



**DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EXTERNAL POLICIES
DIRECTORATE B
- POLICY DEPARTMENT -**

Egypt: Country Briefing



Contents:

This note sets out the main features of Egypt's institutional configuration. It discusses the current issues concerning national politics, the economic situation, human rights and freedom of expression, external relations, and EU policy vis-à-vis Egypt.

The opinions expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Parliament.

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Institutional configuration



Hosni Mubarak has been **President of the Republic of Egypt** since 1981. In September 2005 he was re-elected for his fifth consecutive term (six years, renewable), taking 88% of the vote in elections with a poor turnout (23%). These were the first genuinely pluralist presidential elections in the history of the Republic of Egypt. Previously presidents had been elected by referendum after nomination by Parliament. Ayman Nour, leader of the *Al Ghad* party and chief opponent, was runner-up with 7.6% of the vote, while Noamane Goma, president of the Neo-Wafd, took 2.9%. The results reflect only a very slight risk posed to the regime by this democratic 'opening', as the Egyptian opposition has only limited space for manoeuvre against the

National Democratic Party (NDP).

The **government has been led by Ahmed Nazif** since July 2004. His party introduced a large number of technocrats and members of the NDP's 'young guard' into the government, which was modified slightly in December 2005 and August 2006.

The People's Assembly (*Maglis al-Sha'b*), Parliament's lower house, is composed of 454 members: 444 elected for 5 years by direct universal suffrage (the next election is due in 2010-2011), and 10 appointed by the President of the Republic. The Assembly's **Speaker, Ahmed Fathi Sorour**, is Vice-President of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA).

At the last elections to the People's Assembly in November/December 2005 the NDP secured a majority of 73% of the seats. The key feature of the elections was the enormous **gain by members belonging to the Society of the Muslim Brothers**, who took 20% of the vote, thereby increasing their numbers five times over in the lower house (88 seats) and consolidating their organisation as the main opposition party. Traditional opposition parties, on the other hand, received a drubbing. In view of the results, in February 2006 the government decided to **postpone the municipal elections** for two years.

The Consultative Council (*Maglis al-Shura*), the upper house, is composed of 264 members: two thirds are elected, while the remaining third is appointed by the Head of State. The members' term is 6 years, and half the Council is renewed every 3 years. The Consultative Council has only limited powers, although these were slightly enhanced by a reform in March 2007. It also acts *de facto* in support of the NDP, and helps to establish the ruling party's political leverage through its control of several other bodies, such as the Committee of Political

Parties (see below) and the National Council of Human Rights (a recent body through which the regime is fond of demonstrating its commitment to reforms, see page 11).

The last elections to the Consultative Council were in June 2007, the setting for the first electoral showdown between the NDP and the Society of the Muslim Brothers since the 2005 elections. The elections were held against a backdrop of repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the NDP took 84 of the 88 seats. The remaining 4 seats were shared out among the Tagammu' Party (socialist, 1 seat) and 3 independent parties.

Egyptian political life features the co-existence of Islamic opposition, 'illegal, though tolerated', and legal opposition parties with no real social basis. The weak basis of this legal partisan scenario is due to an emergency law placing restrictions on its activities and **institutional and political engineering** favouring divisions and co-option by the authorities.

The **Committee of Political Parties** operates at the very centre of this system: it is responsible for analysing requests for the legalisation of political parties and has the power to curtail the activities of existing parties. The Committee's composition means that it is entirely controlled by the presidential majority. Among the criteria on which the Committee bases its decisions is the 'innovative aspect' of the programme submitted, a relatively vague, malleable concept. Moreover, the 1971 Constitution prohibits parties based on religious ideologies. Thus the **Society of the Muslim Brothers**, founded in 1928 by Hassan Al-Banna, is not a legal entity, although its members do stand in elections as independent candidates.

Authorisation was granted in 2004 for the **creation of two new political parties – *Al Ghad* (Tomorrow) and *Al Dusturi* (The Constitutional)** – although permission was **refused for at least two others**, *Al Wasat* (The Centre) and *Al Karama* (Dignity). Authorisation was also granted in June 2007 for the creation of the 'Democratic Front'. One of its leaders, Osama el-Ghazali Harb, is a university lecturer and intellectual who left President Mubarak's NDP in 2005, indicating his disagreement with the limited scope of the political reforms introduced.

The opposition parties do not have **equal access to the State media**. During the debates organised at the time of the last elections, the opposition parties were granted only a very small amount of time to air their views in the public media, which represent almost all of Egypt's mass information systems.

The **municipal elections of 8 April 2008** were plagued by social unrest and political discord. In the weeks prior to the elections, labour protests escalated, precipitating a harsh crackdown that resulted in at least two fatalities and many injuries. The Brotherhood boycotted the elections after it was allowed to field only 20 of a total of 10 000 candidates, and arrests en masse of Brotherhood members and potential candidates in the run-up to the election. Voter turnout did not exceed 5% and the NDP, facing virtually no competition, won roughly 95% of the seats at stake.

