

Kifaya

The rise and fall of Egypt's secular opposition: A retrospective

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MARYAM SAYEED, 18, would sneak out of her house on weeknights, telling her mother that she was going shopping with friends in downtown Cairo. She had a shopping bag full of clothes that she brought back with her as an alibi, though the bag had become wrinkled and faded from overuse. But unlike other girls her age, Maryam's covert excursions were not about secret liaisons with boys. Rather, she was an organizer of "Youth for Change," one of dozens of protest groups that had sprouted up in Egypt over the past few months under the umbrella of "Kifaya" (Enough), the Egyptian Movement for Change. The movement's bold protests of last summer, with its activists storming the streets of Cairo on a nearly weekly basis, breathed life into Egypt's long-stagnant political culture.

I came to Cairo in the summer of 2005 in search of Kifaya, after it had been labeled abroad as the next step in the "Arab Spring" for democracy. President George W. Bush had said, "We're standing with [Egypt's] dissidents... because we know that the dissidents of today will be the democratic leaders of tomorrow." Kifaya's leadership, composed of a broad spectrum of intellectuals, activists and former politicians, state their main goal as toppling the authoritarian regime of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's president for the past 24 years. But December's legislative elections, in which Kifaya candidates suffered overwhelming defeats, have left many international observers and Egyptians wondering what happened to the much-hyped dissident movement.

Kifaya, which ironically had its origins in spontaneous anti-Israeli and anti-American protests at the time of the intifada and the Iraq war, originally drew its strength from the political and ideological diversity of its members. But its inability to unite with the powerful Muslim Brotherhood, as well as growing discord within its own ranks, have ultimately led to the group's downfall in recent months.

Despite the optimism held by much of the international community last summer, signs of this disintegration were already evident when my visit began. With university stu-

dents out of class and an election on the horizon, Kifaya should have been in top form. Instead, I found a fragmented, disparate movement lacking vision and with little chance of achieving their aims. But it wasn't hard to find Maryam, an inveterate street protester and activist who helped drive the movement's unlikely ascendancy, witnessed its recent decline, and embodies its legacy for a generation of young Egyptians.

It was a hot, smoggy afternoon in June. Maryam's voice was clearly audible above the din of mostly male protesters assembled in Lazoughly Square in front of the austere Interior Ministry building in Cairo. Shrill, piercing and high-pitched, it emanated distinctively from underneath a tightly wound turquoise *hijab* — the conservative Muslim head covering generally associated with modesty and submissiveness — creating a further dissonance. She stuck to simple slogans like "*Yaskut, Yaskut Hosni Mubarak*" (Down with Hosni Mubarak), a chant that is easily learned and contagious.

The event, organized by Maryam's "Youth for Change," had been advertised as a demonstration against torture. But as with all other protests organized under the watchful eye of the Mubarak regime, this was just a ruse to conceal what was really a rally against the five-term president. Aware of this, endless rows of policemen lined the streets for hours before the protest was scheduled to begin.

I wandered away from the foreign journalists standing across the street, slipping into the center of the crowd to better hear the chants. But within minutes of the start of the protest the police began to close in, wielding riot shields and using metal barricades to barge into the crowd. Maryam and other protesters accustomed to this routine firmly planted their feet and stretched out their arms, hoping to thwart the police attempts to push the group into a small corner of the square. Unexpectedly trapped, I found myself shoulder-to-shoulder with Maryam. I instinctively extended my arms to match hers.

The chants descended into frantic yelling as the two sides clashed. I was quickly crushed between a riot shield and a screaming protester. Maryam disappeared amid the

chaos. Punches were thrown, riot clubs swung, clothing torn, as foreign journalists snapped pictures from a safe distance. A cheer arose from the crowd as a group of protesters on my right wrestled free one of the metal barricades from the policemen and subsequently threw it across the square. The edges of the protest swayed back and forth as the protesters battled the encroaching police officers on all sides.

As the struggle moved toward stalemate, a *hijab*-cloaked figure flung herself from among the demonstrators into a thick pocket of policemen. Kicking, flailing and screaming, she abruptly fell to the ground, seemingly unconscious. A flock of fellow demonstrators linked hands in an effort to clear an open space around her limp body.

