ugly. The reason is that the opponent to the incumbent is fair prey, unprotected by the traditional legal machine that the more open societies cherish and preserve, and of course it is a one-way street, with the incumbent enjoying full impunity and little risk of reciprocity.

Egypt has lately witnessed a fresh onslaught on a man snared into the election battle by peer as well as popular pressure. He is on the receiving end of the professional services of government thugs, who have excelled at the name-smearing art. The ex-head of the IAEA, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, Mohamad ElBaradei, strangely enough, was the recipient only three years ago of Egypt's highest accolade, following his Nobel peace prize. At the time, he was a hero doing Egypt proud. Now that he has had the temerity to challenge the strongman, the government-controlled media have turned against him quite fiercely and have converted him into an ungrateful villain overnight. Accusations of academic mediocrity also came up from the days the young ElBaradei

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first applied to join the foreign service. He would probably have fared better with a military background, barely making it to graduation from the academy.

He is deemed to be unsuitable for the job, lacking in leadership experience and totally disconnected from the Egyptian public, having lived abroad for decades. To add insult to injury, he is accused of having a foreign passport, a charge he vehemently denies, which can leave a stigma on his name and that would probably have better emanated from those not living in glasshouses.

Naturally, the instigators of such allegations have the luxury of complete immunity from any legal action, regardless of the veracity of their claims. They are serving their master the best way they know: by eliminating anyone standing in his way to perpetual rule, daring to challenge him and actually believing the job is open to others. Instead of attempting to find attributes to improve the image of the strongman and thereby depict him as a better choice, they resort to a nasty smear campaign and never manage to hit above the belt, perhaps because there would be no target to be found. The fact that libel and the right to use it are confined to the regime and its henchmen makes a mockery of any claim of fairness in the system and renders the staged election no more than a travesty of democracy, if any official still has the audacity to use that word.

In fact, it is odd that journalists can get into serious trouble for spreading a rumour about the possible poor health of the strongman, almost certainly true, while an opponent can have his whole reputation marred with clearly false rumours without a single feather being ruffled in the system.

The people of Egypt, according to official channels, are ecstatic with their current ruler. Government, with the help of a servile media army, continually finds new angles to extol his image. The man's vision and uncanny leadership qualities have made him everybody's darling, they always insist.

How convincing is such an image?

Can a people enduring abuse for decades and reduced to abject poverty wish to shower the man who brought them all that misery with 90 percent approval ratings every time they 'vote'? Is it even reasonable to imagine that the current strongman is still worshiped by his people, as the media never stops reminding us? Could anyone have done a worse job?

What most people miss when they go along with pointing out Mr. ElBaradei's alleged defects is that it does not really matter who takes over. Once the chains of tyranny are broken and a respectable system is in place, whereby power can actually change hands without death or the ominous ghost of an ugly coup, then hope will be restored and the country can move on.

In Egypt what is important at this stage is to give the people hope that they can trust their government and that living conditions will improve. Without a fair and open election, it is hard to imagine how that can happen.

## Civil Society and Literature: The Shabab Literary Movement

Walter Scott Chahanovich\*

Egypt's youth faces a dilemma. This generation is caught between a purported clash of civilizations and a society jellied in the aspic of ideological absolutes. The Egyptian government is oppressive and supported by many Western governments; society is growing increasingly conservative; the population is ever booming and economic disparity grows ever wearier. Behind broad categories such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the National Democratic Party, Christian vs. Muslim vs. Baha'i, regional instability and war, young Egyptians are exploring the activity of art.

"Artistic form," according to the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, "does not shape already prepared and found content, but rather permits content to be found and seen for the first time". In the last several years, young Egyptians have been toying with short novellas as a vehicle for individual expression. A critic's pen may decry the stories as ephemeral, lacking depth, or too ecumenical to qualify as artistic fiction, cultural journalism, or social science. But that misses the point. The content is primarily personal expression, which itself can be diaphanous and jarring. Second, the stories reflect inchoate criticism. Nevertheless, people are reading these literary vignettes, which are examples of an artistic form that provokes discussion.

Enter the Shabab literary movement: young authors taking advantage of Egypt's quasi-lenient approach to printed media. Generally, the government pays attention to and censors newspapers and blogs. Fiction, however, is censored by State Security, which usually serves a more editorial role than book burner. Young authors are taking advantage of this opening. For example, Alaa Abd al-Hamed's story *Call Me* deals with drugs, sex, rape, and suicide. At first, this seems to contravene Article 178 of the Egyptian Penal Code, which prohibits, "material which contravenes moral decency"; Article 179 authorizes its confiscation. Authorities did not act, however.

The author considers these vices a product of pessimism among young Egyptians about their future. A critical panel was set up in the bookstore *Maktabat al-Balad* due to the stories popularity. Obviously the authorities did not consider this meeting a threat to the State as well. This is art's trick. Criticism was voiced against Egyptian society and government during the meeting. A public gathering in *Midan al-Tahrir* just down the street, however, with posters rather than books, is a guaranteed ticket to ride "al-Box", the massive green paddy wagons.