Constitutional reforms: towards a more sophisticated authoritarianism

In the run-up to the presidential elections of September 2005, **external pressure** (chiefly American) and new **internal calls for democracy** resulted in demonstrations by the *Kifaya* ('enough is enough') movement and by NGOs, the mobilisation of certain professions (journalists and judges, for example), and more vigorous campaigns by independent and opposition newspapers.

President Mubarak and the NDP employed the **discourse of reform** in reaction to the new pressures. The adjustment of constitutional mechanisms and electoral rules was a key element. No in-depth reforms were made to the system, but Egypt underwent a process of transformation. The regime adapted in order to consolidate the supremacy of the Head of State over institutions such as Parliament and politics, and to boost its network of clients. The focus on constitutional affairs also went hand in hand with the absence of any formal debates on the major political issues, such as social reform.

In May 2005 the President secured an **amendment** to Article 76 of the **Constitution, modifying voting in presidential elections** and making it possible for multiple candidates to be put forward. Many procedures in practice, however, **limited the actual scope of pluralism** in elections to the presidency. For example, candidates required the backing of Parliament, dominated by the ruling NDP. The new Article 76 also obliged independent candidates (and therefore the Muslim Brothers) to obtain the signatures of 250 elected members of the legislative assemblies and municipal councils. The parties were required to have been operating legally for at least 5 years and hold 5% of the seats in each assembly. The article also made provision for the creation of a Presidential Election Commission to supervise the election process, although its independence is doubtful.

The process continued with **a series of amendments to the Constitution in March 2007**, approved by referendum. Under the pretext of continuing the democratic process, the amendments were geared towards **reinforcing the President's powers, curtailing freedoms and weakening the judiciary and its independence**. In particular, the reforms brought an end to the supervision of elections and referendums by judicial authorities, and the amendments made permanent the 'temporary' emergency laws.

The amendments also directly targeted the Muslim Brotherhood. The ban on parties created on a religious basis is laid down in the Constitution, and one of the amendments also made it possible to hold elections on a list basis, thereby allowing the legal system to do away with the system of independent candidates that had hitherto enabled the Muslim Brotherhood to take part in the political process.

The reforms also provided a legal basis for the introduction of an **anti-terrorist law**, allowing acts of terrorism to be tried by any judicial authority, including military tribunals. This law was intended to **replace the law on the state of emergency**, which had been in force since 1967 and had been suspended only between May 1980 and October 1981. It was renewed for a further two years in April 2006. Nevertheless, since Egypt's legal and political system does not provide sufficient guarantees, the opposition saw the amendment as a kind of 'constitutionalisation' of the emergency law.

The **EU Presidency** observed on 3 April 2007 ‘that the referendum [to adopt amendments to the Constitution] took place only a few days after parliamentary approval, thus leaving little time for public debate (...). The EU will follow very closely developments concerning the foreseen new anti-terrorism law, and expects any new legislation to abide by international standards.’

The dynasty succession scenario

The succession of Hosni Mubarak has always been the subject of much speculation. **Both constitutional reform and ongoing power plays within the NDP usher in the scenario of a dynasty succession.** The opposition and many other observers feel that opening up the presidential election to a number of candidates would eventually secure the presidency for Gamal Mubarak in ostensibly democratic elections. The other amendments are geared towards perpetuating the NDP’s political hegemony by removing any trace of opposition.

Gamal Mubarak has indeed become a central figure within the NDP. The President’s son and his followers have in recent years had a meteoric rise through the ranks of both the party and the government. Following his appointment as **head of the NDP’s highly influential Policies Secretariat** (responsible within the General Secretariat for drawing up the party’s policy guidelines), Gamal Mubarak was promoted to **Deputy Secretary-General** on 1 February 2006. The ‘young guard’ he leads has entered the Nazif government and party structures en masse, whereas certain elements of the ‘old guard’ have been removed.

The NDP has also undergone a series of internal reforms endorsed at its **9th Congress in November 2007**. Elections were held in September and October to renew hundreds of party representatives at various levels. Election procedures were also introduced for the ruling hierarchy, including the party presidency. Even though Hosni Mubarak was unsurprisingly re-elected to this post, the reforms are seen as a means of **renewing party barons in the medium term in favour of the young guard**, and allowing Gamal Mubarak to become the NDP’s undisputed candidate in 2011. Furthermore, a new ‘Supreme Council’ comprising the General Secretariat and the Political Bureau – and therefore including Gamal – has become the party’s new executive body, a function previously carried out by the Political Bureau alone. This means a promotion for Gamal, who was not a member of the Political Bureau. He can now avail himself of his status in the party’s executive body, and thus, in accordance with the Constitution, **become the NDP’s official candidate.**

The Muslim Brothers

As the regime acted to remove the Muslim Brotherhood from political circles, a fresh wave of repression was unleashed on its members in the course of 2007, targeting mainly **‘moderate’ leaders of the Brotherhood** such as Essam El-Erian and Khairat El-Shater. These events took place as the opposition led by the 88 Muslim Brotherhood members took the parliamentary sittings by storm, forcing the government to respond to the assembly, and several **Western governments, including the United States, seriously considered initiating dialogue with the Brotherhood.** The Muslim Brothers have continued to reaffirm their intentions to have the organisation legalised, and have even gone as far as introducing their first political party platform.

