

By Sameh Fawzy

In January of 2007, an employee of the Egyptian Ministry of Health, Sohier El Sharkawi, claimed to have found 200,000 contaminated bags used to package donated blood in the ministry's storage area. The bags, she alleged, were infected with bacteria and fungi likely to cause hepatitis or cancer. The bags' manufacturer was a company owned by Dr. Hany Srour, a member of the People's Assembly (national parliament) with the ruling party.

Dr. Srour was interrogated by the general prosecutor after his parliamentary immunity was lifted and was officially charged with profiteering — it is unconstitutional for members of parliament to do business with the government — along with six other people, including his sister and employees in both his private company and within the Ministry of Health. The trial began on June 12 and is still underway. The case revives unpleasant memories of the corruption of the Assembly's members, mostly within the ruling party, and casts doubt on the relationships between politics and business. Moreover, to date, the whole affair has received little attention from the watchdog agencies that are supposed to monitor public corruption.

The corruption of assistants to ministry-level officials seems to be a pattern in Egypt. In August 2007, the Administrative Control Authority (ACA), which tracks corruption within government agencies, arrested two aides to the minister of Culture on charges of corruption. The first was Ahmed Hussein, caught red-handed with a bribe of 10,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$1,800) from a contractor competing for a contract for the restoration of the Nubian Museum, while the second, Ayman Abdel-Moneim, was accused of collecting bribes from contractors working for the Ministry of Culture. The investigations revealed that both defendants have been on the take for some time, collecting bribes ranging from meals of fish to luxurious apartments.

The minister of Culture, Farouk Hosni, is the Egyptian nominee for the post of director-general of UNESCO (United Nation's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), with elections slated for 2009 in Paris. Hosni defended his aides, stating that they were competent in their work, but insisted that he would not protect any corrupt employee.

Some commentators have tried to link the revelation of the Ministry of Culture scandal with infighting by political elites.

Although this argument has been totally dismissed by the minister, it has emerged that some of the corruption cases in the government have been disclosed by rival government officials.

Over the last decade, a number of corruption cases involving ministers' aides have erupted, especially in the Ministries of Information and Agriculture. The cases have resulted in lengthy trials, occasionally leading to the conviction of several government officials. Some opponents of this process insist that these cases are politically motivated, designed to distract attention from far larger and more important corruption concerning privatization and profit-making partnerships between businesspersons and the ruling elite.

In 2006, the Egyptian Movement for Change, widely known as Kafaya (Enough), published a report entitled "Corruption in Egypt: A Black Cloud That Never Passes." The report contained a detailed description of corruption at different levels. Most importantly, it detailed the close relationship between politicians and business interests within the elite strata of Egyptian society. The report mentioned that "the only way common people can deal with the government is through bribery."

In fact, ordinary Egyptians echo stories about profit-sharing deals between high-ranking politicians and members of the Egyptian business community. Yacoubian Building, a controversial movie released mid-2006, portrayed a society in which corruption had become a way of life, a society sinking in the mire of poverty and social disintegration. In the movie, a corrupt minister cuts a deal with a drug dealer who becomes a member of Parliament.

Bribery is systematically entwined in Egyptian daily life. People bribe public employees to get both legal and illegal services. Public employees, in turn, are usually looking for small cash tips from people to offset extremely small salaries.

Corruption among municipal-level officials in Egypt is especially rampant. The situation is described by Dr. Zakareya Azmy, the chief of staff to the Egyptian president, as "sinking up to its ears in corruption." Local authorities enjoy enormous power over people's day-to-day lives in Egypt. They license shops, monitor markets and issue building and remodeling permits. Generally speaking, it is difficult to get the license required to conduct any of these activities without paying off local employees, who sometimes create networks of power based on their ability to distribute favors.

A new law governing local administration is expected before local elections are due in April 2008. Many Egyptians hope that the law will curb corruption at the municipal level and improve the quality of local services. In 2007, the government openly acknowledged that corruption is a real problem and contributes to Egyptian poverty, as well as the lack of foreign investment.

The Ministry of Administrative Development lists six fields in which bribery is rampant: unjustified payments to get lawful public services, evasion of customs and taxes, erasing criminal records, careless management of public utilities, recruiting and procurement.

In July 2007, Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif held a high-profile meeting, including his ministers of Interior, Justice and Administrative Development, along with his attorney general and the chairman of the Administrative Control Authority. His goal: to focus his cabinet on the war on corruption. In this meeting, which came at the behest of President Hosni Mubarak himself, the prime minister promised a sustained war on bribery.

At the meeting, the prime minister stressed that the government would pursue the war on three fronts: first reviewing and modifying the laws and bylaws governing the work of a number of different watchdogs; second, taking more steps toward “electronic government,” a process that replaced a number of state employees with technology, reducing the opportunity for government officials to exercise corruption; third increasing the level of transparency in government purchases and official regulations. The government, according to the prime minister, will push a package of new laws to the Parliament later this year, which will help harmonize the work of watchdog agencies, reduce redundancy and energize their work. One of these laws concerns “public function.”

Over the last three years, some laws, such as the Egyptian Tax Code, have been modified in the interests of fighting corruption. But the Egyptian people continue to have their pocketbooks raided by corrupt officials, and the government has done nothing beyond adopting strong rhetoric.