Such consideration of literature as benign ammunition for social change reflects the government's alienation from young agents in civil society. Gramsci's discussion of culture is useful here. According to Gramsci, civil society is voluntary, consisting of consensual political activities and institutions such as families and places of worship; political society is coercive, consisting of state institutions, which exercise domination. Culture is an element found in the former, because it is formed and consumed by consenting agents. Therefore, literature, as an intellectual trademark of Egyptian civil society, is a vehicle for criticism. Shabab literature builds on this tradition to provoke discussion. The establishment of the publication house *Shabab Books* demonstrates an increasing consolidation of the movement for liberalism and democratization.

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Shabab Books' publication of two works, *Representing My Body* (forthcoming) and Mostafa Fathi's *The World of Boys*, are relevant examples. *Representing My Body* is a collection of short stories and poems written by Cairo's young feminists. Although Egyptian feminism is not new, this book is a collection of voices, which demonstrate a readiness to carry a torch, more famously lit by Huda Sharawi and stoked by Nawal Al-Saadawi. Today, Egyptian women not only compete with their historical subjugation by the West, as Edward Said demonstrated in his *Orientalism*. These young women also compete with Egyptian male chauvinism. The language they use is constructive, yet provocative. A brief note in the introduction of *Representing My Body* reflects this style: "I don't write to defend women or attack men. I write in defense of femininity, which has become a scarlet letter on the breast of whom God so chooses to make female. Femininity is not shameful. What is shameful is your lowly view of it, whether you are a husband or father, brother or friend, or even a lover. In the name of women I say to you, who see femininity as shameful, 'Screw you'." Such enthusiasm and social engagement can easily spill over into a more coherent political thesis.

Mostafa Fathi, a human rights worker, encourages public debate about the social acceptance and lawful protection of sexual orientation and identity in *The World of Boys*. This is a novella narrated in the first person by the protagonist, Assam, a young gay Egyptian who touches on a flurry of issues in Egyptian society. Meta-themes focus on religion, sex, poverty, regional turmoil, Egyptian popular culture, and the struggle for identity under the deceptive dichotomy of "East vs. West". More important, however, is Mr. Fathi's human rights message.

Towards the end of the story, Assam asks about homosexuality at a human rights workshop. The moderator, a human rights activist like Mr. Fathi, defends homosexual human rights, citing the Yogyakarta Principles, which applies human rights law in defending sexual identity and sexual orientation. The attending crowd however calls for the application of Sharia Law to protect Egyptian society from the "cancer" of "faggots". The story not only calls for the respect of human rights and of sexual orientation, but also encourages young Egyptians to defend civil society and support liberal values. While *The World of Boys* provoked several heated book discussions, the government did not intervene. This further reflects the regime's ostensible disinterest in fiction, as well as artistic content's galvanizing, albeit provocative, effect among young Egyptians.

In its annual report from 2008 the Ibn Khaldun Center states that: "A functioning democratic system requires additional institutional elements and conditions". Yet "an additional institutional element" is missing from the center's research: the role of culture in civil society. Literature is a part of that culture and Egypt's Shabab movement is gaining influence.

Although the books are small and their artistic form sometimes incoherent, the content young Egyptians are revealing is critical. Moreover, value judgments aside, the stories are published, read, shared, and discussed. But the government has taken notice. *Metro*, Egypt's first published graphic novel, has recently been banned and its author Magdy al-Shaffei and publisher Mohammad Sharqawi each slapped heavy fines of 5,000 Egyptian Pounds. Perhaps this incident demonstrates that young authors' artistic form is revealing more content than political leadership would like to read.

## **The Syrian Reawakening: Islam and mobilization**

Amira Mohsen

While there have been many studies of Islamism in Egypt, where it has been more visible and developed over a greater length of time, little has been said about Syria. Whether this is due to lack of academic interest or difficulty of research due to Syrian security measures is up for debate, however Syria occupies a very important role in the shaping of the Middle East nonetheless, as the Arab adage goes 'There is no war without Egypt and no peace without Syria'. The development of Syrian polity is therefore essential to the future of the region.

Islamism was first imported to Syria in the 1940s by students influenced by the nascent Muslim Brotherhood, however one would be mistaken to assume that the Syrian Brotherhood was merely an Egyptian import. In fact, the Syrian Brotherhood began as a federation of numerous Syrian political and social organizations that had been particularly popular during the 1930s. In 1946, these groups were merged by Mustafa al-Sibai, with the backing of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The early years of the Muslim Brotherhood were characterized by a reformist trend, but with the take over of the Alawite led Ba'ath party in 1963, the Brotherhood was banned and state control tightened over religious institutions weakening its influence. The Brotherhood did push back but this only resulted in their leader, Issam al-Attar, being forced into exile in Germany in 1964.

