



# SHAYFEEN.COM: We're Watching You

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

Get an intimate look at the recent multi-party elections in Egypt through the eyes of three women working to assure the election's legitimacy. The women provide unprecedented access to activists operating in and around the highest levels of both government and opposition groups.

## THE FILM

SHAYFEEN.COM tells the story of three Egyptian women—a prominent TV newscaster, a university professor and a marketing consultant—and their efforts to help bring political reform and democracy to their country. Their work began in 2005, after President Hosni Mubarak announced that for the first time in 24 years the upcoming elections would allow for multiparty participation, sparking demonstrations by Egyptians who denounced this move as a sham. When the government responded with a violent crackdown, Boysana, Ghada and Engi decided they could not stand by silently in the face of this brutal suppression: they formed Shayfeen.com

Like other affluent Egyptians, the three women had not been politically involved nor very aware of the poverty and social problems in Egypt. But, these women were politically astute and Internet savvy; they decided to keep an eye on the government and expose its abuses. They chose to call their activist organization shayfeen, an Arabic word that means “We’re watching you.” For the 2005 elections, they armed their supporters with video cameras and sent them to polling stations around the country to monitor the elections and document the political process. What they witnessed was electoral fraud and voter intimidation. When Muslim Brotherhood candidates made a good showing in the first round of voting, security forces barred voters from entering the polls for the second round. By the third round, voters’ frustrations spilled into the streets and there were violent clashes between protesters and police.

Although discouraged by a low election turnout of 30 percent, the Shayfeen leaders were heartened by the willingness of two judges to investigate election fraud by eighteen of their colleagues. The judges did find evidence of fraud, which made people realize the power and influence that judges could have. Shayfeen began rallying support for an independent judiciary and, in spite of the prohibition against assemblies of more than five people, crowds gathered outside the Judges Club to show their support. Many in the crowd were arrested and beaten, including Mahmoud Hamza, himself a judge. The three leaders of Shayfeen decided to produce a short film about the plight of the judiciary and to use all the current technology at their disposal—radio, plasma screens and the Internet—to encourage the public to support the May 25, 2006 Judges March for an Independent Judiciary.

The march and demonstration resulted in the arrest and jailing of thousands of ordinary Egyptians, people who remained in prison even months later.

In spite of a lack of money and the failure to achieve their early objectives, Shayfeen continued its work. Engi spoke to a group of world leaders (including former president George W. Bush) at the UN, describing the lack of political freedom in Egypt. And in spring of 2007, Shayfeen mounted a campaign against the government’s proposed 34 constitutional amendments that would write parts of the Emergency Law\* into the Constitution.

The three leaders of Shayfeen have accepted the reality that building democracy in Egypt will be a slow and arduous process. In addition to convincing people to put aside the cynicism, apathy and fear that has resulted from decades of official corruption and repression, they face the task of helping to institute democratic reforms, while fending off charges that they are somehow helping the Muslim Brotherhood. The film provides ample evidence of Egyptian citizens who are angered by their lack of political freedom. The challenge for Shayfeen will be to harness that anger and give people faith in the democratic process so they can become full participants in the governing of their country.



\* See page 3 for information on Egypt’s Emergency Law No. 162

## INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN SHAYFEEN.COM

### Founders of Shayfeen.com

Bosayna Kamel – news presenter, Egyptian National Television

Ghada Shahbandar – university professor

Engi Haddad – marketing consultant

### Judges who examined election fraud

Judge Hesham El Bastawissi

Judge Mahmoud Mekki

Judge Mahmoud Hamza – beaten by police during protests at Judges Club

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Profile of Egypt

Egypt is famous for being an ancient land of pharaohs, pyramids and hieroglyphics. After three millennia of rule by Egyptian dynasties, the country experienced two thousand years of foreign rule by the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottoman Turks and British. Egypt today plays a central role in Middle East politics. The first Arab country to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, Egypt has been a broker in negotiating an end to the conflict between Israel and neighboring countries.

### Quick facts

**Capital city:** Cairo

**Population:** 83,000,000 (largest in the Arab world)

**Religion:** 90 percent Muslim (mainly Sunni); 10 percent Christian (Coptic)

**Land:** Largely desert; only 2.9 percent of land is arable; bisected by the Nile River and its fertile valley: the focus of economic activity and the location of Egypt's arable land and its source of fresh water

**Geographic importance:** Egypt is only land bridge between Africa and Asia; it controls the Suez Canal, the only sea link between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean.

