

# Down to business, and bribes

Al Ahram Weekly

29 November-5 December 2007

After two weeks of procedural sessions, opposition and independent MPs are determined to shower ministers with questions intended to embarrass, [Gamal Essam El-Din](#) reports

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Opposition and independent MPs, undeterred by what they characterise as constitutional amendments that aim to strip them of their basic supervisory powers, are determined to challenge the government of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif by continuing to table interpellations intended to embarrass members of the cabinet. A total of 58 interpellations -- questions that ministers must answer -- have been submitted so far.

The most vocal of the government's detractors, as expected, are Muslim Brotherhood and leftist MPs. The former appear eager to intensify their fire against the government in retaliation for the Ministry of Interior's year-long security clampdown against the group while leftist MPs are pursuing an anti-privatisation agenda.

Minister of Interior Habib El-Adli tops the Muslim Brotherhood parliamentary bloc's hit list, with Brotherhood and leftist MPs taking El-Adli to task over the prevalence of torture in Egypt's prison cells and police stations.

Last year Brotherhood MPs unsuccessfully called for El-Adli to come to the assembly to answer questions in person.

"I think this year he will have to show up. It would be unacceptable for a cabinet minister not to appear in parliament for three years running," Brotherhood MP Hamdi Hassan told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

A week ago, members of the People's Assembly Defence and National Security Committee made surprise visits to prison cells and police stations. Committee Chairman Farouk Taha said the aim was to verify the accuracy of torture claims levelled at police officers. Edward Ghali El-Dahabi, chairman of the assembly's Human Rights Committee, says he plans to invite the ministers of interior, justice and foreign affairs to answer accusations made by local and international human rights organisations. "We also want to see how the government is implementing international charters on human rights to which it is a signatory."

El-Adli has been accused by opposition MPs of manipulating the 2005 parliamentary elections, especially during the second and third stages, in favour of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). They allege that the police were involved in many violations, including assaulting judges and preventing voters from casting their ballots.

Relations with Israel have featured in a number of Brotherhood interpellations. Farid Ismail, Brotherhood MP for the Delta governorate of Sharqiya, alleges that the ministers of investment, industry and tourism approved the sale of large plots of land to Israeli investors in the Sinai resorts of Taba and Sharm El-Sheikh. Wafdist MP Mohamed Abdel-Alim Dawoud has also directed an interpellation to Nazif, accusing the prime minister of failing to take

action to oblige the government of Israel to answer questions on "the Israeli massacre of Egyptian prisoners of war in 1956 and 1967".

Socio-economic interpellations reflected the government's travails during the summer. Four MPs, including Mahmoud Abaza, leader of the liberal-oriented Wafd Party, accuse Nazif and Investment Minister Mahmoud Mohieddin of reneging on promises not to sell Banque du Caire to foreign investors. Abaza said that while his party advocates economic liberalism it remains opposed to the sale of public banks to foreigners. Al-Wafd led a campaign last summer that aimed to restrict potential purchasers of Banque du Caire to local Egyptian investors.

Opposition MPs have also submitted interpellations on inflation and growing poverty levels. Hamdeen Sabahi, the leftist MP for the Delta governorate of Kafr Al-Sheikh, argued that the failure of higher rates of growth in 2007 to benefit those on limited incomes underlines that "the government is pursuing policies that ensure the rich grow richer and the poor poorer."

Other interpellations have highlighted corruption in the state-owned press, the misuse of public funds by the Television and Radio Union and lack of transparency over the proceeds of privatisation.

The most serious interpellations, however, allege that the government gave NDP MPs bribes of LE250,000 in return for them rubber-stamping controversial laws in parliament. Independent MPs Alaa Abdel-Moneim and Gamal Zahran claim the government gave every NDP MP LE100,000 last year, a sum that increased to LE250,000 this year.

"The money is a political bribe. And to compound the scandal it comes from the public purse," says Zahran. He asked Nazif on Sunday to apologise for the payments, pointing out that the government had no right to use public money in such a way.

On Monday, opposition MP Saad Abboud said NDP majority spokesman Abdel-Ahad Gamaleddin should feel ashamed that his deputies had willingly accepted the payments. Gamaleddin, said Abdel-Moneim, had acknowledged the payments during an interview aired on satellite TV, when he said the sums were offered in return for approval of last year's new budget. Mohamed Hussein, MP for Minya, told the house that as a member of the NDP he had been given LE100,000 in cash by the government, but since dissenting from the party's ranks such payments had dried up. Minister of State for Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Moufid Shehab denies that the government offers bribes to NDP MPs.

"Such financial support is offered to NDP and opposition MPs to help them establish projects and improve public services in their districts," said Shehab.

Gamaleddin also insists that the government's financial support is available to both NDP and opposition MPs. "I assure you that some opposition MPs, including Hamdeen Sabahi and Mohamed Abdel-Alim Dawoud, have received money from the government to set up projects in their districts."

Dawoud pointed out that the government allocated money to his district in the Delta governorate of Kafr Al-Sheikh only after citizens staged a public protest over the lack of potable water.

Assembly Speaker Fathi Sorour has called on Nazif to come to the assembly to answer questions arising from the government's payments to MPs in person.