



C A R N E G I E E N D O W M E N T
for International Peace

Arab Reform Bulletin
July 2005, Volume 3, Issue 6
Michele Dunne, Editor
Julia Choucair, Assistant Editor

Interview with George Ishak, founding member of the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kifaya), June 16, 2005

Translated by Michele Dunne

Who formed the Egyptian Movement for Change, when, and why?

We began in November 2003 as a group of friends, thinking ahead to the 2005 presidential and parliamentary elections. We chose seven among us, representing different political outlooks—Islamists, Marxists, Nasserists, liberals—and decided to meet. We put out our first statement after eight months of talks, saying that if you want to confront U.S. and Israeli hegemony, you need a strong state. We said we wanted the state of emergency lifted, free elections—there is no such thing as a presidential referendum—no monopoly of authority or wealth, and limited presidential powers. We put out the statement and 300 people endorsed it—intellectuals, students, farmers, etc.

We had our first conference on September 22, 2004, during the National Democracy Party conference. We chose that time in particular because it was important that they hear another voice. Five hundred people attended, and we felt that people really were yearning for change, that this despotic regime had to come to an end. We agreed on a charter and chose 35 people to lead the Egyptian Movement for Change. Then we decided it was time to get the message out. It's hard to do this due to the Emergency Law. We considered requesting a permit for a demonstration, but I said no, enough of that. The constitution says I have a right to demonstrate and I'm going to exercise it.

A friend suggested we should choose one simple word that anyone could use to express our sentiments. So the word kifaya (“enough”) became the movement's slogan. We are saying “enough” to everything: to injustice, despotism, unemployment, corruption, unfair distribution of wealth, monopoly of authority—to all our daily sufferings.

On December 12 we held our first demonstration in front of Attorney General's office, a silent demonstration. We chose that particular location because we wanted to stress the importance of the judiciary. We support the Judges Club strongly, because the judiciary—if it is transparent and clean—is the only institution that can protect citizens. Without the judiciary, there is no protection. One thousand people came to that demonstration and we

accomplished two things: we broke the culture of fear and reclaimed our right to demonstrate. That was very important because fear of the police controls Egyptians.

We said at the time that we wanted to see three articles of the constitution amended: 75, 76, and 77. Article 75 should call for full financial disclosure by the president before he can run for another term, so you can see what he did while in office. Article 76 was about the referendum on the presidency and 77 talks about term in office. We asked for institution of term limits, two four-year terms and no more.

We held some more demonstrations and then Mubarak announced this business of amending only article 76 on the presidential referendum. We are not against amending any article, but what the government has done is rubbish. Apparently they are determined to prevent any real change. They said if you want to say anything about the amendments, say it before the People's Assembly. We said fine, and went to the People's Assembly to present our demands. Of course the doors were barred and there were police guarding them. Seven or eight colleagues and I went up to the officer in charge, who said in five minutes a car was coming to take us to jail. I said, "Go ahead, why not?" Then we held a demonstration in front of the Journalists' Syndicate and made our demands.

After that the draft constitutional amendment came out, and we saw that the restrictions on opposition and independent candidates really deprive the amendment of all significance. We began to focus on delegitimizing the amendment and the referendum by which it would be passed. We held three demonstrations in Cairo and 21 in provinces on May 25, the day of the referendum. I went out that day and saw there were police surrounding all the places we planned to demonstrate. All kinds of beatings, crimes, and violations of the law took place, and we held a press conference in which I held President Mubarak responsible, by virtue of his position, for protecting the safety of Egyptians.

Observers say that Kifaya and other liberal movements come from the political elite, not the grassroots. Is this true, and is it possible to have a grassroots democratic movement in the Middle East?

We did come from the elite, which is always the group to mobilize society. At first we had a presence in Cairo, Alexandria, and Mansoura only. Today we have coordinators in 21 provinces. We started out with 300 members and now have 7000. Three hundred and fifty thousand people have visited our website and 2000 people per day exchange opinions on it. And we will continue.

