

Government bans Muslim Brotherhood's annual Ramadan event

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CAIRO: The government has banned the Muslim Brotherhood's largest annual social gathering for the first time in 20 years, part of a concerted crackdown against the country's opposition, the group's leadership said Sunday.

Every year, the Brotherhood invites a diverse group of some 1,500 people to one of Cairo's five-star hotels for a gala dinner during Ramadan.

Brotherhood leader Mohamed Mahdi Akef criticized Egypt's Interior Ministry on Sunday for banning the annual meal, which the country's largest opposition group had planned for Saturday.

"This decision hurts Egypt's reputation and dignity and gives an impression of instability, which negatively affects the political, economic, and social environment in our beloved Egypt," Akef said in a statement.

The Interior Ministry declined to comment, but officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the press, acknowledged the decision had been made to stop the event.

The ban comes at a time of rising tension between President Hosni Mubarak's government and those who question its leadership. Authorities have imprisoned hundreds of Brotherhood members in recent months and have begun a crackdown against dissenting voices within the media.

On Thursday, an Egyptian court sentenced the editors of four outspoken tabloids to a year in prison for defaming Mubarak and his ruling party after they criticized senior officials in the government.

One of the editors also faces charges in a separate lawsuit of spreading rumors that the 79-year-old Mubarak was in poor health. Several opposition and independent newspapers published the reports, prompting the president to accuse "illegitimate movements" — a reference to the Brotherhood — of being behind the rumors. The group's leader, Akef, has denied the allegation.

Analysts say the government's moves have been driven by uncertainty over who will become president after Mubarak, who has ruled Egypt for more than a quarter century but has no designated successor. Many believe Mubarak's 43-year-old son Gamal is being groomed for the position, a prospect that has raised widespread opposition.

"The escalation against the Brotherhood and the press reflects high volatility in the political scene due to a struggle within the institution over the transfer of power," said Diah Rashwan, an analyst with the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

The Brotherhood stunned the government by scoring large victories in the 2005 elections for Parliament's lower house, winning more than a fifth of the legislative body's seats to become

the largest opposition bloc. Though the group was officially banned in 1954, its members run as independents.

The government has also targeted organizations unrelated to the transfer of power. Earlier Tuesday, authorities closed the Association for Human Rights Legal Aid, which had been involved in the first lawsuit against a state security officer for torture.

Egyptian officials said the group had received funding without the necessary permission, but fellow human rights groups said the closure was related to the torture case, which ended with the officer's acquittal on Sept. 5.

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