Many became influenced by Sayyid Qutb, with whom several activists met while studying in Egypt. Activists started to preach in the spirit of Qutb's ideas and advocated open confrontation with the regime.

An underground, extremist organization called the 'Fighting Vanguard' –al Tali'a al-Muqatila emerged upon the scene and started a violent campaign against the regime. The regime responded by arresting the group's leader and torturing him to death, which resulted in a tit for tat offensive that culminated in the infamous Hama massacre of 1982. Up to a tenth of Hama's population lost their lives, although exact numbers have never been confirmed.

After the events of Hama, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria seemed to vanish from daily discourse and Brotherhood leaders were forced into exile to avoid imprisonment or execution.

From the mid 90s, there was an improvement in the regime's attitude toward Islamic circles in Syria: first, the regime began demonstrating more tolerance to open manifestations of religion, such as the hijab and religious preaching. Religious schools started to proliferate, some even with government backing, and textbooks and religious pamphlets began to circulate freely.

In the late 1990s the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which had been nearly destroyed by the regime's all-out war, started re-establishing itself and seeking a new understanding with Assad.

Since the election of Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni as general supervisor in 1996, the Brotherhood has negotiated on and off with the government in hopes of reaching an agreement. Negotiations made some progress after the ascension of Bashar Assad, who released several hundred Brotherhood members from prison, but the regime remained unwilling to grant Bayanouni's three core demands - a general amnesty that would free thousands of Brotherhood members still in detention, permission for all exiles to return home, and a lifting of the government's ban on the Brotherhood.

In hopes of building bridges with secular opposition currents, Bayanouni, who has lived in London since being ejected from Amman in 2000, has steadily moderated the Brotherhood's declared objectives and principles. In October 2005, a coalition of Syrian opposition parties published the Damascus Declaration calling for an end to the “authoritarian, totalitarian, and cliquish regime.” The Syrian state’s gross misuse of incarceration and punishment and its unwillingness to abandon its repressive ways have established it as a negative example for all opposition parties who increasingly view the state as a common enemy.



Current leader of the Syrian MB Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni

Despite its position in exile, the Brotherhood continues to enjoy considerable sympathy among Syrians. Riyyad al-Turk, a secular opposition leader, considers it "the most credible" Syrian opposition group. The Brotherhood has continued to advocate a democratic political system; it has abandoned its calls for violent resistance and Shari'a law, as well as for Sunni uprisings against Alawites. Al-Turk and others in the secular opposition are inclined to take this evolution seriously, as a sign of the Brotherhood's greater political maturity, and believe that the Brotherhood would now be willing to participate in a democratic system of government and indeed interviews with the Brotherhood in London have suggested that the Brotherhood do indeed want a “Civil and democratic government, elected freely by the Syrian people”

Despite the Brotherhood’s political activism abroad, it may be that within Syria, the Brotherhood has become redundant, suffering from political impotence due to the regime’s enforced secularism. And yet it seems clear that Islam is making a come back, if not politically, then certainly at a social level.

Several domestic and external factors coincided to push Syria in this direction. After crushing the Muslim Brotherhood during the 1980s, the government sought to encourage a moderate, government approved form of Islam. It encouraged the building of some 80,000 new mosques. It also established the ‘Assad Institute for Memorizing the Koran’ in various cities and governorates, and over 22 higher-education institutions for teaching Islam. In order to bolster its Muslim credentials, the regime suppressed secular

leftist groups, with the aim of upholding the Ba'ath Party as the only organization worthy of that description in Syria. The government's support for an 'official' Islamic ideology and the younger generation's disenchantment with politics led many to turn to religion, both as a reaction against official policies and as a means of coming to grips with the economic and social problems besetting them- namely unemployment.

Some 220,000 individuals are entering the labor market every year, and the government is incapable of providing work for them. According to official statistics, there are a million unemployed in Syria, about 500,000 of whom are registered at the government's employment bureaus. When limited to the ideology of a single political doctrine and facing socioeconomic setbacks, many people turn to religion, which at the least offers spiritual comfort if not solid solutions.

External regional and international factors also contributed to the growth of Islamism in Syria, seeing as major events helped entrench Islamic dogma during each of the past three decades. The end of Communism, the failure of Socialist regimes to offer solutions to the economic and social ills of their own societies, and the failure of powerful ruling parties to accomplish much externally or internally, coincided with the mounting successes of Islamic parties. The Syrian public watched closely the achievements of Hamas and Islamic Jihad during the two Palestinian intifadas. This helped bolster Islam in Syrian society and this was further promoted by the role played by Hizbullah in ousting Israel from Southern Lebanon, helping entrench a belief that "Islam is the solution."

From this it appears clear that if allowed to operate within Syria, the Brotherhood may potentially attract vast support from the masses and perhaps, like in Egypt, become a very real threat to the established regime.



