

“Egypt after Hosni Mubarak may look much like it looks now: another military man in civilian clothing in charge of civilian technocrats mismanaging both the economy and the political system.”

The Struggle for Egypt’s Future

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“Frankly speaking, my becoming president is not on the table, it never occurred to me, and is not an issue on my father’s mind. All such talk is baseless.”

—Gamal Mubarak, February 2001

“Egypt is not Syria.”

—President Hosni Mubarak, April 2001

The Mubaraks’ protests notwithstanding, there is wide speculation in Egypt and among Egypt watchers that the country will indeed follow Syria’s model of presidential succession, where son follows father even without monarchical rule. In Syria’s case, 34-year-old Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father, longtime authoritarian ruler Hafez al-Assad, when he died in June 2000. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is grooming one of his sons to succeed him (Uday, 38, and Qusay, 36, currently are rivals for power). And if 39-year-old Gamal Mubarak, second son of Hosni Mubarak, becomes Egypt’s next president, Egypt will perpetuate this model of an Arab “hereditary republic” (*jumlukiya*, as some call it—a hybrid of the Arabic words *jumhuriya*, or “republic,” and *malikiya*, or “monarchy”). We expect this of Arab and other monarchies. But Syria, Iraq, and Egypt were supposed to be different. These so-called radical (albeit nondemocratic) states that emerged in the 1950s were seen as bucking the trend of conservative rule. Instead, they now perpetuate the rule of families, of conservatism (even if under the guise of radicalism), and authoritarianism.

Shortly after Saad Eddin Ibrahim—a professor of sociology, a human rights worker, and one of Egypt’s most vocal democracy advocates—speculated that Egypt would follow the example of Syria (and Iraq), President Mubarak had him and 27 of his colleagues arrested in June 2000. Saad Eddin, his health deteriorating, spent nearly two years in

Cairo’s Tora prison until his release on appeal last month, jailed by a political order that tolerates no criticism of the president.

This strict proscription of any direct criticism of the president or his family is just one of many examples of how Mubarak prevents freedoms of speech, assembly, and association; of how he uses laws to thwart all political opposition; of how he keeps Egypt wed to an authoritarian system that is far from the democracy it pretends to be. Beyond the 64-year-old professor who Mubarak is trying to destroy, Mubarak’s real target, his primary opposition, is the Muslim Brotherhood—the oldest and most popular opposition movement in Egypt. But Mubarak also has his sights on other “Islamists,” including militant groups. An emergency law that effectively suspends Egypt’s constitution is in effect. His government and the parliament he controls have also established laws on a wide array of issues to prevent human rights organizations, women’s groups, and other non-governmental organizations from organizing, raising funds, and providing social welfare services that attempt to treat symptoms born of poverty and political exclusion. Alongside these laws is an array of procedures and policies that include torture, political imprisonment, and the increasing use of military courts to expedite convictions of civilians (which allows the government to accelerate executions of those it seeks to crush and denies the accused any recourse to judicial review). And whenever a parliamentary election approaches, the Egyptian government rounds up scores—and sometimes hundreds—of Muslim Brotherhood members who are candidates for office. All these methods serve as the foundation of an authoritarian system that has changed very little since its establishment by Gamal Abdel-Nasser in the early 1950s.

Yet Egypt also has a vibrant civil society and a network of political institutions that would promote democracy if the president would only abide by his own pledge to allow democracy to function. Egypt-

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tian politics thus remains both restricted and promising. Ironically, if Gamal Mubarak does succeed his father in a nondemocratic fashion, he could be Egypt's best hope for democracy if he fulfills his own father's promise to promote democracy—a promise made 21 years ago when Hosni Mubarak ascended to the presidency after the assassination of Anwar Sadat.

Aside from the important question of who will be Egypt's next leader, Egyptians also have been waging their own "war on terror" for years. But while the militant opposition is now largely defeated, or pushed underground, the government continues to stress how dangerous this movement is. At the same time, the United States–led war on terror provides Mubarak with adequate cover to continue to crush all opposition, militant or otherwise.

THE HOUSE THAT NASSER BUILT

Analyzing the prospects for succession, stability, and democratization in Egypt must be done in the context of history and political culture. Hosni Mubarak in 2003 rules a political system established by Gamal Abdel-Nasser, who led the coup against King Farouk in 1952, disbanded parliament, crippled the Muslim Brotherhood, and established one-party rule with the backing of the military.

When Anwar Sadat, vice president in 1970 at the time of Nasser's death, assumed the presidency, he initiated a number of changes. He began by shifting Egypt's main alliance away from the Soviet Union and toward the United States. He also launched an "economic opening" (*infitah*) toward Western capital and technology, improved Egypt's relationship with Saudi Arabia, gave greater liberties to the Muslim Brotherhood as long as the group renounced violence, and, in an act of historic significance, made peace with Israel. What Sadat did not change was the political system he inherited from Nasser and passed on to Mubarak. That system begins—and ends—with the president.