Two or three years ago the political conditions would not have allowed the emergence of a movement like Kifaya. What changed?

Let's be frank. No one can deny that foreign pressure has helped, as has domestic and regional pressure. The whole region is boiling. Beginning with the Palestinian and Iraqi occupations, the whole world is waking up. Also it helped that there were presidential and parliamentary elections coming and we couldn't just remain silent about that. Egypt is in a state of weakness economically. And where are we in terms of a regional political stance? I don't have any problem cooperating with the West, with America, with the whole world, but on the basis of equality, not humiliation.

I wish the government would respond to purely internal demands, but it does not. Look at the dialogue with the opposition parties; four months and they got nothing. If you follow the debate on the law of presidential elections, you will see that they are trying to outdo each other in finding ways not to open up. Because of that, I believe completely that this regime has to go; there's no point. President Mubarak should take a rest. That is our hope. As for Gamal Mubarak, he is the son of the regime. He has a new look but he is merely a more modern form of despot.

What is the effect in Egypt of U.S. policy regarding democracy?

We have had a parliament since 1862, and demands for democracy are longstanding. Now there is a synergy between external and internal changes. If the outside were calling for democracy and there was no activity inside, what would be the result? Nothing. So outside and inside factors are working together.

What is the relationship between Kifaya and the political parties? Will Kifaya become a political party or propose candidates for elections?

We are in dialogue with all the parties—the Muslim Brotherhood, Nasserists, Tagammu, Al Ghad, the Labor Party—all political forces. We invite them to all our activities and they participate or not according to their circumstances.

I prefer that we remain a movement rather than a party. Parties have many restrictions. We are working in the streets and that is extremely important in the current phase. Regarding elections, we might support certain candidates—those who have cooperated with us, who we feel are with the people and are effective—whether independents or in parties.

Is there a new wave of contacts and coordination between Islamists and secularists in Egypt ?

There is an Islamic camp; it is undeniably part of Egyptian society. If the Islamists come in with us as partners, we welcome that, as long as they operate as a political rather than a religious group. The Muslim Brothers learned from us about articulating political rather than religious slogans; they used to raise the Qur'an during political demonstrations but now have stopped. This is Kifaya's influence. Their younger generation is beginning to work with us.

From Kifaya's point of view, what are the most important political reform steps for Egypt now?

First, we will delegitimize the recent constitutional amendment, which will not lead to democracy. We demand real democracy, genuine and complete judicial supervision of all aspects of the electoral process, and keeping the ruling establishment out of the process of legal and constitutional reform because they are incapable of it. For example, having people on the electoral commission who have been guilty of bribery and violating the law—is this the democracy we want? We want complete independence for the judges, as they are demanding. That way we can build democracy.

What about upcoming elections and monitors?

We are not that interested in the presidential election. What we are interested in is that this regime come to an end. Regarding parliamentary elections, we will see the revised laws when they are out of parliament. Everyone is saying we need proportional representation but the government is not responding—as though there is no Egyptian people, as though they don't exist.

Regarding monitors, Egypt has sent observers to monitor elections in other countries, and now it will not accept them here? All this talk is pompous nonsense. Someone put out an Islamic legal opinion yesterday saying that the ink used to stain voters' fingers so that they can vote only once is “forbidden.” But fraud is not forbidden.

What will Kifaya do if President Mubarak is elected?

We will begin the struggle anew on behalf of a free, democratic state that respects the rights of citizens. Citizenship means complete equality without discrimination based on religion, sex, etc. Our main issues now are ending violence and showing that the upcoming presidential election is illegitimate. And we will keep fighting even if President Mubarak starts another term. We will fight in the streets to the end and we won't stop no matter what happens.

Change in Egypt will come from the people, from their awareness. It cannot come from outside or from the regime; forget about the regime. We put all our confidence in the people, who still don't realize fully that their economic and social problems are due to this regime. Once they realize, they will move. This is our task and it requires serious effort. And I don't think change will come suddenly. If we continue to work at this pace, it will take ten years. The important thing is that we have begun.