**Economy:** One of the most developed in the Middle East, with rapid but uneven development; 20-30 percent live below the poverty line, with great disparities between the wealthiest 20 percent and the poorest 20 percent.

### The Mubarak Years

Born in 1928 in Kafr-al Meselha, President Muhammad Hosni Said Mubarak was educated at Egypt's national Military Academy, its Air Force Academy and at the Frunze General Staff Academy in Moscow. Under his predecessor, Anwar Sadat, he served in a number of military posts and then became vice president. Mubarak assumed the presidency when Sadat was assassinated in October 1981. His programs and policies have included vigorous economic development; commitment to the peace treaty with Israel signed in 1979; improvement of relations with other Arab states, which had been damaged after Egypt's peace with Israel; and "positive neutrality" toward the major world powers. Mubarak supported UN sanctions against Iraq when that country invaded Kuwait in 1990, and he committed 38,500 troops to the coalition fighting Iraq in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Having been re-elected four times (1987, 1993, 1999 and 2005), Mubarak has faced increasing opposition by various groups seeking

greater freedom and democracy in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood, which has mounted the strongest and most active opposition, has been accused of sponsoring violence and helping radical Islamic groups, with many of its members having been arrested and imprisoned. The September 11th attacks on the U.S. strengthened Mubarak's policy of suppressing Islamic fundamentalists, a policy that extends to all opposition groups; the government's excuse for this is that their success might encourage or enable the Brotherhood.

The change in the country's presidential election law announced by Mubarak in 2005, though purportedly paving the way for multi-candidate polls, actually placed tight restrictions on candidates seeking to run for office. In fact, Mubarak's chief potential rival, Ayman Nour, was imprisoned after the 2005 elections. In addition to this apparent lack of commitment to democracy and the rule of law, Mubarak's government has faced strong criticism for its poor human rights record. According to Human Rights Watch, some of Egypt's most serious human rights violations are routine torture, arbitrary detention and trying civilians before military courts.

Many of Egypt's political activists believe that Mubarak's current term will be his last.

### Movement Toward Democracy

1798 – Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt exposed the country to the principles of the French Revolution and ideas of self governance.

1879 – Nationalist groups began to form in opposition to British and French intrusion in Egyptian affairs.

1919 – Egyptians staged a countrywide nonviolent revolution against the British occupation of the country, leading to Egyptian independence in 1922.

1923-1924 – A new constitution is drafted based on a parliamentary representative system. Saad Zaghlul was popularly elected as prime minister.

1952 – A coup d'etat overthrew King Farouk, who was considered corrupt; a republic was established ushering in a long period of authoritarian rule

2003 – Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya), a grassroots coalition to oppose Hosni Mubarak's presidency began working for democratic reform.

2005 – Shayfeen.com is launched to serve as a watchdog on the Egyptian government.

Today – Numerous Egyptian voices are finding expression through blogs, YouTube and other online tools; many are forming pro-democracy movements and political parties (See Resources).

### The Emergency Law

Egypt's Emergency Law No. 162 has been on the books for the last half-century. It was initially drafted in 1958, by the government of President Gamal Abd al-Nasser, to be used during war, internal disturbances or natural disasters endangering public security or public order. The law has now been in effect continuously since Hosni Mubarak became president (after the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981). The law provides the executive branch (in practice, the Ministry of the Interior) with extensive powers to prohibit demonstrations and strikes, censor newspapers and other media, monitor personal communications (including letters and phone calls) and detain people indefinitely without charge. It also permits



the executive branch to refer civilians to military or state security courts, where the accused has no right of appeal, in violation of international fair trial standards. At any given time, there are hundreds, if not thousands of people in prison because of this law. The Emergency Law has been renewed every three years (most recently in 2008) and continues to be used as an instrument for suppressing dissent and opposition to the government.

### Muslim Brotherhood

Founded in Egypt in 1928 by an Egyptian schoolteacher named Hassan Al-Banna, the Muslim Brotherhood is Egypt's largest political opposition organization, with at least half a million followers today. Rooted in a broad rejection of British domination of the country and its accompanying political and social injustices, the Brotherhood quickly gained a mass following and significant political influence. However, with increased influence came official repression. The Muslim Brotherhood has long been targeted and suppressed by the Egyptian government, and often has been implicated in violent attacks on government figures. Though the Brotherhood officially renounced violent tactics in the 1970s, the group remains subject to repression.