Although elected and required to stand for reelection, an Egyptian president effectively has a lifetime appointment. Egypt's electoral system is actually no different than Syria's or Iraq's. An Egyptian presidential candidate is nominated by parliament, which is controlled by the president. One name is placed before the electorate. And Egyptians, much like Syrians and Iraqis, get to vote either yes or no—on one candidate. Just as Saddam Hussein could claim he received 100 percent of the votes in his October 2002 "reelection," Hosni Mubarak claimed a 99.96 percent endorsement in his September 1999 reelection bid. Like Saddam, Mubarak had no opponent.

Elections aside, Mubarak bases his legitimacy on and gains his primary support from the military establishment. In 2003 the political role of Egypt's 450,000-man military is less prominent than in the past. But the military remains the backbone of the regime. It was last called on to secure the government in 1986, when hundreds of Central Security conscripts rioted in Cairo to protest their poor living and working conditions and low pay. There is no question the army would act again should an internal threat arise—just as it would act against any external threat. And it certainly would act against militant Islamists should the police fail to thwart any action against the regime. The military is also especially eager to know with certainty who will succeed the 74-year-old Mubarak—indeed, it wants the next president to be chosen from its own ranks.

Beyond the military backbone of the regime, the president uses more palatable political institutions to create the pretense of support and legitimacy. This begins with a political party and a compliant parliament.

ONE-PARTY "DEMOCRACY"

Nasser created a one-party system in the 1950s. Between 1976 and 1978, Sadat disbanded Nasser's Arab Socialist Union and reorganized it under the banner of the National Democratic Party (NDP). He also allowed a controlled number of "loyal opposition" parties to compete while never allowing any real opposition to challenge the supremacy of the ruling party. The NDP remains in full control of the bicameral parliament and all 26 regional entities known as governorates (which are roughly similar to American states). The regulation of party activity is led by the "political parties committee," which is controlled by Mubarak and consists of three government ministers (interior, justice, and parliamentary affairs) and three legal consultants, who are appointed by the president.

The lower house of parliament, the Magles al-Sha'b (People's Assembly), has 444 elected members plus 10 members appointed by the president. The current parliament was elected in 2000 and has a five-year mandate. The largest group in the body is known as the "independent" NDP members. These are people who ran as independents but were NDP party stalwarts, calculating they had a better chance of electoral success by distancing themselves from their party, which is noted for its corruption and aging leadership. These 213 "independent" NDP members rejoined their colleagues—the 175 candidates who won their own seats under the NDP banner—giving the NDP 388 seats in parliament.

There are 20 nonaligned independents plus 17 other MPs (members of parliament) who are affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (although Egypt's party law forbids the Muslim Brotherhood to have an official party). Seven MPs are from the Wafd (a secular, centrist party), 6 from Tagammu (a leftist party), 3 from the Nasserist Party, and 1 is a member of the Liberal Party.

The upper house of parliament—the Shura Council—is no more diverse. Of 88 elected seats, Mubarak's ruling NDP has 74. In addition, Mubarak is able to appoint another 44 members to the council. At the local level, too, the NDP dominates the daily life of Egyptians. In the April 2002 local elections across Egypt, the NDP secured 97 percent of the seats—45,943 out of 47,346 posts that were contested at the village, district, town, city, and governorate levels.

All this structure and trappings of democracy aside, Egypt is an authoritarian system where the president is the most powerful person, and depends primarily on a military establishment for his security in office. Egyptians do not turn out in large numbers to participate in elections; the norm for any election is 8 to 12 percent voter turnout. Egyptian voters know their choices are limited (or, in the case of the referendum on the president, nonexistent) and the elections virtually a sham since Mubarak and the army will not allow any party except the NDP to dominate politics. Mubarak has been most effective at “dividing and ruling” the opposition. And the opposition parties actually help this process: although they preach democracy for the nation, they have internal governing structures that are authoritarian, thereby perpetuating the old guard and denying young leaders a chance to join the leadership ranks. Thus, this alternative to Mubarak and the NDP does not generate much excitement. Opposition leaders are generally seen as corrupt and irrelevant to the daily lives of most Egyptians. Overall, they are ineffective at organizing against the government and its policies.

POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY AND INSECURITY

Nasser designated Sadat as his vice president and heir apparent. Sadat chose Mubarak. But since Sadat's assassination in 1981, when then Vice President Hosni Mubarak assumed the highest office, Egypt has been without a vice president. In the absence of a second-in-command, Mubarak's death (or incapacitation) will throw the question of succession to the parliament. Why has Mubarak, in power for over 21 years, declined to name his intended successor? Is he a democrat in disguise, refusing to anoint one single-

handedly? The answer is no. If he were such a “democrat,” he would have demonstrated his true colors over the past 21 years. Mubarak even insisted, after his second election to the office in 1987, that he would not stand again. He obviously has reneged on his self-declared term limit by running twice more for the uncontested 6-year terms.