Cairo's countless slums remain left behind as the city's suburbs grow.

Every drive from the center of Cairo to Katemeya, now known to most as New Cairo, is noticeably different. The rapid transformation that is taking place in Katemeya, funded by private capital and supported by powerful government forces, is significantly changing the landscape everyday. Feddans of uneven sand are being tamed and replaced by acres of almost identical partially constructed houses separated into grids by roads aptly named axes rather than streets.

In the sea of partially constructed houses, malls, ministries, and banks, the campus of Future University stands out for all the wrong reasons. The architectural manifestation of modernization theory, the entrance of the University is a modern glass structure emerging from a replica of the Coliseum. Such a literal representation, the 'modern' future emerging from the 'traditional' past, attempts to represent Egypt's past with a replicated Roman landmark, disregarding dimensions of locality and time. Herein lies the problem with New Cairo and the current development tract of Greater Cairo. These developments are not indicative of a society in transition but rather a great destructive transformation, the beginning of a project to construct the past, present, and future all at once, with one notable absence-- the urban poor.

Because many of the recently constructed buildings appear so new and modern, it is easy for commuters to miss the fact that they are witnesses to a project that is not new, but rather old. The final stages of construction are a product of powerful finance capital and government forces that have been working together for over a decade. It all began in the 1970's when the Greater Cairo Master Plan called for the construction of 10 communities on the periphery of Cairo. Each community was assigned 2000 acres making the overall expansion around 20,000 acres. When land sales started to exceed what was planned, instead of reworking the plan the government ignored it. In 1995 the Council of Ministers called for construction and sales in New Cairo to stop and even sought the returning of down payments on recent sales. In addition to a moratorium on expansion, the Council called for the formation of committees to study the current and future expansions in relation to the problem of affordable housing.

In spite of the Council's decision and further recommendations, the Housing Ministry continued sales, which continued not for the sake of development but to repay government debt. In 1991, the IMF pushed Egypt into a restructuring plan which allowed the Egyptian pound to collapse against the dollar. Hoping to start an agricultural export boom, instead the IMF started a process that, in tandem with global deregulation, caused

a massive sinking of domestic, foreign, and remittance wealth into luxury real estate and land speculation. Misguided capital searching for high yields was drawn to mismanaged land sales by way of state supported financiers and banks. This capital flow changed the direction of development creating an abundance of low density, high priced compounds offering excess comfort to those who can afford it at the expense of those who cannot.

With over 1 million Cairenes living on rooftops and an estimated 40% of Egypt's population living in slums, the crisis of low income housing has reached a critical mass. The current development tract of Greater Cairo is grim, characterized by the concentration of capital outside Cairo and the subsequent pooling of informal and service labor into a slowly decaying city center. If capital continues to flow in this direction, the vacuum that it will leave will only make the current situation worse. Without further investment, areas that were not previously categorized as slums will fall into the same category. Behind a veneer of progress, the city will slowly rot but never collapse. In this scenario, slums will be perpetually sustained because the gilding of the periphery cannot be done by the forces of capital alone; labor is necessary. While beneficial to some, such an organization of capital and labor is only possible by exploitative, tolling means.

By definition labor is a mobile input; but what happens when the scarcity of employment allows its mobility to be pushed to the limit? The round trip from Midan Tahrir to New Cairo can take anywhere from 2 to 4 hours. Such a commute is tolling. Increased costs of transportation, the loss of 2 to 4 hours of wages, and physical wear, are all real concerns which contribute to a decreased standard of living.

Another consequence that cannot be ignored is increased motorization. Commonly thought to only increase pollution, the consequences of increased motorization create serious obstacles to development. An increase in vehicles will inevitably increase the incidents of traffic accidents. The World Health Organization recently estimated that the total cost of road deaths and injuries amounts to twice the total development assistance received worldwide by developing countries.

A decrepit but perversely sustained center existing only to excessively beautify the periphery, consequently neglecting the majority of its inhabitants, cannot possibly be the future of Cairo: or could it?

The existence of such an unequal transformation with little resistance must be indicative of a weak civil society. Murmurs of discontent with the current development path are no match for the opposing military, capital, and governmental forces. Some say that with the end of the Mubarak regime a stronger Egyptian civil society will emerge which could effectively change the course of Cairo's development, however 2011 may be too late. Once the foundations of a non inclusive New Cairo are complete any hope for change could be futile, especially when the forces that can replace barren sand with vibrant green grass within days seem so insurmountable.

With this said, the current economic crisis has already challenged similar lavish developments. In Dubai, the government recently requested a moratorium on the repayment of debt incurred by state owned real estate company Dubai World. A similar default of luxury real estate companies could buy time for the formation of a movement to challenge the current development agenda, but unfortunately without grass root organizing, such a movement will be esoteric at best and absent at worst.