Criticisms have been levelled at the Brothers accusing them of ‘double discourse’. Although they claim to be a democratic grouping, their platform (originally described as ‘provisional’)

states that they oppose the election of a Copt or a woman as President of the Republic. The ‘double discourse’ actually points to some **deep divisions within the organisation**, and substantial controversy between ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives’ frequently plagues the Brotherhood’s leadership. One such example was observed when Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, a member of the Guidance Bureau, stated that he was not opposed to the election of a woman or a Copt, or when the spokesman Essam El-Erian claimed that if the Brothers came to power they would recognise Israel as a reality and would make no major changes to Egyptian policy on this issue.

Challenges by judges and journalists

Since the legal opposition parties were relegated to a negligible role, it was the Egyptian judges and journalists that spearheaded the calls for democracy. The **Judges’ Club**, which acts as a syndicate for some 8 000 magistrates, spoke out against the irregularities in the three elections of 2005: the constitutional referendum, the presidential elections and the general election. Two magistrates (Vice-Presidents of the Court of Cassation), Mahmoud Mekki and Hicham Al-Bastawissi, became the symbols of the ‘**revolt of the judges**’, who demanded, in particular, that the **independence of the judiciary** be guaranteed. When the Judges’ Club refused to ratify the results of the last legislative elections, El-Bastawisi and Mekki’s immunity status was withdrawn and they were accused of ‘defaming the State’. Mahmoud Mekki was finally exonerated, whereas Hicham Al-Bastawissi was issued with a reprimand from the **High Magistrates’ Council**, whose members are appointed by the President of the Republic.

Following this affair a new **Justice Minister, Mamdouh Marei**, was appointed as part of the ministry reshuffle in August 2006. Analysts felt his arrival signalled the authorities’ intention to ‘regain their grip’ on the judges. A large number of judges who had taken part in the demonstrations came under pressure. In **October 2007 a parliamentary bill deemed to infringe the neutrality and the independence of the judiciary again led to demonstrations by the Judges’ Club**. The bill, in fact, did away with judicial immunity for magistrates, gave the executive power over the main judicial bodies (the High Constitutional Court, the High Magistrates’ Council, the Court of Cassation), and deprived judges of control of their own budget.

On the heels of their new-found freedom of expression, **independent and opposition journalists** now faced a certain amount of backlash. Since 2004 journalists had been active under the leadership of Galal Aref at the Journalists’ Syndicate. The ‘politicisation’ of the syndicate was such that its head office, located in the same street as the Judges’ Club, became the favourite rendezvous for ‘Kifaya’ demonstrations. The elections of 17 November 2007, however, returned leadership of the syndicate to Makram Mohammed Ahmed, who had been quick to criticise this kind of politicisation in the past, and is perceived as a government ally, although he denies this. His election was thus seen as an indication of **the authorities regaining their grip on the syndicate**.

Strikes by workers and civil servants

In Egypt, as in other African countries, **the huge increase in the price of basic necessities poses a threat to social peace**. In less than two years the prices of basic foodstuffs have doubled and in some cases almost tripled, whereas the national minimum wage has not increased since the mid-1980s.

Widespread strikes have affected many textile companies since the end of 2004 and have gone on to affect other sectors, including the public administration, with workers demanding higher salaries and pensions against a backdrop of inflating prices and insecurity with regard to the **privatisation policies** introduced by the Nazif government. The authorities have taken care not to become embroiled in confrontation amid the unprecedented demonstrations generated by these strikes. In **Mahalla El Koubra over 20 000 textile workers went on strike on several occasions in the course of 2006 and 2007**, and were successful in the end following intervention by the security forces.

The authorities are certainly afraid of **politicisation** of the demonstrations. **Calls for union rights** are emerging from what are essentially social and economic claims. Under Egyptian law official authorisation is required to exercise the right to strike and the Federation of Professional Unions, an ally of the authorities, opposes the strikes. On several occasions striking workers have demanded that local representatives of the Federation be sacked, and have threatened to create parallel union structures. The demonstrators' slogans also **target government policies** and are moving ever closer to the President, albeit still rather gingerly. At the end of 2007 several thousand tutors on strike threatened to march on the presidential palace, and their discourse even covered more general subjects such as unity of Muslims and Copts.

The security situation and the situation of the Copts

After a lull of seven years, the **security situation** deteriorated after the attacks at Taba (34 dead, October 2004), Cairo (April 2005), Sharm El Sheikh (88 dead, July 2005), and Dahab (21 dead, April 2006). These attacks pointed to the failure of the security policies implemented for decades by Mubarak's government. Although Islamic terrorism is not a new phenomenon in Egypt, the 2006 attacks saw the use of a new procedure: suicide commandos. As in other Arab countries, combating Islamic movements allows the regime to affirm its legitimacy and its leading role as a bulwark to Islamic attempts to gain power.

