



EDITORIAL

It's the Economy Stupid...As Riots Break out in Egypt The Muslim Brotherhood Is Sidelined

By: Raouf Ebeid – PI Online

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On April 6th there were orchestrated general strikes in many provinces throughout Egypt. The protesters urged people to stay home and organize demonstrations as acts of “civil disobedience” to show their dissatisfaction with having to suffer the inflation and food shortages that are plaguing the economy.

The most violent confrontation occurred in the city of *Al-Muhallah Al-Kubrah*, considered an important center for textile manufacturing. However, extensive government security measures in the capital, assisted by a sand storm, managed to contain the protests in Cairo. The demonstrations were an unusual planned and announced secular grass roots' action by the workforce. Typically such confrontations take place between the authorities and the Muslim Brotherhood.

In this instance, however, the leadership of the Brotherhood openly stated that they would not participate and its members were conspicuously absent from the demonstrations. That fact left most experts scratching their heads to understand why the Brotherhood would choose to stay on the sidelines.



It was currently assumed by observers that the only two political choices available to Egyptians were the present government and the Muslim Brotherhood. Small parties on the left seemed to lack sufficient popular support to carry any weight. That view of the current political situation was reinforced by President Mubarak who warned the West that his government may fall prey to Islamists if he succumbs to pressure from the West to democratize at any cost. If the Hamas experience is any indication, there is some credence to that kind of assessment. What the popular protests over the past few days seem to indicate, however, is that there is a shift taking place in what most concerns the Egyptian population. Understandably, they appear to care less about elections and representation in parliament and more about the deteriorating economic conditions which are inflicting ever increasing hardship on the poor, graphically illustrated by the recent massive shortages of available subsidized bread.

Examining the complex question of the Muslim Brotherhood's refusal to participate in the protests, some analysts have accused the Brotherhood of acting behind the scene to ferment the dissatisfaction that led to the protests, while publicly assuming the role of a mere spectator. It was however unclear whether the Brotherhood restrained its members because they were concerned about further government reprisals after the recent incarceration of many of its members, or wanted to disassociate themselves from protests that were organized by individuals and secular organizations because to join forces with them would run counter to their goal that any reform should be based on a religious solution.

The picture becomes even more complex when one considers the country-wide local elections being held today in Egypt to choose 52,000 representatives. The government has tried to restrict the participation of members of the Muslim Brotherhood in those elections, primarily through bureaucratic procedures. According to the Brotherhood, as many as 4,000 of their members have been prevented from having their applications accepted, and out of the 498 that were accepted, only 21 of the names were included in the election rosters. The government, according to most observers, was keen to avoid a repeat of the Brotherhood's relative success in 2005 when they secured almost 20% of the seats in local elections.

Because the Brotherhood has been prevented from establishing an official political party, all these members present themselves as independent. In a surprise move, however, a few hours before the voting started, the Brotherhood declared their total withdrawal from the elections. Their leader *Mohammad Habib* proclaimed: "We ask the Egyptian people to boycott today's elections in view of the total disregard of the judiciary by the executive branch" and adding "we shall abide by such a boycott."

So, while the Brotherhood declined to participate in the popular demonstrations protesting the deteriorating economic conditions that are impacting peoples' daily lives, they asked the population to support their boycott of the election process because the Brotherhood was treated unfairly. These concurrent events suggest that the Brotherhood is out of touch. It is increasingly evident that the Egyptian population is already disinterested in an election process that they know will not put food on their table. The people are also slowly coming to the realization that the religious agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood will not solve their economic problems either.

All of this is borne out in the early editions of tomorrow's Arabic newspapers which report that participation in the elections was less than 3% (*Al-Arabiyya*)¹, and that the confrontations between police and demonstrators in *Al-Mahallah Al-Kubrah* continued for a second day (*Al-Masry Al-Yum*), which led Mubarak to instruct the government to pay an extra month's salary to the textile workers in that city. (*Al-Ahram*.)² Meanwhile, the Brotherhood's actions, or lack thereof, are a reflection of their diminishing ability to offer any attractive solution to the real problems plaguing the Egyptian population.

Source for the news:

<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/04/07/47994.html> 4/7/2008

http://www.alhayat.com/arab_news/nafrica_news/04-2008/Item-20080407-2a51c6d2-c0a8-10ed-01e2-5c730982b33a/story.html 4/8/2008

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¹ <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/04/08/48003.html>

² <http://www.ahram.org/Archive/2008/4/9/FRON1.HTM>