## **Civil Society News from the Arab World**

## Egypt

### Incumbent Press Syndicate Chairman Retains His Post

Of 3,980 valid votes cast in the run-off poll Ahmed won 2,419 and Rashwan 1,561. The number of journalists eligible to vote is 5,532. Ahmed's supporters described the result as a landslide while Rashwan's supporters insisted that the poll had established that demands for change were now unstoppable, Shaden Shehab reported in al-Ahram Weekly.

Ahmed, a former editor of the state-owned weekly Al-Mussawar who began his career as a military correspondent and is now a columnist with Al-Ahram, survived an assassination attempt in 1987 after penning a series of articles against terrorism in Egypt. Rashwan is an expert on Islamic movements and internal Egyptian politics at the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies. He writes columns for several newspapers.

As the campaigns of both unfolded it became clear that smearing was to be the name of the game. Ahmed was accused of being a conduit for government interference in syndicate affairs, Rashwan of being the vehicle of a Nasserist- Muslim Brotherhood (MB) takeover of the syndicate. Although the MB announced its support to Rashwan, he denied having brokered a deal with the group. Ahmed, who clearly enjoyed government backing, denied being a government lackey.

Until the results of Sunday's run-off no one would have hazarded a bet on the result. During the first vote on 6 December Ahmed won just 39 votes more than Rashwan. In the second poll he increased his lead 858 votes. While that might seem a convincing victory it reflects, says veteran journalist Salama Ahmed Salama, a "growing demand for change in the syndicate". And the pressure, says Salama, is largely coming from younger journalists.

### State Security Detains Four Bloggers

State security services continue to hold four young men of the April 6<sup>th</sup> movement despite the release order issued from the prosecutor of Zagazig Second police department, according to ANHRI.

The four young men were arrested during a demonstration to express their objection to the arresting of a girl whose younger brother was wearing a Palestinian keffiyeh. Security forces broke up the demonstration with outstanding violence.

Lawyers who attended the two-day investigation stated that the four young men had been interrogated since their arrest on December 1<sup>st</sup> and that a release order was issued by the prosecution on December 2<sup>nd</sup>.

### First Egyptian Graphic Novel Confiscated

The Misdemeanor Court of Qasr El Nile has ruled that the author Magdi El Shafai and the publisher Mohamed El Sahrqawi of the novel "Metro" each should pay a fine of 5,000 pounds, in addition to confiscating the novel.

The case started in April 2008 when the Vice Squad (a body of the Ministry of Interior) collected hundreds of copies of the novel “Metro” after storming El Malemeh printing house and some libraries that sell the novel. The squad issued arrest warrants to the public prosecutor against El Shafai and El Sahrqawi to investigate them. The ruling of the president of the Court of South Cairo was the collection and confiscation of the novel from the market and the prosecution of El Shafai and El Sahrqawi for “making and publishing something that was regarded immoral to the public.”

The public prosecutor demanded the punishment of those artists, on the basis of articles 30, 171, 178 and 198 of the Penal Code. Then, the prosecutor decided to prosecute El Shafai and El Sahrqawi in the Misdemeanor Court of Qasr El Nile, which issued its ruling late November of this year.

#### Ministry of Interior Refuses to Release Hani Nazeer

The Egyptian Ministry of Interior has refused to implement an order issued on December 14<sup>th</sup> by the State Security Supreme Criminal Court to release the Christian blogger Hani Nazeer Aziz, whose website entitled “Karz al-Hob” was shut down after he was first arrested in October of 2008.

Hani Nazeer was arrested under the provisions of the Emergency Law without any specific charge. A church cleric is also believed to have cooperated with security to get hold of Hani in October 2008 when he was arrested and detained at Borg Al Arab prison. Hani has also been subjected to a series of violations since his arrest, including prolonged solitary confinement, detention as a criminal instead of a political prisoner, pressure to convert to Islam, the abduction of his brothers, etc...

#### MB Elects New Guidance Council

The Muslim Brotherhood elected 16 new members to its Guidance Office who will lead the group for a four-year term, according the Daily News Egypt.

“There has been a complete change in the Guidance Office, and the election process went smoothly and successfully despite the current circumstances,” Supreme Guide Mohamed Mahdi Akef said in a press statement. The Guidance Office is the group’s highest authority, and is headed by the Supreme Guide, a post currently held by Akef.

The new members include prominent Muslim Brotherhood members Mahmoud Ezzat, Essam El-Erian and Saad El-Katatney. On the other hand, Abdel-Moneim Aboul Fotouh and deputy leader Mohamed Habib are not part of the new board. Some reports had tipped Habib to be the group’s next supreme guide.

“We are a powerful group that is getting more powerful, these elections proved that the highest authority is well aware of the group’s welfare, therefore they have elected members for the new Guidance Office to lead in the coming four years,” El-Katatney, who is also a member of parliament, told Daily News Egypt.