A total of 900 Islamic prisoners who had renounced violence were released in April 2006, and they were presented as repentant members of the *Gammaat al-Islamiya* groups that terrorised Egypt in the 1980s and 1990s.

In April 2006 **attacks on Copt worshippers** at three churches in Alexandria left one person dead and a dozen wounded. Intercommunity scuffles broke out the following day at the funeral of the dead Copt, and the tragic result was 22 people injured, burnt-out cars and stoning of Christian homes. The seething Copt community rejected the official version, which attributed the events to an unbalanced individual. There have been numerous attacks on Copts since the 1970s.

Relaunch of the civil nuclear programme

After 20 years of stagnation, Egypt announced the **relaunch** of its civil nuclear programme. It also decided to enlist the assistance of China and Russia, at the risk of irritating its US ally, which had already expressed its desire for cooperation on the project. This policy emerged within the **context of an initiative by the Arab League**, which, on 6 September 2006, had invited Arab countries to consider or expand the use of civil nuclear technology in all areas assisting sustainable development. This raised questions about Egypt's intentions, since the country's official policy is to encourage an area free of weapons of mass destruction (including nuclear weapons) throughout the Middle East. This policy is opposed by Israel, which, although it supports the ban on biological and chemical weapons (especially in relation to Syria), refuses to give up its own nuclear arsenal, especially in view of Iran's ambitions.

Economic situation

Main indicators (2006)¹:

Population: 80 million

Growth in GDP: +6.8%

GDP per inhabitant: \$ 4 200

Unemployment: 10.3%

Inflation: +7.7%

Budget - income: \$ 27.01 billion - expenditure: \$ 35.48 billion

Public debt: 113.4% of GDP

The country is increasingly moving from a government-controlled economy towards a free market economy. Egypt has put an end to the socialist economic model that had been operational since 1973 and the *infithah* or Open Door Policy introduced under Sadat. Though revenue (oil, the Suez Canal, workers' remittances) allowed the Egyptian Government to carry out large-scale redistribution, falling oil prices in the mid-1980s created a budget deficit, greater foreign debt and, due to an expansionist monetary policy, record inflation, which in 1991 forced the country to implement the **IMF and World Bank's macro-economic stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes**.

The reforms implemented are designed to reduce State intervention in the economic system, ensure the adoption of the principles of a market economy, enhance Egypt's integration within the international economy, encourage exports and increase the country's dependence on internal revenue. In June **1995 Egypt became a member of the WTO**. State companies were privatised, and the regulatory environment improved. Exchange rates were liberalised in 2003, leading to a depreciation of the Egyptian pound. **Free trade agreements** were drawn up: the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement with the US in 1999, the Agadir Agreement with Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan in 2004, and the EU Association Agreement, which entered into force in June 2004. Egypt also reformed its trade policy to bring it up to WTO standards.

Prime Minister Nazif and his government of technocrats and economists appointed in 2004 **accelerated the reforms**, primarily to attract foreign investment, boost economic growth and curb unemployment. **New legislation** was adopted and there was **further privatisation**,

¹ Sources: CIA World Factbook.

including in the banking sector. The financial sector was completely restructured. **Tax and budget reforms** were also implemented: fuel subsidies were reduced (resulting in a considerable price increase for consumers), income tax was simplified, corporate taxation was reduced, and the budget was streamlined. In December 2004 Egypt also signed the Qualified Industrial Zone Agreement with the US and Israel authorising export to the US of any item using at least a minimum percentage of Israeli products, and a year later in December 2005 Egypt signed a free trade agreement with Turkey.

The reforms allowed Egypt to stabilise the country’s economy, increase its foreign currency reserves and achieve regular growth. However, the various **corruption** scandals point to a **flawed institutional environment** whose ability to maintain growth, create jobs and reduce poverty may be called into question. Direct overseas investment, in fact, is still quite poor, and the government faces an additional dilemma over the need to reduce subsidies that have increased the budget deficit and its inability to act against the secondary effects of the reforms, chiefly socio-economic problems. Striking workers concerned with job security and spending power are a direct consequence of these problems.

