

Political row over protest groups

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THE protest movements, which have popped up over the past few years, have thrown Egyptian intellectuals in unending thinking and soul-searching.

Thinkers look at these movements and see their rising numbers of followers and expect them to replace Egypt's political parties.

"Politics is being played on the street now, not inside this country's political parties," said an opposition party leader, having seen protests and sit-ins almost everywhere in this country of 80 million people after 2005.

But many do not seem to be ready to share his point of view.

"These movements have started to appear to reflect the institutional crisis that has beset Egypt," said Howida Adly, a researcher from the National Centre for Sociological and Criminological Research. "But we still need to differentiate between them and street protests," she added during a recent gathering in Cairo.

Many of these movements started to make their presence felt on the streets of this populous country years ago. To many of the Egyptians who were not used to expressing their anger in public, these movements were both new and shocking.

Some of these movements, however, managed to cause headache to the Egyptian Government, including the



Gazette photo

Political mobility: The protest movements, which have popped up since 2005, have prompted almost daily protests and strikes in Egypt.

protest *Kefaya* (Enough) Group and another group calling itself 6 April.

Six April started in 2008 on the social networking site Facebook to offer moral support to textile workers in the industrial city of Mahala, Gharbiya Governorate.

Its members urged the workers to stage a work strike, wear black clothes, and stay at home to force their employers to meet their demands for higher wages and better working conditions.

The ensuing violence made many consider the strife and dangerous ramifications that these movements could cause.

"Most of these movements aren't well-organised," said Alieddin Helal, the Chairman of the Media Committee at the

ruling National Democratic Party. "They come from their initiators sense of moral obligation," he added.

As of January 2009, 6 April had 70,000 predominantly young and educated members who were politically active.

"Although members inside some of these movements try to replace the political parties, I need to assure everybody that this will never happen," said Amr Hashem, an experts from Al-Ahram Centre for Strategic Studies, a local think tank affiliated to Al-Ahram Press institution.

Egyptians will elect a new parliament later this year and go to presidential polls in 2011.