Hussein Ibrahim, head of the MB parliamentary bloc, said, “The level of change is promising, there is a variety of expertise from different fields, each with a vision and the important thing is that they are all in harmony with one another...the Guidance Office elections have occupied us [MB members] for a while, it’s time to focus on important

issues including the PA elections in November 2010 which is a priority in the coming period.”

The first task for the newly elected members will be choosing a new Supreme Guide, who will be announced before Jan. 13, according to Ibrahim. News reports speculated over the new Supreme Guide, predicting that it would either be Habib, Mahmoud Ezzat, Gomaa Amin, Abdel Rahman Al Bar or Mohamed Badee’a. Habib had told Al-Jazeera on Saturday that he intended to dispute the decision to speed up the process because he was not informed of the new appointments. He also told Egyptian daily Al-Shorouk that there was a split in the group between a camp that demands a more active role on Egypt’s political scene and another that wants to maintain the status quo.

“The rifts within the group are very serious,” Amr Choubaki, an analyst with the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies told AFP. “Most of the group’s members are conservatives who have little political experience outside the Muslim Brotherhood and rely on religious documents to provide political guidance,” Choubaki said. Others, including Habib and Abdel Moneim Aboul Futouh, have called for more participation in mainstream politics which has become a contributing factor to their being sidelined, he said.

The Muslim Brotherhood is officially banned, but enjoys a substantive parliamentary presence — its MPs run as independent candidates — as well as popular support.

## **Iraq**

### Government Accused of Militarizing Society

Iraqi lawmakers are seeking the lowering of the 2010 budget allocation to the Interior and Defense Ministries, accusing the government of trying to militarize the regime. In this context, independent Deputy Hussein al-Falluji stated to Al-Jazeera.net: “Through the accurate reviewing of the allocation mechanism of the 2010 budget, we can see that the ladder of the ceiling of expenditures reached \$14 billion offered to the Interior Ministry and the Defense Ministry. This is a very high number in comparison with the size of the budget and the size of the allocations offered to the other sectors.” He added: “This reveals that the government is trying to build a massive military deterrence force and is relying on the use of military means to resolve the crises.”

He continued: “Our criticism revolves around the fact that the budget abandoned investments which could have been secured through the support of the private sector, in order to help develop the various aspects of society. This goes to show that the government is heading toward the militarization of the society in Iraq.” Al-Falluji then indicated that the agricultural and housing sectors were completely disregarded, recognizing the fact that “Iraq needs around three million housing units and that the agricultural sector is one of the greatest in the country, offers jobs to countless unemployed citizens and provides food security.”

Brigadier General Sobhi Nazem Tawfiq added: “Regardless of the strength of the security bodies and their forces, nothing will be achieved in the realm of improving the security situation, because focusing on the security and military facets alone will not

pay.” He indicated there were more vital things which could affect the security situation and cause its improvement, namely a real reconciliation that would include all the factions and components in the Iraqi community and the elimination of administrative corruption which has spread within the Iraqi state in an unprecedented way.

He then concluded by saying: “Had half the budget allocated to the Defense and Interior Ministries, the intelligence services and the other security bodies been used to rebuild the infrastructure, eliminate unemployment and improve the citizens’ social and economic conditions, this step would have had more of an impact on containing the violence and improving the security situation than the enhancement of the security apparatuses.”

### **Iraq’s Christian Community Demands an International Investigation**

Christian Deputy in the Iraqi parliament Yunadem Kanna has demanded that the big crimes and massacres committed in Iraq against his community be investigated by an international commission, noting that the last period witnessed many cover ups and did not lead to any serious investigation into the crimes that were committed, according to the London-based al-Hayat daily.

Kanna was quoted by Al-Hayat as saying: “During the last parliamentary session, we have asked Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that the big crimes that have hit specific Iraqi communities be investigated by an international committee in order to be able to get to the truth of the matter, considering that those crimes could not go unpunished. Many horrible crimes have been committed and targeted a specific Iraqi community, but the political alliances in place made it impossible to get to the bottom of those crimes. And instead of finding the truth, they are trying to hide the real murderers and they are even making some evidence disappear.” It is important to note that the Christian community in Iraq has been recently hit by a series of attacks especially in the city of Mosul. The second wave of attacks launched against the remaining Christians after the attack that was seen last year, drove more than two thousand Christian families to leave the city indefinitely and leave Iraq altogether....

The Christian community in Iraq is currently getting ready to celebrate Christmas on the twenty fourth of December and New Year’s Eve on the last day of the month. The remaining Iraqi Christians hope that they will be able to perform their religious ceremonies freely this year, after last year's violence made it impossible for them to stage the proper religious celebrations.

## **Jordan**

### **Study Finds Lack of Concern For Human Rights Among the Political Parties**

The Kingdom's Islamist parties are the least concerned with human rights among other political parties in the country, according to a study revealed in the Jordan Times.