"Doctor! Doctor! Is there a doctor around?" yelled one.

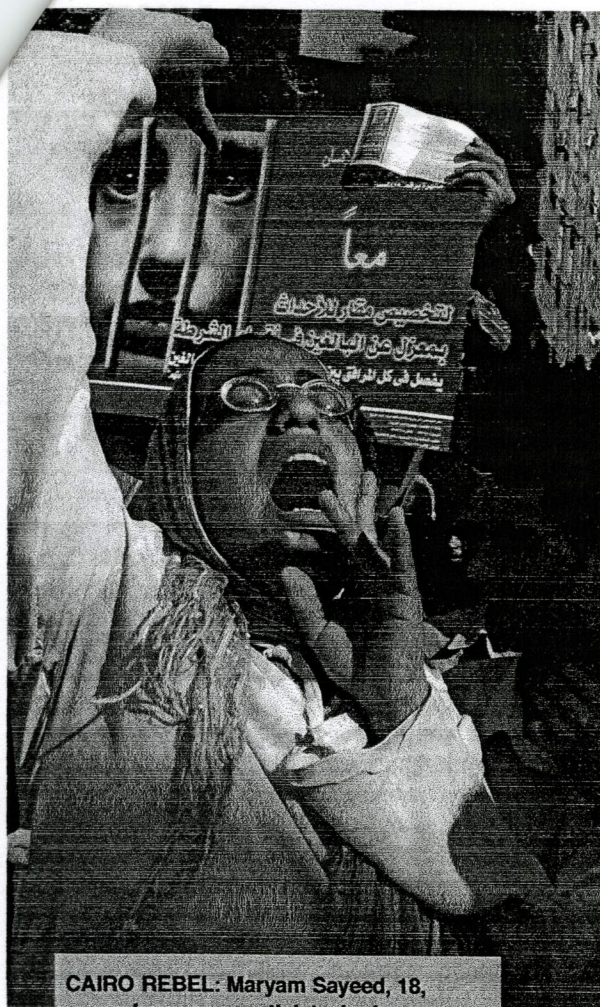
"Maryam has been beaten by the police!" proclaimed another.

A woman appearing to be a doctor entered the circle, hovered over the body for a few seconds, and declared her to be badly wounded. Four men promptly lifted her on their shoulders like pallbearers and carried her out of the crowd after a quick detour toward the journalists. This image made its way to the pages of multiple newspapers the next day.

Yet minutes later, Maryam was back in the crowd, climbing atop one of the commandeered metal barricades and gleefully leading the chants. I made my way back across the street and asked one of the more seasoned correspondents about the girl in the turquoise veil.

"Oh her, she's at all the protests. She's one of the feistier ones," the correspondent said, sharing a laugh with some of the other reporters as she packed her notebook away. "But none of us really know who she is."

Later that evening, I followed Maryam and a group of the protesters to the plaza outside the Journalists Syndicate, where dissidents often congregate for vigils and other public displays. The group was sitting on the stairs, still chanting in subdued tones as stoic policemen looked on from across the street. Maryam gaily bounced from step to step,



CAIRO REBEL: Maryam Sayeed, 18, a pro-democracy activist who became a feisty fixture at opposition protests last summer with her famed rallying cry of 'Down with Mubarak'

trying to cheer up her colleagues with jokes and smiles, her *hijab* now slung around her neck and her mane-like hair trailing behind her.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted a crew from Al-Jazeera setting up its camera. She bounded toward them, but stopped quickly to rewrap her *hijab* around her youthful face, with round cheeks and thick-rimmed glasses. Her smile drained as she grasped the microphone with a trembling hand and recounted her "beating" at the hands of the police earlier that day, punctuating her performance with heaving sobs.

Once the news crews had left and only a few stragglers remained at the Syndicate, Maryam stood on the street corner, unsure where to go next, chain-smoking Cleopatra brand cigarettes.

When I asked her for a cigarette in Arabic, her eyes lit up. "I only started smoking after coming to these protests," she said in a thick colloquial Egyptian dialect between hasty puffs. "I wanted to fit in, and

I was the only one who wasn't smoking, so now I smoke."

