

## Interview

# Egypt's Nation's Future Party seeks to build on youth vote

Hassan Abdel Zaher

Cairo

When parliamentary elections took place in late 2015, the Nation's Future Party was less than a year old. Despite its newness, it won almost half of the 120 seats at stake among Egypt's more than 100 political parties.

The little-known party, founded by young Egyptians, suddenly found itself in the political limelight. Established politicians were shocked by the group's ability to chart its own course in Egypt's murky political waters, something that the Nation's Future Party continues to seek to do by reaching out to the public in an unprecedented way.

"We have a new approach to most of the problems of our country, one coined by the party's members and leaders," said Nation's Future Party leader Ashraf Rashad. "We dream of bringing our country back to its past glories, depending on our totally fresh outlook."

The Nation's Future Party seeks to transform Egypt into a regional mass production centre to capitalise on the country's huge workforce.

The party also wants Egypt to break its reliance on imported goods by boosting domestic manufacturing to ensure a better trade balance. In 2016, Egypt

exported \$22.5 billion worth of goods but imported \$57.7 billion worth.

"These two moves will ensure that we will build our national economy by dependence on our local capacities," Rashad said. "We need to depend on ourselves, not on others, in rebuilding our country."

It is this message of self-reliance and autonomy that is winning over young Egyptians, who suffer from debilitating unemployment rates.

The young Egyptians have been at the centre of the political transformations that have taken place in Egypt in the last seven years. Despite playing a leading role in the ouster of longstanding President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, many young Egyptians said they felt short-changed in the post-revolutionary period and chose to disengage.

This is a mood that Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is seeking to reverse, although critics said the government's attempts at mobilising Egypt's youth, including government projects and initiatives such as the Youth Conference, have seen little success.

These are efforts, however, that the Nation's Future Party has played a leading role in. Ties between the Nation's Future Party leadership and Cairo are strong and party founder Mohamed Badran was known to be close to Sisi.

"The Nation's Future Party was manna from heaven for the government, which was incapable of convincing youth to be part of political life," said Egyptian



New approach. Nation's Future Party leader Ashraf Rashad.

(Courtesy of Nation's Future Party)

political analyst Abdel Monem Halawa. "We are talking here about a huge disgruntled segment of society that needed to be organised into any political form before it feels left out, which could have adverse ramifications."

The Nation's Future Party is considered a last resort by some of Egypt's youth. More than 90% of the party's 250,000 members, including its leaders, are under the age of 35. Rashad, the party head, is just 27.

"We have a policy in the party that all leaders must be less than 30," Rashad, who was elected leader in September, said. "I think this is a success factor. Youth overlooked by other parties feel there is finally a party in which they can have their place."

At a time when many Egyptians, and Egyptian politicians, appear apprehensive about the future, Rashad and his colleagues are dreaming big. There are even plans to secure a parliamentary majority and form a government.

However, to do this, they need to boost the way the party is viewed, particularly among Egyptians who may not be ready to give a new party like the Nation's Future a chance.

The party has offices in all of

Egypt's 27 provinces. Its members have launched social care and medical programmes to boost the party's image. They also offer Egyptians training courses in topics ranging from political education to information technology.

The Nation's Future Party's 53 MPs make it the second-largest party in Egypt's parliament and its members are considered diligent legislators.

However, some political observers say, despite its improbable rise, it is too early for the Nation's Future to be dreaming of parliamentary majority and rule.

"The party is a real model of a political entity that rose out of obscurity to reach political fame," said Akram Badr Eddin, a political science professor at Cairo University, "but for it to rule, it needs to be present among the public, even more."

Rashad said that was precisely what he intended to do. "We are not on the political stage for the sake of it," he says. "We want to have a say in creating the future of our country and we cannot do this without being in a decision-making position."

Hassan Abdel Zaher is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.

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## Egypt's human rights battle with Qatar

Amr Emam

Cairo

Hafez Abu Saada and Mohammed al-Ghoul represent different – and occasionally divergent – groups that investigate human rights in Egypt. Despite disagreements and trading accusations, both men agree about the scale of Qatar's "flagrant" human rights abuses.

Abu Saada, head of the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR), one of Egypt's largest rights groups, is preparing a lengthy report on human rights violations allegedly committed by Doha against the political opposition and foreign workers.

The report has the backing of Ghoul, deputy leader of the Human Rights Committee in the Egyptian parliament. The committee is working on its own report about human rights in Qatar, including documenting what Ghoul described as the "unlimited" support Doha is offering terrorist groups.

Qatari authorities are accused of restricting the rights of freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, particu-



Indentured labour. Migrant workers walking next to a construction site in the Qatari capital Doha.

(AFP)

larly those working in construction on stadiums ahead of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, face exploitation and abuses, human rights groups claim.

"Qatar must be brought to account for the human rights violations it commits," Abu Saada said.

"It is about time the whole world knew the disgraceful record of the Qatari regime, which squanders the wealth of its people for the pleasure of terrorists and killers," Ghoul said.

Egyptian rights groups, some backed by the government but also independent ones, such as

the EOHR, said they will no longer stay silent on Qatar's human rights abuses.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain cut diplomatic and trade ties with Qatar in June and presented Doha with a list of 13 demands to be met before normalisation of relations.

The countries accuse Qatar of financing terrorism and interfering in their domestic affairs. They specifically called for Doha to stop supporting groups designated as terrorist organisations such as the

Muslim Brotherhood.

By opening a human rights front in the war against Qatar, Egyptian groups said they were responding in kind to Qatar's tactics. Cairo accused Qatar of financing international human rights groups that allegedly fabricate reports about human rights violations, exaggerating problems facing Egypt.

The Qatari-backed, Geneva-based Alkarama Foundation has published reports about alleged human rights violations in Egypt. Egyptian activists, including Abu Saada, acknowledge that human rights violations do take place in Egypt and are working to address this. They said Qatar-backed groups are raising such issues for political reasons and to harm the Egyptian state.

Abu Saada and Ghoul said their groups will file complaints about Qatar's human rights violations at relevant international organisations, including the UN Human Rights Council.

"Parliament's Human Rights Committee is preparing to participate in a large number of international events during which it will stand up for the victims of Qatar's human rights violations both inside Qatar and outside it," Ghoul said. "We will file reports in this regard wherever we go."

Abu Saada revealed that the EOHR had been granted powers of attorney from the families of dozens of victims of terrorist attacks in Egypt and that it intends to file lawsuits against Qatar in international courts over its sponsorship of terrorist groups.

"Qatar is the main sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood, the movement that has been staging terrorist attacks here for more than three years," Abu Saada said. "We will demand compensation for the poor families of the victims of these attacks."

This move to tackle Qatar's human rights violations is not just taking place in Egypt. In Geneva, Switzerland, Mohamed Abdel Naeem, head of Egyptian NGO United National Organisation for Human Rights, is coordinating action against Qatar with European human rights groups.

"We are here to divulge Qatar's practices in front of everybody," Abdel Naeem said from Geneva in a telephone conversation. "We have prepared documents and arguments to show the world that the state that claims to defend human rights in other countries is itself the largest human rights violator."

Amr Emam is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.