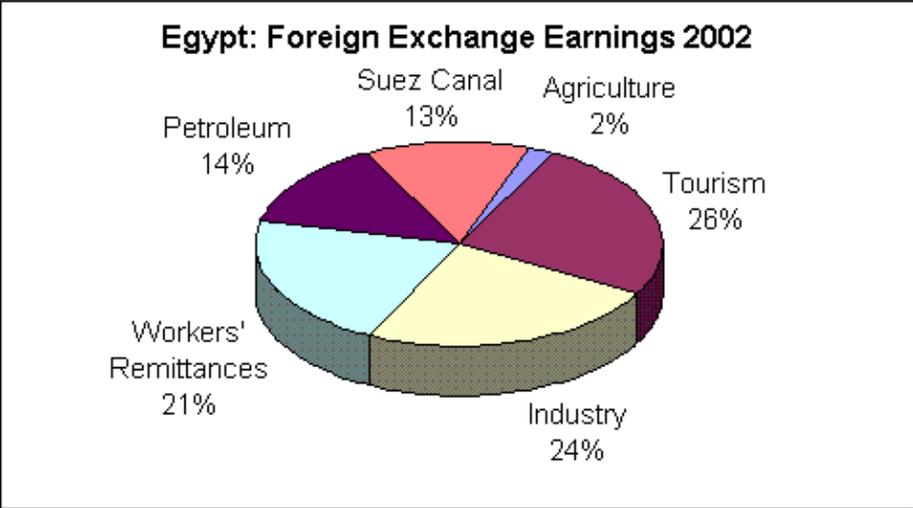
Egypt also has a **trade deficit**, showing \$20.55 billion in goods exported against \$33.1 billion in imports during 2006. The country’s main export destinations are Italy (12.1%), the US (11.3%), Spain (8.5%), the UK (5.5%), France (5.4%) and Syria (5.2%). Egypt exports mainly crude oil and oil products, cotton, textiles, metals and chemical products. Its principal import partners are the US (11.4%), China (8.3%), Germany (6.4%), Italy (5.4%), Saudi Arabia (5%) and France (4.6%). The chief imports are industrial products, foodstuffs, chemicals, timber and fuel.

In the World Bank's ‘Doing Business 2009’ report, published in mid-September, **Egypt remained among the top ten reforming countries**, moving up 11 places to 114th out of 181 countries in the global rankings. This was largely as a result of improvements in the ease of starting a business, registering property, managing construction permits, obtaining credit information, investor protection and cross-border trade. In early October, in a final seal of approval, the Egyptian Finance Minister, Youssef Boutros-Ghali, was elected to chair the IMF’s International Monetary and Financial Committee, the first time the position has been occupied by a non-European.

The role of tourism

Tourism is Egypt’s main source of foreign currency, and one of its main sectors of economic activity, bringing the country an annual revenue of around \$7 billion, which amounts to much more than the remittances from Egyptians working abroad.

Recent figures point to PE 414.645



a substantial increase in the number of tourists visiting Egypt. Income in 2006/2007 was \$8.2 billion, accounting for 3% of the country's GDP. The World Tourism Organisation reports that Egypt is the destination of one quarter of all tourists visiting the Middle East, and one third of those who visit Africa. Even though Egypt is also a popular destination with Arab tourists, especially from Gulf nations, the nationalities most keen to visit the country are Russians, British and Germans (these three countries accounted for 14% of total tourist numbers in 2007, according to the Ministry of Tourism).

This consequent growth in the sector has led the government to revise its forecasts upwards: it is now expecting 18 million visitors per year, along with the creation of 1.2 million jobs in the sector by 2015. Boosted by increasingly prestigious spa facilities, the tourist industry is developing into an exclusive sector (golf courses and 'aesthetic tourism'). The construction of luxury hotels is also in full swing with two five-star establishments opening in 2007 and additional five-star hotels due to open at the end of 2008.

Following a period of relative calm, the kidnapping in southern Egypt in September 2008 of a group of German, Italian and Egyptian tourists revived the fears that the tourist industry might be affected.

The Suez Canal and its impact on the Egyptian economy

The Suez Canal earned around \$2 billion for the country over the first half of 2007. Its favourable policy towards the West in a hostile region brings Egypt \$2.1 billion in aid from the United States each year.

The Suez Canal set a new record in May 2008 in terms of monthly revenue, generating \$479 million (\$448 million in April and \$381 million in May 2007). The Suez Canal Authority (SCA) is agreeable to optimising business at the Canal, now set to benefit from an increase in merchant vessels sailing to Asia, especially China. An agreement was signed in June with the Georgia Ports Authority (GPA) to promote the Asia-US sailing route via the Suez Canal.

Suez Canal	2004	2005	2006	2007
Vessels (no)	16 850	18 193	18 664	20 279
Shipping Tonnage (m)	621.0	671.8	742.7	848.2
Receipts (US\$ bn) ^a	3.09	3.46	3.82	4.61

^a Includes navigation services.

Source: Suez Canal Authority.

Food dependency

The production and consumption of agricultural products are increasing more rapidly in developing countries than in developed economies. However, as indicated in **a joint report by the OECD and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)**, the higher productivity in poorer countries is insufficient to meet the food requirements of Egypt's growing population.

Egypt has been receiving financial aid from the United States since 1979 – \$2.2 billion annually – and it is the third largest beneficiary of US funds since the war in Iraq.

Egypt is therefore not yet a modern economy, despite constant flows of income. It should take a more serious look at its future, especially its dependence on external donations to meet national needs.

Oil

The prosperity of Arab oil countries has always benefited Egypt substantially. However, revenue from oil and natural gas fell in 2006 and 2007 and the industrial structure has changed to the benefit of non-oil sectors. Oil exports thus fell from 56% in 2005/2006 to 46% in 2006/2007.