As we stood there, she fidgeted with her cigarette with a mix of anxiety and excitement. She had never spoken with a Western journalist before, her ability to communicate impeded by her lack of any English. I chose to break the ice by asking if she always wore her *hijab*. After a brief pause, she winked, smiled and whispered, "Sometimes."

Maryam Sayeed is from the impoverished Cairo suburb of Imbaba — the site of one of Kifaya's larger protests on July 6. Her parents are from the *Sayeed*, or Upper Egypt, the rural south of the country along the Nile. The third of four children, Maryam attended a religious school in Cairo for most of her life. None of her family members are politically active, she tells me, and none of them know about her involvement in Kifaya. "My mother would kill me if she found out," she says. Her eldest brother is a university student and the other works in the laundry room at a hospital.

IN RECOUNTING HOW SHE FIRST got involved with Kifaya, Maryam casually mentions a "run-in with the law" and a "short time in prison" two years ago, followed by a dismissive shrug, illustrating the casualness with which the Mubarak regime jails average citizens. Though she doesn't specify why she was jailed, her criminal record led to her expulsion from high school, after which she spent much of her time at home, a "prisoner" in her own house, watching TV.

She has never used e-mail and doesn't have a cellphone, but it was these endless hours of television that inspired her political activism. "I kept seeing these images of innocent Palestinian and Iraqi children being killed, and I couldn't take it anymore," she says. Similar media images inspired anger and frustration in households across Egypt, setting the stage for the emergence of Kifaya from a culture of political apathy, nurtured by years of tight-fisted government oppression. Though Kifaya is now known as a domestic protest movement, most famous for its fiery public demonstrations over the past year, its roots lie not in Egypt, but rather in events elsewhere in the Middle East.

Although Mubarak's 24-year-old emergency law requires prior consent for any kind of public demonstration, popular frustration inspired by the Palestinian intifada exploded in 2000 with spontaneous protests across Egypt. The government did not want to risk a collision on an issue so unanimously supported by Arabs, especially since it was already coming under fire for its "complacency" on Palestinian suffering.

Taking advantage of this newfound political space, subsequent escalations in Israeli violence during counterterrorism operations touched off further demonstrations in the form of rallies, hunger strikes and sit-ins led by actors, politicians, professional unions, university students and prominent intellectuals. By the end of 2002, these efforts were joined by the newly formed "Egyptian Popular Campaign to Confront U.S. Aggression," which organized its first anti-Iraq war conference in December of that year. The universality of these two causes allowed local groups to create links across ideological and social divides. It also allowed Egyptian activists to affiliate with the international anti-war and anti-globalization movement, from which they drew inspiration as well as tactical models.

These two issues culminated in a massive rally on March 20, 2003, after the first U.S. military strike in Iraq. Television images of the destruction in Iraq drew over 20,000 protesters to Cairo's central Tahrir Square. This was Maryam's first protest. "Standing in the middle of Tahrir," she tells me, "surrounded by thousands of people who couldn't take it anymore — it was the first time that I ever felt like I had a voice, like my opinion mattered."

Fati Abu Hatab, an Egyptian writer for Islam Online, explained to me during a protest this summer over the roar of the chants that people here "didn't have the political consciousness yet to know that they could affect things at home, so they directed their protests against others like the U.S. and Israel."

The boldness of the anti-war protest — unparalleled in recent Egyptian history — spawned many smaller-scale rallies in the following months. Inspired by the feeling of empowerment, Maryam, for one, set out in search of more. She found her way to the Center for Socialist Studies in Giza, a Cairo suburb, where similarly restless youth gathered every Tuesday night. "We vented, we yelled, we complained, we brainstormed — but it kept coming back to protests," Maryam says, excitedly waving her cigarette as she

recalls the initial energy of the nascent Youth for Change. "Everyone wanted to organize more protests."

It was only a matter of time before criticism of the regime's complicity in these international conflicts spilled over into criticism of the government's domestic activities such as torture. Despite police efforts to suppress the protests, criticism of the regime only increased. Maryam, though, did not let the strong-arm tactics of the security forces impede her activities, proudly showcasing her bruises as medals from a well-fought battle.

