

Redrawing tactics

Al Ahrum Weekly
10-16 January 2008

[Mona El-Nahas](#) reviews the implications of last week's ouster of the firebrand chair of the Alexandria Judges' Club

Mahmoud El-Khodeiri, who has long been a leader of the campaign for greater judicial independence, was ousted as the chairman of Alexandria Judges' Club, a position he has held since 2004, during club council elections last Friday.

Ismail El-Basyouni, chief justice of the Qena Court of Appeals and widely rumoured to enjoy the support of Minister of Justice Mamdouh Marei, was elected in his place after winning 569 votes to El-Khodeiri's 535. El-Basyouni's supporters also managed to win seven seats on the council, the same number as El-Khodeiri's camp.

El-Khodeiri immediately blamed the results on the influence exercised by Marei.

"My opponent in the elections was not El-Basyouni but the minister of justice", said El-Khodeiri. "Marei used everything at his disposal to unseat me after I criticised him in public and exposed his designs since being appointed to the cabinet."

El-Khodeiri claims that sources close to the Ministry of Justice had threatened to continue to suspend the financial aid allocated to the club and stop the appointment of the children of judges to the general prosecution even before the start of the nomination process.

El-Basyouni denies the allegations. "I have been working in the judiciary field for more than 47 years during which I was not once delegated to work for any of the ministry's affiliates," he says, stressing that it is his intention to struggle to maintain judicial independence.

The struggle, though, under El-Basyouni's chairmanship, will no longer include facilitating direct confrontation with the state.

"The club will no longer allow its members to stage sit-ins or organise protests. Such acts tarnish the image of the judiciary," he argues. "It doesn't befit judges to stand in the street wearing their judicial sashes to express anger with the state."

Reacting to the results of the election, Zakaria Abdel-Aziz, chairman of the Cairo Judges' Club and a close friend of El-Khodeiri's, said he respected the choice of Alexandria's judges and stressed that El-Khodeiri's defeat would not halt calls for an independent judiciary. "Seven judges belonging to the reformist group managed to win seats on the club council, making it clear that there is large scale support for our demands."

"Losing his seat does not put an end to El-Khodeiri's participation in our struggle," insisted Abdel-Aziz.

"The Alexandria Judges' Club is a provincial organisation and as such is not required to adopt public stances. That is the role of the Cairo Judges' Club, which is there to reflect the views of judges from across Egypt," Hesham Geneina, secretary-general of the Cairo Judges' Club, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. Those views, he says, strongly favour reform. "The election results at the Cairo Judges' Club two months ago, where reformist judges swept the polls, clearly indicate where the hearts of judges lie."

At least one champion of reform, though, Judge Ahmed Mekki, suggests that the result of the Alexandria election might signal that it is time for judges to reconsider their tactics. In recent months the Alexandria Judges' Club had been criticised for several of its stands, with El-Khodeiri himself criticised for provoking official hostility towards judges.

Last September, El-Khodeiri described the People's Assembly as "a slave to the executive authority", and during last year's referendum on constitutional amendments raised black flags at the entrance of the club to symbolise its objection to the changes.

"The People's Assembly has abandoned its supervisory and legislative roles and is now little more than a body that takes orders from the executive," El-Khodeiri was quoted as saying. The remarks, for which El-Khodeiri later apologised, saying they were intended to give a push to the assembly, stirred the anger of a majority of MPs.