Historically, the Brotherhood gained much of its support through its educational and charitable work, by partaking in the nationalist movement

against British rule and championing the cause of the poor and working classes in Egypt. Although it generally comes down on the side of pro-democracy forces in Egypt today, the Muslim Brotherhood is often criticized by secular political groups for its upholding of Sharia law, which critics say is fundamentally antidemocratic and would institutionalize oppression of women.

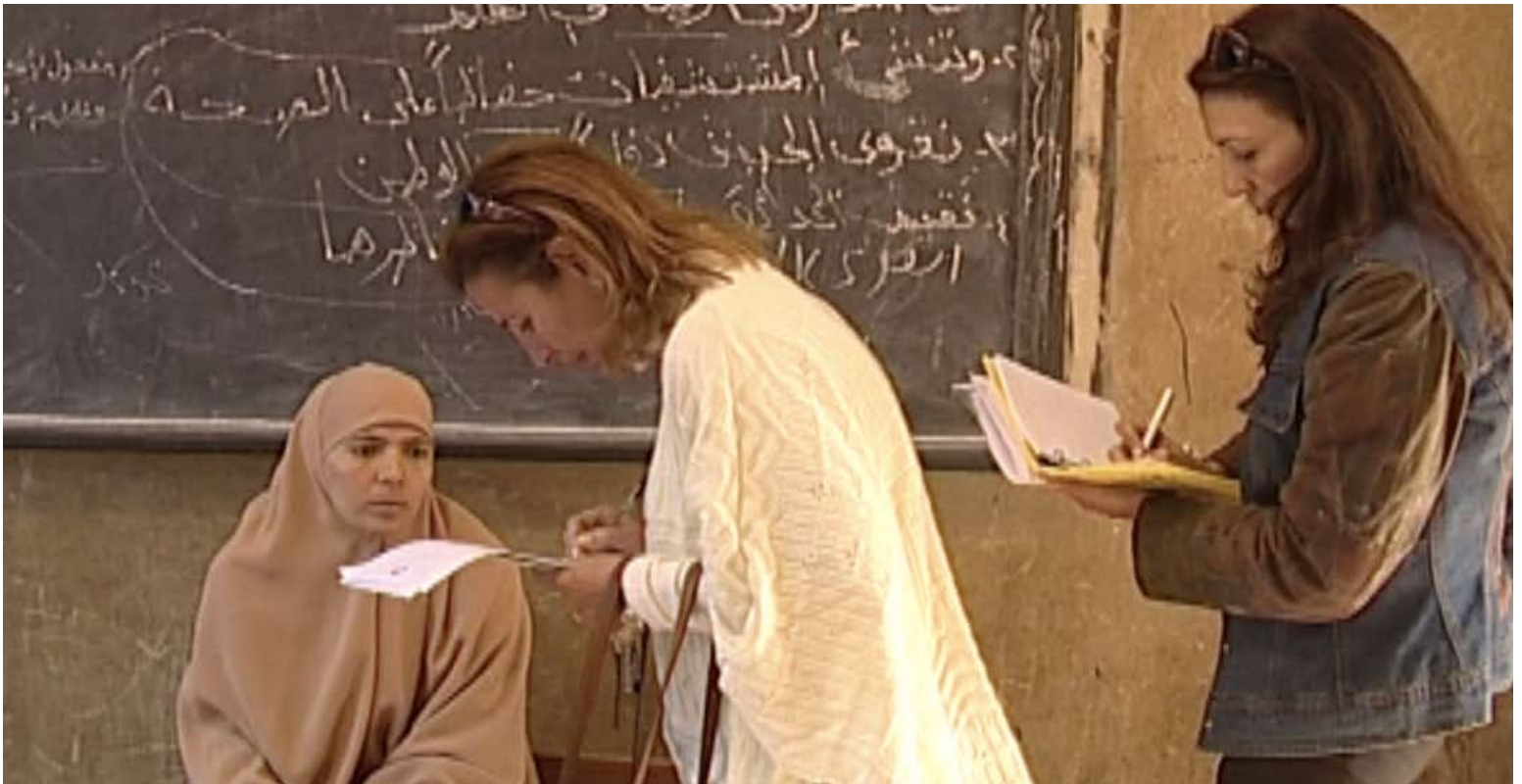
The Brotherhood has spread to other countries to become a transnational movement that upholds a vision of moderate political Islam across the Arab world. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood seeks to achieve power through electoral means, and regularly attempts to field candidates in national and local elections. Today, it remains officially banned as a political party, though it is tacitly tolerated by the regime of Hosni Mubarak. Hundreds of its members and leaders continue to be held prisoner in Egyptian jails, and it remains subject to arbitrary crackdowns and arrests.