Against this backdrop, the Kifaya movement was officially formed in July 2004 by a broad spectrum of political activists under the banner Harakat Misraya (The Egyptian Movement). With public figures like Muhammed Al-Sayyed Said, deputy director of the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, and Abdel Halim Qandil, editor of *Al-Arabi Al-Nasseri*, at the helm, the group came to include activists like Maryam and her Youth For Change group, traditional dissident political groups like al-Istarakieen al-Sarwaen (Revolutionary Socialists), Amal (Labor), and Hamla Shabaaya (The Popular Campaign). Together with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood and Communist Party, as well as a dozen other groups, who initially became natural allies in their opposition to the Mubarak regime, Kifaya crafted a website, began circulating a petition, and printed huge numbers of stickers emblazoned with its catchy red-and-yellow logo declaring their simple message: "Kifaya," enough. The group soon organized the first-ever anti-Mubarak protest, attracting hundreds of sticker-wielding demonstrators to downtown Cairo. Smaller protests like the one at Lazoughly Square continued into the mounting heat of June, attended by various amalgamations of Kifaya's constituent groups.

MARYAM WAS ONCE AGAIN desperately clamoring to be heard among the throngs of demonstrators who had gathered on a hot afternoon in July 2005, this time in Abdeen Square in downtown Cairo — a site of symbolic significance for the numerous Egyptian nationalist demonstrations held there in the first half of the last century. Standing on her toes, she tried to commandeer the chants with her calls of "Yaskut, Yaskut, Hosni Mubarak." A fellow protester put his hand over her mouth. "She always tries to turn these things into a circus," I heard the protester yell to a friend.

"There are real issues we're fighting for!"

Maryam got dragged away in the current, resurfacing a few minutes later on the other side of the square, trying her usual tactic of mounting the riot fences. But she was quickly jerked down by another protester before she could grab the spotlight, her *hijab* (black this time) unfurling behind her. She relegated herself to walking the perimeter of the demonstration, cupping her hands to her mouth, and joining in the chants of almost a thousand protesters, many of whom had been bussed in from over 20 cities across Egypt.

This was clearly not one of the small-scale Youth for Change protests over which Maryam has reigned in the past few weeks. At one corner, Muslim Brotherhood leader Muhammad Abdel Qaddos rattled the riot fences and yelled at the policemen. Veteran activist Kamel Khalil, who heads the Center for Socialist Studies and has been arrested over a dozen times, stood atop a telephone booth leading a section of the crowd with his trademark sloganeering. I was almost knocked over by elderly Kifaya spokesman and key strategist George Ishaq — a Coptic Christian education expert and Egyptian Labor party leader — as he attempted to navigate the crowd. These political celebrities joined the hoards of protesters who stormed the security forces, tore through their cordons, and engaged in hand-to-hand combat while chanting about democracy.

Kifaya had not held a wide-scale protest like this in months and many had feared that the group was losing its momentum. The Abdeen event came after a turning point for the movement: Mubarak's proposed amendment to the constitution, which ostensibly opened the door for the country's first multi-candidate presidential election. Kifaya and other opposition groups dismissed the amendment as a sham that intended to put a veil of legitimacy over Mubarak's prolonged rule. They organized a boycott of the national referendum on the amendment, claiming that it skirted real reform by placing unrealistic restrictions on candidates intending to run.

Kifaya had staged a handful of peaceful demonstrations on May 25 — the day of the referendum. In response, government-hired thugs descended on protesters and beat them mercilessly while state security officials watched. The brutality of the attacks galvanized previously apathetic segments of society behind Kifaya's crusade for reform.

Maryam and her fellow protesters from the Revolutionary Socialists and Hamla

Youth, harnessing the power of student activists, focused on specific issues such as unemployment and housing. A group of government employees formed Workers for Change, advocating for an independent union to represent them. Within days, similar groups formed such as Writers for Change, Doctors for Change, Actors for Change, and Lawyers for Change — all pressing for reforms in their respective sectors. The Association for Egyptian Mothers and its offshoot, the National Apology Campaign, roused housewives to political action in response to female victims of police brutality. Kifaya, with its broad base of support, emerged as a major presence in the Egyptian political scene.