The study, which was conducted by the National Centre for Human Rights (NCHR), categorized the country's 15 political parties into four groups - Islamists, nationalists, leftists and moderates.

It used a content analysis methodology that reviewed each party's agenda, principles and objectives as well as their activities to assess the extent to which they focus on human rights. Nitham Barakat, a professor of political science at Yarmouk University, explained that the study asked party leaders to comment on the Kingdom's present human rights situation, which only one party described as "very good", while 10 parties called it "good" and four parties said it was "very bad". Barakat said the study classified human rights into four sub-categories: equality; civil and political rights; economic, social and cultural rights; and any relevant articles in the parties' charters concerned with human rights in general.

The 102-page study showed that Islamic parties' charters made the least mention of equality, accounting for only 13.64 per cent of all references to equality in party charters. In comparison, moderate parties accounted for 33.64 per cent of such references. According to the study, which was compiled through direct questionnaires and interviews with the founders of each party, Islamic parties' charters focus more heavily on socio-economic, cultural, civil and political rights, as well as on power sharing.

All parties' charters call for freedom of expression, the study noted, while 13 out of 15, or all except one Islamist and one nationalist party, mention the right to a fair trial. Barakat explained that the founding documents of leftist and Islamic parties do not include any references to the right to life, freedom of movement or freedom from torture and cruel treatment, whereas moderate and nationalist parties stress these rights in their agendas.

Addressing the Political Parties Law for the year 2007, the study criticized the licensing procedures stipulated under the law, which require parties to have a minimum of 500 founding members and secure the approval of the interior minister to be established, pointing out that these restrictions contradict international standards. Barakat said the study showed that poverty and unemployment were the top issue on all parties' agendas, followed by the state of the national economy, fighting corruption and democracy, while human rights, agricultural reform, water shortages and national unity were issues of least concern.

"Human rights, in the past, were not at the top of political parties' agendas. This study is a call for all parties to review their objectives and principles to be more focused on human rights," said Minister of Political Development Musa Maaytah, who attended the seminar along with human rights activists and representatives of various political parties. The minister added that parties should seek to contribute to the decision-making process in the country in a peaceful manner.

## **Kuwait**

### **Prime Minister Cleared of Corruption Charges**

The Kuwaiti Prime Minister has survived an opposition bid to depose him over corruption allegations, according to Aljazeera's English language website. Sheikh Nasser Mohammad al-Ahmad al-Sabah was questioned on Wednesday over claims he issued a

\$700,000 check to a former member of parliament (MP) and that his office misappropriated millions of dollars of public funds.

Thirty-five MPs voted against a non-cooperation motion brought against the prime minister, which was filed last week following intense questioning. Thirteen MPs voted for the unprecedented motion and one abstained, speaker Jassem al-Khorafi, said. The motion required at least 25 votes of the 49 elected members of parliament to pass, with cabinet ministers banned from such votes.

Had it been passed, the motion would have been sent to the Emir, Sheikh Nasser's uncle, who would have either dismissed the prime minister or dissolved parliament and called for fresh elections. It was the first time a Kuwaiti head of government has been questioned in parliament since democracy was introduced to the oil rich state in 1962.

## **Morocco**

### **Ruling Against Human Rights Activist Upheld**

The Court of appeal in Casablanca upheld its ruling against the Moroccan human rights activist, Chakib Al-Khayari, who faces 3 years in prison and a fine of 753,000 dirhams (nearly \$90,000) for allegedly insulting official government bodies and violating laws of exchange and currency in Morocco by "opening a bank account in the city of Melilla, with 225 euros."

Chakib AlKhayari, head of the "Rif Association for Human Rights" in Nador city which defends the rights of the Amazigh, was arrested in February 2009 following media statements in which he criticized the government's relaxed efforts in combating the drug trade in addition to suggesting the involvement of some officials in this trade. Although the Moroccan police opened an extensive investigation which proved the involvement of some officials in the trade, Khayari has still been detained since February 2009.

After undergoing numerous investigations while incarcerated, Khayari was sentenced on June 24<sup>th</sup> of this year by a Casablanca court to 3 years in prison and the above mentioned fine. The court of appeal upheld the verdict against the human rights activist on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

### **Blogger Arrested Over A Statement About Student Protests**

Twenty six year old El Bachir Hazzam, author of the blog <http://hazzam82.maktoobblog.com> was arrested after he posted a statement reporting student protests in Taghjijt (70 km east of Kuelmim). State security reacted to the protests violently, before proceeding to monitor internet activity at cafés in an effort to stifle any coverage of the arrest.

According to sources, after being arrested, Bachir was kept in solitary confinement for interrogation before being grouped together with another group of detainees. Many bloggers, students, and activists will have been brought to trial by the December 14<sup>th</sup> of this year.