In the 2005 elections, Brotherhood candidates won 20 percent of seats in parliament, but they ran as independents because of the official ban on the organization. Most recently, the Muslim Brotherhood decided to boycott municipal elections in spring 2009 after being allowed to field only twenty candidates for thousands of seats and because of mass arrests by President Mubarak's security forces.



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Why would the party led by President Hosni Mubarak want to be re-branded, especially after announcing a more inclusive election process? What is the image of Egypt that Engi's video clips represent?
2. When the Muslim Brotherhood scored some victories in the parliamentary elections, the government responded by preventing people from voting in the remaining phases of the election. The government claimed it was trying to prevent a worse fate for the country, namely an Islamist victory. What would be a better, more democratic way to keep people from turning to the Muslim Brotherhood for leadership?
3. Why do you think no one from the judiciary would visit the jailed protesters who had demonstrated at the Judges Club?
4. The Egyptian government has accused Shayfeen.com of "giving Egypt to the [Muslim] Brotherhood." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
5. What are some indicators that something bad might happen in Egypt, as Ghada maintains in the meeting with John McCain's staff?
6. Can the type of democracy we have in the U.S. be recreated in a country like Egypt? Why or why not?
7. After seeing this film, how do you feel about the prospects for democracy taking hold in Egypt?
8. As Shayfeen tries to remain a viable organization, should its leaders consider adding additional tactics to their activities surrounding elections? What are some other ways they can reach ordinary Egyptians and get them involved in activism for democracy?
9. Can Egypt show the way toward democracy in the Middle East? If so, how?
10. What can the U.S. do to encourage and support Egyptian democracy?



## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Americans are often apathetic when it comes to voting, although it's among our most cherished rights. Find out what some people think about the importance of voting and add your opinion to the "Why bother voting?" discussion at <http://www.whymocracy.net/forum/comments.php?DiscussionID=25&page=1>. You can also join the discussion about democracy at the Why Democracy blog at <http://whymocracy.net/blog>.

2. The UN has adopted Sept. 15 as the International Day of Democracy, stating that "Democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems, and their full participation in all aspects of life." They also state that "While democracies share common features, there is no single model of democracy and that democracy does not belong to any country or region."\*

Gather representatives from a variety of organizations (civic, business, educational, religious and so on) in your community for a democracy forum. Use it to acknowledge the International Day of Democracy, to explore and discuss the different forms of democracy and to find ways for people who are often marginalized to have greater participation in our democratic institutions. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=24599&Cr=democracy&Cr1=day>

3. Find out how the Internet is being used in your community for grassroots political organizing and monitoring. Join the netroots (Internet + grassroots) movement using blogs and other online media as techniques for political participation. Two websites that offer ways to participate and provide models of online activism are the Grassroots Netroots Alliance ([www.grassrootsnetroots.org](http://www.grassrootsnetroots.org)) and Project Vote Smart ([www.votesmart.org](http://www.votesmart.org)).

4. Help to strengthen the role and voice of women in political leadership positions, both in the U.S. and in other countries. The International Museum of Women is an online resource that provides an extensive list of initiatives promoting women's advancement and wellbeing. Work with a local civic, political or religious organization to choose one of these initiatives as a longterm project of the organization. For details go to <http://www.imow.org/community/act/index>.

5. Help prevent human rights abuses in Egypt. Check the websites of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (see Resources) for current developments. Sign up to receive their action alerts, letting you know how you can participate in specific human rights campaigns. You can also check the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (<http://en.eohr.org/?p=67>) for additional current human rights issues and to learn the ways the organization is addressing them.

