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Subject: ElBaradei's Egypt presidential campaign faces divisions (Reuters)

CAIRO, Nov 5 (Reuters) - Mohammed ElBaradei's Egyptian presidential campaign suffered a blow on Saturday as campaigners quit in protest at the handling of his election race, saying the former U.N. nuclear watchdog head has become isolated from his grassroots base.

Campaigners in one of Egypt's biggest electoral blocs walked out and nine other provinces froze their activities, blaming flawed campaign management for ElBaradei's decreasing popularity, charges his central office has denied.

The Nobel Peace Prize winner is no longer seen as one of the front runners in the election race and the internal dispute could further weaken his prospects ahead of presidential elections expected at the end of 2012.

One survey has placed the former International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) head seventh in the running as he struggles to navigate the country's internal politics.

Independent analysts and Western diplomats, while praising ElBaradei's integrity and diplomatic skills, have questioned whether he has the broad appeal to attract votes from many ordinary Egyptians concerned with local issues rather than his international achievements.

ElBaradei could not be reached for comment but the central office said he was keen on meeting campaigners and had met with "over 1,500 volunteers" recently.

Volunteers in Sharqiya, a province with a voting power of 3.4 million, said they resigned after their campaign leader was dismissed in an "arbitrary decision" by the directors.

"ElBaradei's campaign office in Sharqiya has collectively resigned to protest the maltreatment the Cairo-based administration has shown to the volunteers and for blocking access between ElBaradei and the grassroots base working for him on the ground," the statement added.

'GAP WITH ORDINARY EGYPTIANS'

The Cairo office denied there was a collective resignation, and said it removed three coordinators to "obtain

harmony and improve the performance of the campaign", insisting volunteers and their efforts were respected.

"This campaign is failing because there is a gap between Dr. Mohammed ElBaradei who ordinary Egyptians consider distant and cut off from them," said Mohammed Gouda, who headed the Sharqiya campaign. Two other campaigners, Saad Bahar and Ahmed Hassan, were dismissed for backing Gouda.

Campaigners in the city of Port Said also quit, while leaders in nine other provinces said in a joint statement they had halted activities until ElBaradei meets them. They also demanded a "transparent and just" probe over the dismissals.

"Volunteers work independently and without integration, like isolated islands. This will be a problem during presidential polls," said Saad Bahar, one of those dismissed. Bahar was responsible for coordinating field work across the country.

Others said the campaign's central office had too many business executives and not enough people with local knowledge.

After his return to Egypt in Feb. 19 2010, ElBaradei led a reform movement, saying Egyptians would rise up against 30 years of authoritarian rule under President Hosni Mubarak. A year later, Mubarak was ousted in a popular uprising on Feb. 11.

Youth groups and an Egyptian opposition of secularists, liberals, Islamists and leftists quickly flocked to ElBaradei.

But eight months after Mubarak's fall, he trails other candidates.

Well-known former Arab League chief Amr Moussa is tipped as the front runner by many. Other leading candidates include former Muslim Brotherhood member Abdel Monem Abul Futuh, and ex-air force commander Ahmed Shafiq who was briefly prime minister after the uprising.

"The point is to show ElBaradei is of the people. We require directors who do not bring their party affiliations onto ElBaradei's campaign," said Ahmed Hassan, former field coordinator for the Cairo area.

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