Human rights and basic freedoms¹

Police repression and violence

Many instances of human rights violations as part of the **fight against terrorism** in Egypt have been criticised. In June 2007 Human Rights Watch spoke out against the death penalty handed down to three people accused of organising the Taba attacks in 2004, after a trial plagued with irregularities and allegations of torture. Following a wave of attacks in 2004, the police carried out a large number of raids in Egyptian villages. Estimates of the numbers detained varied between 800 and 3 000, and the vast majority of those released in November 2004 reported that they had been tortured.

Incidents concerning national security and acts of ‘terrorism’ are usually dealt with by military tribunals, and those who appear before these courts are not entitled to an independent and impartial hearing nor to a full re-examination of the case by a higher court.

The main target of repression is the Muslim Brotherhood. In September 2007 Amnesty International estimated that over **500 Muslim Brothers had been jailed**. In October 40 Brothers accused of involvement in terrorist activities were brought before **military tribunals**. Two Brotherhood members of parliament were also briefly imprisoned in August. Students have been arrested on many occasions, too.

There are also criticisms of the endemic violence employed by the security forces. One of the most shocking examples was the **action taken on 30 December 2005 to disperse Sudanese asylum-seekers** demonstrating outside the HCR’s regional offices, when those taking part were attacked violently by the police. The operation left at least 27 demonstrators dead, although certain sources reported that the numbers were even higher, and dozens injured on both sides. The EP adopted a resolution on 19 January 2006 to denounce the incident². A decision by the Dokki state prosecutor in May 2006, however, absolved the police of any blame. The text of the decision was only made public at the end of 2007, and in December several organisations in Egypt and other countries appealed to Hosni Mubarak to open a fresh inquiry.

¹ Sources: RWB, AI, HRW, IHRF, WOAT.

² P6_TA(2006)0031, 19 January 2006.

Incidences of torture in prisons and police stations are regularly reported. There was one positive development on 5 November 2007, however, when a three-year prison sentence was handed down to two police officers accused of beating up and raping a bus driver. Likewise, in January 2008 another three police officers received sentences of up to five years in prison for their treatment of a person arrested in Alexandria in April 2006. In the first case, a video of the event had been posted on Internet, although it was not the first time that new information technology had been used to bring human rights violations to the attention of the general public.

Political freedoms and freedom of association

Ayman Nour, a member of parliament, was arrested on 29 January 2005, released and subsequently rearrested in December 2005 and sentenced to five years in prison (an appeal to the Court of Cassation was rejected in May 2006). He was accused of forging the documents submitted to the Committee of Political Parties for authorisation of his party, Al-Ghad. Both he and his supporters claimed that this was a political manoeuvre to remove one of the ruling party's rivals. An EP resolution of 6 April 2006 called for his release.¹

The jailing of the leader of the Al-Ghad party, authorisation of which had caused a certain amount of surprise in 2004, led to a serious crisis within the party and caused setbacks to its development. The episode thus demonstrates the **regime's ability to control partisan activity** even beyond the pre-selection mechanism used by the Committee of Political Parties.

Associations are also subject to an authorisation system, run by the Ministry of Social Affairs. On the basis of the **Law of Associations of June 2002**, a particularly restrictive text, several NGOs have been refused permission to legally register their organisations, such as the Egyptian Association Against Torture (EAAT) and the Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence. The 2002 law also forbids associations to conduct political activities or receive external funding without government authorisation.

As human rights organisations were struggling to have their status recognised, the **National Human Rights Council (NHRC)**, a body linked to the Consultative Council (*Maglis al-Shura*), was established by a law passed on 19 June 2003. This came as a blow to the organisations within Egyptian civil society, which saw it as a government institution that would manoeuvre around them. Consequently, the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR) denounced the fact that the NGOs were not consulted about the composition and role of the NHRC and the fact that, at the same time, the 2002 law imposed new restrictions on the organisation and functioning of NGOs.

Pursuant to the 2002 law, in 2007 the government decreed the **dissolution of two associations**: the Centre for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS), accused of incitement to social unrest, in April, and the Association for Human Rights Legal Aid (AHRLA), on the accusation of receiving overseas funds, on 4 September.

Media and freedom of expression²

The **2007 world press freedom index** drawn up by Reporters Without Borders ranked Egypt **146th out of 169 countries** (133rd out of 168 in 2006).

¹ P6_TA(2006)0144, 6 April 2006.

² Sources: RWB, AI, HRW, IHRF, WOAT, and the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR).

In **July 2006** the Egyptian Parliament voted for **controversial amendments to the press law** amid protests by journalists and opposition groups. The amendments did away with prison sentences for a number of press activities, though not all: **35 offences are still punishable by imprisonment**. The new law also prevented journalists from criticising the President of the Republic, State bodies such as Parliament and government ministers, and foreign heads of state. It also introduced restrictions on the financial information of private individuals that could be published in a bid to protect the businessmen who profit from corruption.