6. The Congressional Caucus for Freedom of the Press is a bipartisan, bicameral caucus, co-chaired by Representatives Adam Schiff (D-CA) and Michael Pence (R-IN) and Senators Christopher Dodd (D-CT) and Richard Lugar (R-IN). It aims to advance press freedom around the world by creating a forum to combat and condemn media censorship and the persecution of journalists around the world. Let these leaders, as well as your own Congressional representatives, know that you support this essential democratic freedom and urge them to increase their efforts to promote freedom of the press. To receive updates on the status of journalistic freedom worldwide visit the website of the Committee to Protect Journalists at [www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org).

For additional outreach ideas, visit [www.itvs.org](http://www.itvs.org), the website for the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website for your PBS station.

## RESOURCES

### Information about Egypt

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/country\\_profiles/737642.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/country_profiles/737642.stm) – This BBC country profile of Egypt provides political and economic context for the film.

<http://www.shayfeen.com/node/64> – The official website of Shayfeen, whose work is followed in the documentary.

<http://www.egyptoo.com/detail/819/shayfeen-com.html> – This site provides a list of ten political parties and movements in Egypt.

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/index.htm> – Al Ahram is a weekly, online, English-language newspaper, covering all aspects of Egyptian life.

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1193622,00.html> – "Stomping on Democracy in Egypt" by Lindsay Wise, is a 2006 Time Magazine Online article describing the demonstrations held to protest the trial of two judges who spoke against the ballot fraud in Egypt's 2005 parliamentary elections.

<http://vodpod.com/watch/1268701-bloggers-egyptian-media-censorship> – This YouTube video from World Focus describes the current state of Internet use and media censorship in Egypt.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7950729.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7950729.stm) – The BBC reports on how Egyptian women are going online to discuss issues and exchange information.

<http://www.al-bab.com/arab/blogs.htm> – This site lists English-language blogs from Egypt as well as other Arab countries.



### Pro-democracy organizations

<http://www.freedomhouse.org> – Freedom House is a proponent of democratic values and an opponent of dictatorships of the far left and the far right. Using a combination of analysis, advocacy and action, Freedom House provides support to individuals working in the world's young democracies to overcome debilitating legacies of tyranny, dictatorship and political repression.

<http://www.soros.org> – The Open Society Institute works to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens. OSI seeks to shape public policies that assure greater fairness in political, legal and economic systems and safeguard fundamental rights. It also implements a range of local initiatives to advance justice, education, public health and independent media, and it builds alliances across borders and continents on issues such as corruption and freedom of information.

<http://www.ndi.org> – The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

<http://www.internews.org> – Internews is an international media development organization whose mission is to empower local media worldwide, giving people the news and information they need, the ability to connect, and the means to make their voices heard.

<http://cima.ned.org> – The Center for International Media Assistance, an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy, brings together a broad range of media experts to strengthen the support for, and improve the effectiveness of, media assistance programs. CIMA provides information, builds networks and conducts research on the indispensable role independent media play in creating sustainable democracies around the world.

<http://www.un.org/events/democracyday> – The website for the UN's International Day of Democracy contains links to information on elections, human rights and the role of women in politics.

### Citizen action and human rights

<http://www.wmd.org> – The World Movement for Democracy is a global network of democrats—including activists, practitioners, academics, policymakers and funders—who have come together to cooperate in the promotion of democracy.

<http://www.aidemocracy.org> – Americans for Informed Democracy empowers and equips young people in the United States to address global issues such as poverty, health, climate change, peace and security, all through awareness raising and actions that promote just and sustainable solutions on their campuses, in their communities and nationally.

<http://www.hrw.org> – Human Rights Watch is dedicated to defending and protecting human rights of people around the world.

<http://www.amnesty.org> – Amnesty International is a worldwide movement of people who campaign for internationally recognized human rights for all.

### Women's political leadership and empowerment of women

[http://www.ndi.org/content/womens\\_programs](http://www.ndi.org/content/womens_programs) – The National Democratic Institute (mentioned previously) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, organization working to support democratic institutions worldwide. NDI believes that equitable participation of women in politics and government is essential to building and sustaining democracy; it helps women acquire the tools necessary to participate successfully in all aspects of the political process.

<http://www.unifem.org> – UNIFEM, the women's fund at the United Nations, provides financial and technical assistance to innovative programs and strategies to foster women's empowerment and gender equality.

<http://www.madre.org> – MADRE is an international women's human rights organization that partners with women in communities worldwide to meet urgent, local needs and create longterm solutions to the problems that women face.