The strength in this diversity of Kifaya's ranks, including socialists, Islamists, nationalists, and mainstream opposition parties, was clearly visible at the Abdeen protest. In every corner of the square a different faction of Kifaya led its own chants with the security forces frantically scrambling to contain each one. Maryam wove in and out of the various circles, seemingly lost, then disappeared into the chanting masses.

BY LATE SUMMER, CAIRO was sweltering. One particularly steamy August afternoon, the courtyard outside of the Lawyers Syndicate was flooded with thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood — bearded, Koran-wielding men shouting, "With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, Islam." Maryam and her fellow activists from Kifaya stood off to the side, dwarfed by the power of the religious group.

The Muslim Brotherhood had had a tenuous relationship with the Kifaya movement. The Brotherhood is the most popular social movement in Egypt today — and probably the only group with enough support to pose a real threat to the Mubarak regime. Its cooperation, therefore, is vital for the success of any opposition movement. Though it shares many of the same reformist goals as Kifaya, personality squabbles kept the Brotherhood from formally joining its ranks.

Threats from the government tend to keep Brotherhood protests to a minimum, though prominent Brotherhood members were often present at Kifaya demonstrations. In March 2005, the regime had responded to heightened Brotherhood agitation by jailing over 900 of its members, leading the group to rethink its public

activism and plan to keep a low profile.

This protest at the Lawyers Syndicate marked the Brotherhood's first attempt to reclaim its powerful image. Though the 2,000 protesters were a far cry from the tens of thousands it can marshal for a funeral of one of its leaders, the crowd present was certainly larger than any protest Kifaya had been able to organize on its own.

of the protest, Maryam was already abandoning the tempered compromise chants in favor of her famed rallying cry of "Down with Mubarak." Minutes later, members of the Muslim Brotherhood began to cheer, "Islam is the solution," some even going as far as to proclaim, "Jihad is the solution." A group of leftists countered by calling Mubarak a coward and — the worst epithet

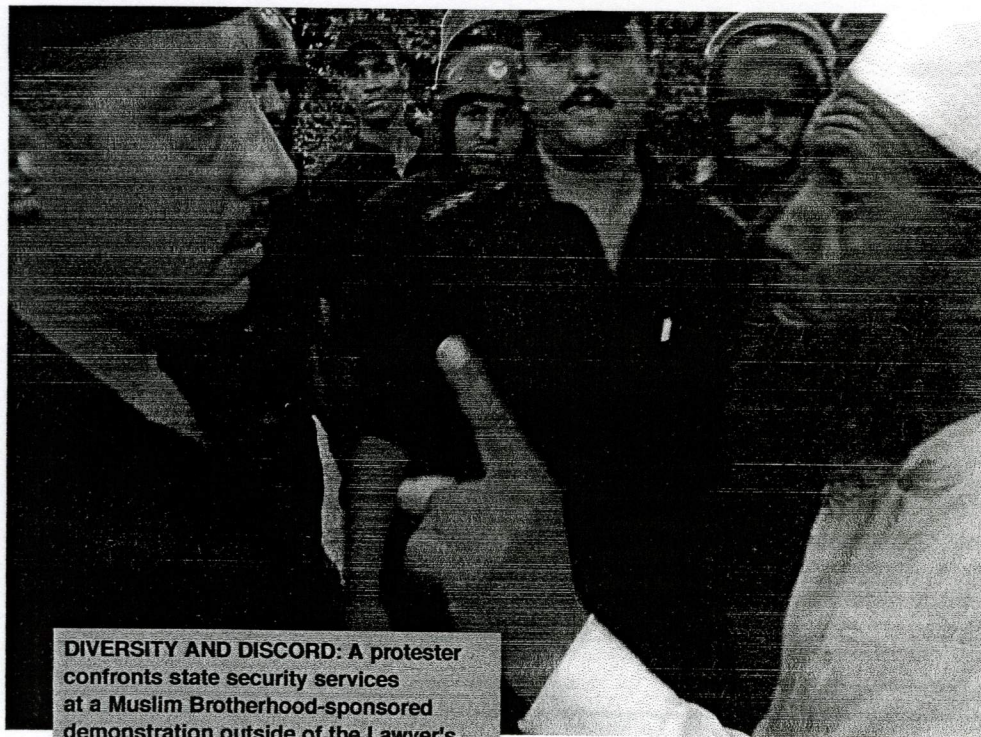
By the time Mubarak was "re-elected" for his fifth term in September 2005, many critics were already beginning to relegate Kifaya to history's trash heap of failed dissident movements. Kifaya had failed to present a viable alternative to Mubarak or positive proposals for how to further democratize the government. By boycotting the presidential election, rather than seizing the opportunities it created, Kifaya was forced into further irrelevance by devoting its energies to strictly negative campaigns with vague catchphrases. The handful of Kifaya candidates who ran in last December's parliamentary elections were roundly defeated by Mubarak's National Democratic Party, which maintained its overwhelming majority in the legislature.