In **September 2007** chief editors **Adil Hammouda (Al-Fagr)**, **Wael El-Ibrashi (Sawt El-Umma)**, **Abdel Halim Qandil (Al-Karama)** and **Ibrahim Eissa (Al-Dostour)** received **prison sentences of one year** and fines of 20 000 Egyptian pounds (approximately €3 000) for ‘publishing false information’. The Al-Jazeera journalist **Huwaida Taha Mitwali** had already been sentenced to six months in prison in May 2007 for making a documentary on torture in Egypt.

The Internet is also targeted by the authorities and, according to Reporters Without Borders, seven cyber-dissidents were jailed in 2006. More recently, the **blogger Kareem Amer** was sentenced to **three years in prison** on 22 February 2007 for ‘incitement to hatred of Islam’ and another year’s imprisonment for ‘insulting’ the Egyptian President. The sentence was confirmed following an appeal on 12 March. Kareem Amer was arrested on 6 November 2006 for articles posted on his blog. He was a regular critic of the Hosni Mubarak Government’s authoritarian tendencies and also spoke out against the highest religious institutions in Egypt.

Foreign relations

Isolated after signing the peace treaty with Israel, Egypt regained its status in the Arab-Muslim world through a pragmatic foreign policy, as well as its role in both the 1990/91 Gulf War and the Israeli/Palestinian peace process. In the current context, characterised by **American pressure for political reforms** (which mellowed considerably after the ‘semi-victory’ of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2005) and a **crisis-ridden Middle East**, Egypt is now **seeking to implement a more active foreign policy** against a background of competition between the major regional powers.

The strategic alliance with the US remains one feature that lends substantial structure to Egyptian foreign policy. The US is far and away Egypt’s largest benefactor, donating \$1.3 billion annually in military aid and a further \$415 million for assistance with civilian projects. In return, Egypt has almost always supported US policy in the Middle East, although a certain amount of tension has returned recently in connection with democratic reforms and disagreements over a number of regional issues, chiefly the Israeli/Palestinian conflict (the US criticises Egypt’s lack of controls of its Gaza border) and Iraq (Mubarak bowed to public pressure and condemned US military operations in 2003).

Israeli-Arab peace is one of the stated objectives of Egyptian diplomats, and the truce secured between Israel and Hamas in June 2008 was hailed as their most recent major success. In parallel to Egypt’s constant attempts to seek reconciliation between the estranged factions of Fatah and Hamas, with a new round of negotiations set for November 2008, this policy reveals a leaning towards ‘proximity diplomacy’. At regional level Egypt is facing major competition

from Saudi Arabia (the instigator of the Arab League's peace initiative) and, more recently, from the Gulf states such as Qatar (the Doha inter-Lebanese reconciliation agreement). Egypt's location in proximity to the Gaza Strip, controlled by Hamas since the summer of 2007 and isolated from the rest of the world by the Israeli blockade, presents numerous difficulties: it must deal with the pressure exerted at its borders by a population of 1.3 million that is hemmed in on exposed territory and will use any means to end its isolation (Rafah tunnel system, demonstrations and holes in the border wall). The Egyptian people's sympathy for the fate of the inhabitants of Gaza favours benign policies, but Hamas's dominance there calls for a more cautious approach. Egypt, in fact, has little interest in supporting this Palestinian branch of its Muslim Brotherhood, the main opposition to President Mubarak's regime. Furthermore, although Egypt is anxious to show the international community that it is reacting to Israel's security concerns by securing its border, it is reluctant to play into the hands of Israel's right-wing factions, which dream of solving the Palestinian issue by annexing the Gaza Strip to Egypt and the West Bank to Jordan.

In Iraq, Egypt's desires are for **stability, territorial unity and preservation of the country's 'Arab identity' (in other words, limiting the influence of Iran)**. Although it does have some links to Iraq's Sunni population, mainly through the prestigious Al-Alzhar Mosque, Egypt, whose population is over 90% Sunni, does not wish to favour any religious or ethnic groups, and in fact direct Egyptian involvement in Iraq was cut back considerably following the murder of the country's Ambassador, Ihab El-Sherif, in July 2004. It has, however, hosted **international conferences** for the reconstruction of Iraq, and over **100 000 Iraqis have taken refuge in Egypt**, thereby putting pressure on the country's infrastructures and prices and making the authorities fearful of 'imported' Iraqi violence on its own doorstep.

Egypt's traditional good **relations with Syria suffered a blow** after French and US pressure caused Syrian troops to withdraw from Lebanon, and also in the aftermath of the Israeli attack on Hezbollah in the summer of 2006. It was at this point that Egypt became unhappy with Syrian influence in **Lebanon**, though it mediates in Lebanon between 'pro- and anti-Syrian factions' in an effort to promote the country's stability. Along with Saudi Arabia, it was also **successful in encouraging Syria to attend the Annapolis peace conference** (November 2007), and supported its request to place the Golan Heights on the agenda. Here the objective was to lend support to the Arab League's peace initiative and, in a more general sense, to persuade Damascus to adopt a more moderate stance, particularly in terms of reconsidering its strategic alliance with Iran.