The arrest of Bachir, which was reported by ANHRI, is part of a wider offensive against freedom of opinion in Morocco. The wave of criminal cases launched against journalists and bloggers has expanded lately, with the newspaper "AlMichael" closed

down and its editor incarcerated for publishing articles about the health of the king. Additionally, the court upheld its sentences against activist Chakib Khayari as well as the journalist and blogger Hassan Barhoun, who was tried and sentenced to imprisonment in one quick session.

## **Palestine**

### 2010 to be the Last Year for Settlements' Products

The Palestinian Minister of National Economy Hasan Abu Libdeh on Sunday said that \$500 million worth of goods from West Bank Jewish settlements are “pumped into the Palestinian market annually,” as reported by Mohammad Mar'i of the Arab News Agency.

“The Ministry of National Economy took a decision to make 2010 the last year for settlements products in the Palestinian market,” Abu Libdeh said during a meeting with representatives of the private sector in the Nablus Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture. Abu Libdeh added: “Consuming settlements' products is wrong, nationally, economically, politically and must stop right away.” He added that about \$1 million worth of merchandise was seized in November and another \$66,000 worth of merchandise on Monday and that the campaign would continue. Targeted items include juice, canned goods and cosmetics. Abu Libdeh urged the Palestinian private sector to “cooperate with his ministry to enforce the decision before the announced date.” The Ministry of National Economy said early this month that it was enforcing a boycott of goods made in West Bank settlements.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced last month a 10-month partial moratorium on new housing starts in the West Bank settlements. He said the move was a bid to revive the peace talks with the Palestinians. Since then, Israel has been urging the Palestinians to make reciprocal steps. The Palestinian side has refused to engage in peace talks until Israel freezes all settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want as capital of their future state. Meanwhile, the Israeli army said it will use air reconnaissance and photography to detect violations of the freeze on settlement construction in the West Bank, as well as Special Forces raids on violators.

Under the moratorium, occupiers and contractors working on projects in which the foundations had not been finished must stop work for 10 months. But many occupiers have vowed to continue building, anyway. The army, therefore, is planning a second phase of enforcing the freeze, which will involve entering settlements to demolish all illegal construction work. In the second phase, the Israeli Border Police will oversee the demolitions and evacuate rightist protesters, while the army will secure the perimeter. The army will move in only in cases of extreme violence. Initially, the army would try to come to a verbal resolution with the occupiers, but if that fails, they would surprise the occupiers with what the army termed “paralyzing force.”

## **Sudan**

### New Security Law Disputed

The Sudanese parliament on Sunday passed a new law curbing the powers of Sudan's intelligence services, although former southern rebels and some opposition parties rejected the move as not going far enough, according to the AFP.

"We voted against this law because it violates the interim constitution," said MP Thomas Wani of the ex-rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM).

The reforms, considered a key provision of a 2005 peace accord which ended a 20-year civil war between north and south Sudan, were adopted after three hours of heated debate, an AFP journalist said. The law halves the period the national security and intelligence services - renamed the national security service - can detain suspects from nine months, in three-month renewable terms, to a maximum of four-and-a-half months.

But MPs from the SPLM, the ruling party in southern Sudan, voted against the reforms, while 20 MPs of the National Democratic Alliance walked out in protest. The NDA is a group of opposition parties that includes the movement of Darfuri leader Minni Minawi. South Sudan's minister for legal affairs, Michael Makuey, said the powers of search and arrest should be the prerogative of the police, under the supervision of the justice ministry.

## **Yemen**

### **Government Continues to Suppress Freedom of Opinion**

The Yemeni government has been taking several measures to suppress freedom of opinion and expression, according to ANHRI.

The first of these measures was the trial of three journalists charged with spreading rumors that not only destabilized the public peace but also encouraged insurrection by calling for the independence of the South and supporting the rebels there. In addition, the Prime Minister issued a decision prohibiting the publishing of any advertisements by the government in the independent press. Moreover, the activist Yasser Abdel Wahab Al-Wazir, a member of the Yemeni Organization for Defending Rights and Democratic Freedoms, will stand before a criminal court in Sana'a on charges of "forming an armed gang". Al-Wazir was arrested and prosecuted as a result of his work in exposing human rights violations by the Yemeni government, particularly in the conflict with the Houthi rebels in Sa'ada, Northern Yemen.

Also, the journalists Fouad Rashid, Salah Al Saqldy and Ahmed Rabizi are facing many accusations including "threatening national security" for which they are being tried in the Special Yemeni Penal court (which belongs to the state security). On the other hand, the three journalists accused the security of violating their privacy by hacking into their e-mails, while they criticized the prosecution for treating the cases as criminal offenses as opposed to publishing offenses. During the trial, many activists stood in solidarity with the journalists, however security forces prevented them from having a protest.

The Yemeni Prime Minister, Ali Mohammed Mujur, banned any state advertisements from being published in the independent press, a measure which many believe confirms the government's intention of killing all opposition newspapers which

depend on revenues from such advertisement. This decision could potentially lead to the shutting down of as many as 25 independent newspapers.