

# Egyptian Left: towards a third way

Friday 12 October 2007, by [ED DIN Gamal Essam](#) (Date first published: 11 October 2007).

**In drafting an alternative constitution, Egypt's four largest secular opposition parties are attempting to position themselves as a viable alternative to both the NDP and the Muslim Brotherhood, reports Gamal Essam El-Din**

Constitutional experts from Egypt's four largest secular opposition parties began work this week on drafting a new constitution. The meeting came after the chairmen of the four parties decided two weeks ago to form a coalition to push for greater political and constitutional reform. Wahid Abdel-Meguid, chairman of the liberal-oriented Wafd Party's Indoctrination Committee, and a political analyst with Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, said that in the 25 September meeting the heads of Wafd, Tagammu, Nasserist and the Democratic Front parties had agreed two committees be formed. "One committee was set up to draft a new constitution and a second entrusted with working out a detailed programme of political and socio-economic reform," said Abdel-Meguid.

The first committee, on which Abdel-Meguid is the Wafd's representative, aims to review the whole range of constitutions drafted in Egypt since 1923.

"Five complete constitutions have been drafted since 1923, in addition to the constitutional proposals put forward by various political forces in recent years," says Abdel-Meguid. "As a first step we will review these constitutions and examine the foundations on which they were based."

"Some, such as the constitution promulgated in 1923, take liberalism as their guiding principle while others, such as the constitutions issued in 1956 and 1964, embrace socialism." But what they have in common, argues Abdel-Meguid, is that they tend towards the view that Egypt is a secular state and thus refuse any confusion between religion and politics.

Although the amendments passed last March stripped the current constitution, promulgated in 1971, of its socialist veneer it retains numerous clauses antagonistic to political pluralism and human rights. "The result," argues Abdel-Meguid, "is that the current constitution is an unworkable mélange of free market economic principles and a repressive political system."

The decision to set up the committee and thus focus public attention on changing the constitution was taken, he says, as a result of "the constitutional amendments that passed last March".

"We saw then how the ruling National Democratic Party [NDP] refused all opposition appeals to reconsider their draft amendments and reach agreement with opposition parties on a reasonable package of political reform." Given the NDP's attitude, says Abdel-Meguid, opposition parties had little choice but to formulate an alternative constitution themselves and present it to the public.

"When our draft constitution is finished the public will be able to compare it with the NDP's amendments and judge for which best embodies their political and economic aspirations."

Mounir Fakhri Abdel-Nour, the Wafd's secretary-general, has indicated that once the drafting

process is over a constituent assembly will be formed charged with hammering the draft into its final shape.

The success of this process, indeed the success of the coalition, will depend, believes Abdel-Nour, on how willing the regime is to keep away from meddling in the coalition's affairs. He is worried "the regime will do its best to undermine the new coalition since it offers the public an option other than the NDP or Muslim Brotherhood".

Hussein Abdel-Razeq, secretary-general of the leftist Tagammu Party, believes the coalition's most difficult task will be to agree a comprehensive programme to tackle Egypt's political socio-economic woes. "There is a problem in that the coalition includes parties with different ideologies: two are liberal leaning [Al-Wafd and the Democratic Front] and two are leftist [the Tagammu and Nasserists]."

The Nasserists for example, says Abdel-Razeq, want 50 per cent of parliamentary seats to remain reserved for representatives of farmers and workers while Wafd and the Democratic Front believe such quotas should be scrapped. In terms of the economy, he adds, the two leftist parties believe that privatisation has been a catastrophe for the country as a whole and for limited-income classes in particular. "In contrast the two liberal parties believe that privatisation is the ultimate panacea for Egypt's economic ills, even if they still have reservations over sales to foreigners."

In spite of such differences, Abdel-Nour believes the four parties will be able to reach consensus over a new social contract for the country and a vision of its future. "It will be a liberal vision, in favour of greater democracy, freedoms, human rights and with a distaste for dictatorship, religious fanaticism and the one-party system."

Osama El-Ghazali Harb, secretary-general of the Democratic Front Party and editor of Al-Ahram's Al-Siyasa Al-Dawliya journal, sees the coalition's role as more than providing alternatives to NDP policies. "I think the coalition should attempt to answer a very important question: what should Egypt look like after Mubarak?" said Harb. Harb stresses that the new constitution must tackle in clear-cut terms how the succession of power in Egypt can be managed democratically and make clear that Egypt is a civil state with no political room for religious movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. "We are attempting to carve out a niche between the corrupt NDP and the fanatic Brotherhood," he says.

Harb's Democratic Front Party was recently dealt a blow after its deputy chairman, Ali El-Salami, a former minister of administrative development, resigned. El-Salami accused Harb of turning the party into a family affair and dictating policy.

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\*Originally published in al Ahram Weekly, Cairo, Egypt.