Egypt is often portrayed as a **player in the Iranian 'containment' strategy** in the Middle East. Both countries severed diplomatic relations after the 1979 Islamic revolution, and relations have never been fully re-established. According to Egypt's Foreign Minister, Ahmed Abul-Gheit, however, negotiations are currently being held to normalise relations so that they can tackle together the various crises in the region (Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon), although their respective interests in these issues often remain antagonistic. Moreover, Egypt's announcement that it intends to develop its own civil nuclear programme has been perceived as a response to Iran's programme, thus auguring the prospect of a nuclear arms race in the region.

The central issue of **relations with the African nations** is administration of the River Nile, which passes through nine countries in East Africa. This causes problems with Ethiopia in particular.

Egypt is also concerned about the conflicts in **Sudan** (North-South and Darfur) and has mediated between President Al-Bachir and rebel leaders. It defends the country's unity and stability and is keen to ensure that it does not have to take in even more refugees than the 2 million Sudanese already living in Egypt. It has called for rapid implementation of the UN Security Council's resolutions and has also offered assistance to the UN mission in Darfur.

Relations with the European Union

The EU is an important partner in both trade and diplomacy and Egypt will play a prominent role in the **Union for the Mediterranean**, which was launched in Paris in July. Egypt and France are the first co-presidents of the Union for the Mediterranean. Egypt has been an enthusiastic advocate of the union and will seek to exercise substantial influence within the new regional institutions.

The EU is Egypt's main trading partner, accounting for 43% of the country's exports. In addition, 60% of direct foreign investment in Egypt originates in the EU.

An EU-Egypt **Association Agreement** has been in force since **1 June 2004**. It provides for the gradual liberalisation of trade between the European Union and Egypt, and establishes an institutional framework for cooperation based on an Association Council. Egypt received €1.1 billion in MEDA aid between 1996 and 2006.

The European Union and Egypt adopted an **Action Plan** at the Association Council meeting on **7 March 2007**. The Plan sets out a number of cooperation targets in relation to trade, customs, agriculture, transport, energy, science, human rights and democracy. The Commission allocated **€558 million** to Egypt for the period 2007-2010 as part of the **European Neighbourhood Instrument** to help meet these objectives, which is an increase with respect to the previous period of MEDA aid.

Egypt is **eligible** for the **European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)**, and financial resources are thus available for both macro-projects and micro-projects in connection with EIDHR campaigns 2 and 3, i.e. projects aimed at 'fostering a culture of human rights' and 'promoting the democratic process'.

The EU is closely monitoring the process of **political reform** in Egypt. The German Presidency expressed its views on the conditions for organising the referendum to validate the constitutional reforms in April 2007 and on the irregularities and violence observed during the elections to the Consultative Council in June 2007. The British Presidency had already criticised the elections to the People's Council in December 2005.

The European Parliament and Egypt

The EP arranged a meeting with the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Ahmed Abul-Gheit, on 6 December 2007 at a joint meeting of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Delegation for relations with the Mashreq countries. The items on the agenda included the Annapolis

conference, the crisis in Lebanon, Darfur, Iraq, the French Union for the Mediterranean proposal and human rights.

The last inter-parliamentary meeting with Egypt was held between 14 and 21 February 2004, when an EP delegation visited Cairo, Alexandria and Aswan.

The EP devoted its **last resolution on Egypt in April 2006 to the case of Ayman Nour**¹, a candidate in the presidential election who was jailed in December 2005. The resolution calls for his release and for Egypt to establish 'precise timetables and benchmarks in order effectively to monitor the progress of the implementation of the Action Plan' and asks the European Commission and the Egyptian Government to set up a Sub-Committee on Human Rights.

A resolution in January 2006 also condemned the use of violence by the authorities against Sudanese refugees².

The last **EP resolution on 17 January**³ criticising the **human rights situation in Egypt** led to **protests** by the Egyptian authorities. In particular, the Speaker of the Egyptian Parliament, Fathi Sorour, announced a break in relations with the EP. The document calls for the Egyptian Government to take a number of measures to improve democracy and human rights in the country, and is particularly critical of the harassment of journalists and human rights activists, the state of emergency, torture cases, the arrest of Ayman Nour and the situation of religious minorities.

Egypt then boycotted several EMPA meetings and cancelled a meeting of the Sub-Committee on Human Rights between the EU and Egypt, due to be held on 23 and 24 January in Cairo. This aggressive reaction by the authorities gave substantial publicity to the EP resolution, especially in the Egyptian media, and triggered widespread public debate. The consequences of that publicity remain unclear: although the EU's human rights policies have finally come to the fore and local activists have found support for their struggle, a considerable slice of public opinion feels that Egypt has been unfairly treated and sees the Neighbourhood Policy as interference with scant respect for national sovereignty.

¹ P6_TA(2006)0144, 6 April 2006.

² P6_TA(2006)0031, 19 January 2006.

³ P6_TA-PROV(2008)0023, 17 January 2008.