With the Muslim Brotherhood having won over 20 percent of the seats, and representing the only serious opposition to Mubarak, Kifaya has apparently fallen far short of President Bush's hopes that its members would become "the democratic leaders of tomorrow."

Yet dissidents like Maryam say they will continue to fight. From the pageantry of staged beatings and sensationalist chants, a generation of average Egyptians has been empowered to speak their minds and take control of their lives. Caught in a seemingly unbreakable cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement, Kifaya has given these people a sense of mission that allows them to transcend their grim reality. While Kifaya may not have turned Egypt's authoritarian system into a democracy, it has liberated a generation previously bereft of hope.

Maryam is not one to be bothered by grand visions though; she is just waiting until the next protest. Sitting on the steps of the Journalists Syndicate after the fizzled Muslim Brotherhood demonstration, she watched crumpled flyers and torn banners blow past in the thick summer breeze. "My job now is freedom," she told me, smoking a Cleopatra. "I don't need a boyfriend — I am in love with these protests. The people who protest beside me are my family."

It now seems clear that factionalism and politics have been the downfall of Kifaya. The group has yet to organize any large-scale protests like the ones of this past summer. But even then, Maryam seemed unphased by the lack of tangible political results. "Sixty-seven million people don't have freedom, and I've just found mine," she said, going on to quote an Arabic proverb: "Even if the bullet misses the target, the gun still makes a noise." ●



DIVERSITY AND DISCORD: A protester confronts state security services at a Muslim Brotherhood-sponsored demonstration outside of the Lawyer's Syndicate in downtown Cairo last summer; the splits in Kifaya's ideologically disparate ranks ultimately sealed its fate

The event, however, had been plagued by difficulties from the start. Though the protest was originally scheduled for the previous week and for a larger venue, the regime strong-armed the Brotherhood into changing the date and location, and to making a commitment that the Brotherhood would stick to protesting policies and issues in general rather than specifically criticizing Mubarak.

Though Kifaya had not formally co-sponsored the protest, many of its constituent groups like the ultra-secular Revolutionary Socialists and the leftist Popular Campaign congregated around the periphery, waving the ubiquitous red-and-yellow Kifaya signs. The Brotherhood agreed to tone down the religious flavor of the protest if these groups refrained from Mubarak-bashing as well.

The divisions did not take long to appear. Less than half an hour after the official start

— an American lackey.

Fearful of the consequences of these blatant calls, the thousands of Brotherhood protesters dispersed within minutes into the winding back alleys of Cairo. The previously jam-packed pavilion outside the Lawyers Syndicate was now eerily empty, leaving the small pockets of Kifaya activists looking around in bewilderment. Maryam tried to reinvigorate the stragglers by leading a march down the block to the Journalists Syndicate. But the cracks in the anti-Mubarak movement's fragile coalition were already abundantly clear.

Kifaya's ideological diversity had given the movement the power to draw large numbers to protests like the one at Abdeen. But the cause of toppling Mubarak had not been strong enough to hold together groups with such opposed social agendas — ranging from radically conservative Islamists to nationalists, Trotskyists, secularists and liberals. This ideological diversity made it impossible for Kifaya to devise a coherent set of goals.