

Opposition slams away

Al Ahram Weekly
December 12-19

Opposition and independent MPs fired more questions at the government, this time focussing on private monopolies and normalisation with Israel, [Gamal Essam El-Din](#) reports

Opposition and independent MPs decided this week to intensify their barrage of interpellations (questions that must be answered by cabinet ministers) at the government despite the refusal of the speaker of the People Assembly Fathi Sorour to approve more interpellations even if they are corroborated by newspaper clippings.

On Sunday, several MPs, mostly members of the Muslim Brotherhood and leftists, submitted 20 additional interpellations, claiming that they draw on official reports prepared by state authorities such as the Central Auditing Agency (CAA). This brings the number of interpellations that have been submitted to a total of 85 in less than two weeks.

As expected, Sunday's new batch of interpellations tackled thorny, and in some cases embarrassing, issues mostly focussing on the private monopolies of business tycoons belonging to the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Other questions allege that normalisation of relations between Egypt and Israel is to blame for the arrest of several Israeli spies working in Egypt.

Mustafa Bakri, an independent MP with nationalist leanings, took the policies of the government of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif to task for the accumulation of wealth and riches in the hands of no more than three per cent of all Egyptians, with most of the businessmen who exploited their membership in the NDP gaining tremendous wealth. "One of these is multi-billionaire Naguib Sawiris who is on the list of the richest people in the world, with his wealth now close to LE120 billion," said Bakri. Although Sawiris is not an NDP member, Bakri alleged that the close relationship between former and senior NDP officials was behind the rapid growth in his wealth.

Bakri claimed that the number of multi-billionaires in Egypt now accounts for three per cent of the population, with their wealth hovering at around LE500 billion. "This has happened at a time when the number of Egyptians who live on just \$2 per day accounts for 70 per cent of the population," Bakri added.

Bakri also said he believed that the growth in the number of multi-billionaires came at the expense of the middle class in Egypt. "This class is the source of all revolutions. Imagine how angry they become when they see how wealthy family dynasties like Sawiris have become influential centres of power in this country," said Bakri who alleged that Sawiris had become so influential that he now can impose orders on the governor of the Central Bank and the minister of communications.

In another interpellation directed at Nazif, Brotherhood MP firebrand Saad El-Hussein alleged he was in the possession of documents certifying how the former housing minister Ibrahim Suleiman facilitated the sale of large plots of land to a handful of businessmen closely

associated with the NDP at cheap prices. El-Husseini cited the name of business tycoon Hisham Talaat Mustafa who was able to get 33 million metres of land around Cairo at a subsidised price. "The government offered him the land at a symbolic price of LE30 per metre in order to build housing units at reasonable prices to limited-income classes," said El-Husseini, adding, "instead, Mustafa built luxurious housing units, with a price per metre as much as LE3,000 while the value of the land as a whole climbed to LE26 billion." Mustafa is a member of Gamal Mubarak's Policies Committee and a major financial contributor to the housing projects of Gamal's Future Generation Foundation.

Mohamed Abdel-Alim Dawoud, a member of the liberal-oriented Wafd Party, cried foul that his interpellation about the normalisation of labour relations between Egypt and Israel had been rejected five times. "I have official documents showing that there are a lot of Israeli workers in Egypt and a lot of Egyptian workers in Israel," said Dawoud, adding, "the result of this normalisation in labour relations between the two countries is that many spies working for Israel have been arrested in the last five years." The most important of them, added Dawoud, was Azzam Azzam (Israeli) and Emad Abdel-Hamid (Egyptian) both of who were working for Israel.

Dawoud warned that more normalisation will encourage Israel to recruit more spies in Egypt at the expense of its national security.

Dawoud also claimed that 13 per cent of Egyptians working in Israel are now members of the Israeli army. "Each one of them receives \$20 a day plus two meals and these could be future spies on their native country," said Dawoud. He also cited Israeli statistics claiming that 10,000 Egyptians live in Israel and that most of them are married to Israeli women in major Israeli cities like Tel Aviv, Haifa and Beersheba. "In Israel, they formed what is now called the Association of Egyptians in Israel. Its objective is to reinforce their role in Israeli society," Dawoud said.

Ragab Hilal Hemeida, the sole representative of the Ghad Party, also hit at businessmen, warning the government not to sell them strategic drug companies. "In its privatisation drive, the government of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif aims to sell key drug companies to local and foreign investors. I warn that Israeli businessmen could line up to buy these companies," said Hemeida.

Mahmoud Amer, another Brotherhood MP, said his interpellation focussed on private monopolies in cement production. Amer said the policy of the current and former NDP-supported governments in selling giant cement companies to foreign investors led to the rise of a strong cartel of producers. "This cartel joined forces to raising the price per tonne of cement to an unprecedented LE420 although the cost per tonne does not exceed LE120," said Amer. What is more distressing, said Amer, is that these companies buy energy from the government at a subsidised cost of LE500.

In the meantime, opposition and independent MPs stepped up their campaign against Nazif, accusing his government of offering bribes to NDP MPs. A number of independent MPs, including political science professor Gamal Zahran and lawyer Alaa Abdel-Moneim said they have documents proving that unlike what the government claims, sums of cash money ranging from LE100,000 to LE250,000 were offered to NDP MPs not to establish local development projects in their districts but to serve their own personal needs. Abdel-Moneim said 22 NDP MPs each received LE100,000, while seven MPs received LE250,000 each.

Zahran said most of the money was not used in establishing development projects "but were offered as bribes to voters supporting NDP MPs in their own districts." Zahran said the money offered NDP MPs was not disbursed upon the basis of project feasibility studies as government officials claim. "The fact remains that these bribes were offered in return for rubber-stamping government-inspired laws and the annual state budget," said Zahran. Zahran and Abdel-Moneim threatened to lodge a complaint with the prosecutor-general, requesting him to force NDP MPs to return the so-called bribe money to the state treasury.