A more compelling argument as to why Mubarak has refused to appoint his successor (that is, a vice president) may be his own insecurities in power. Mubarak came to office with the assassination of a president. There have been an unknown number of attempts against him since. There also has been very little public enthusiasm for Mubarak as president. Naming his successor could lead to an immediate diminution in his power since the heir apparent might come to be seen as president-in-waiting—and perhaps even lead to an internal military “discussion” favoring a quick succession.

If Egyptians' penchant for jokes is a measure, President Mubarak is seen either as a buffoon (at worst) or as an ineffective leader who got lucky. He was in the right office when Sadat was killed and likewise has been lucky enough to avoid a number of attempts to deal him the same fate. Since surviving a 1995 attempt against him in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, the media has gone overboard in trying to build a personality cult around Mubarak.

What began as fawning over the “great leader” when he returned to Cairo, alive but shaken in 1995, has continued as uninterrupted sycophancy in Egyptian media coverage. Normal for dictatorships, this is most distasteful for Egyptians, who fancy themselves a step above Syria, Iraq, Libya, and other such systems. One newspaper issued a “Card of Love” on Mubarak's birthday on May 4, 2000. And then, approaching his seventy-third birthday in 2001, the state-owned papers went even further. *Al Ahram* published a front-page article on May 3 entitled “The Great River of Loyalty” that wondered “Why do we love him?” “Why do all people love him, back him up, rely on him and listen to his words of wisdom? Why do we love Mubarak, the father of the Egyptian family? We tell him with heartfelt affection and hope, happy birthday President Mubarak. We hope that you will be with us every year. With you, we are elevated. With you, we can have more determination and enthusiasm. With you, our day becomes clear, our night dissipates and we are catapulted to fame. . . .”

Love him or not, not all those in the Egyptian government have been content to wait indefinitely to

learn who is next in line. The military especially, as the guarantor of stability, has been eager to put this question to rest. One person who came closest to moving into the role of successor was Field Marshal Abd al-Haleem Abu-Ghazala, the charismatic defense minister for most of the 1980s. He was well liked by Egypt's military as well as in American political and military circles. Almost certainly because of this, Mubarak removed him in 1989. Officially, the defense minister was implicated in a scandal dealing with the smuggling of materials for ballistic missile production; popular views hold that this was a convenient scandal for Mubarak to seize on (create?)—perhaps removing the popular military leader forestalled Mubarak's own removal. Indeed, many believed Abu-Ghazala had become powerful enough to remove Mubarak from office. Mubarak learned from what may or may not have been a near coup by Abu-Ghazala, and has worked to prevent others from gaining the type of popularity, visibility, and power that his former defense minister achieved.

And so, when Foreign Minister Amr Moussa's popularity and visibility increased throughout the late 1990s (mainly as a result of his condemnation of Israeli policies), it was announced in May 2001 that he would be "promoted" from foreign minister (a job he had held for 10 years) to secretary general of the Arab League. As most people realized, this was hardly a promotion—leaving his very visible position as foreign minister, where he succeeded in becoming the "second" voice of the Egyptian government, for the job of governing the ungovernable Arab League, which generally is fraught with divisions and is ineffective on defining an "Arab view" on politics. Thus, the prevailing opinion is that he was sidelined to the Arab League because, as Samer Shehata, assistant professor of Arab politics at Georgetown University, put it, he had "become too popular and . . . the president did not like the attention showered on the well-spoken and dashing minister." Some say the last straw for Mubarak was when Shaaban Abdel-Rahim, an "ironing boy turned singer," topped Egypt's music charts by singing "I love Amr Moussa" (and "I hate Israel").

Without grooming a successor, Mubarak has succeeded in keeping rivals at bay. Yet, the question is increasingly urgent: Who's next? Mubarak is nearly 75 years old and is serving his fourth six-year term. He is, by all accounts, healthy (an avid squash player) and could live on and serve as president for the next 10 years. Still, while he has survived assassina-

tion attempts, accidents do happen—and so "Who will succeed Mubarak?" is an important question to discuss.

President Mubarak and his son Gamal both claim that the Egyptian "constitution is clear" on the issue of succession. But while they may be clear on the matter, and while Gamal Abdel-Nasser's and Anwar Sadat's deaths led to smooth transitions of power (because both had appointed their successors by naming vice presidents), there is indeed room for "mischief" in the succession of the president. Article 82 of Egypt's constitution details the authorization of the vice president to assume temporary power if the president is incapacitated (again, temporarily): "If on account of any temporary obstacle the President of the Republic is unable to carry out his functions, he shall delegate his powers to a vice president" (emphasis added).

At present, and probably until Mubarak is ready to make known his plans for succession, Article 82 is irrelevant, since there is no vice president. And the oft-cited Article 84, which most people look to for guidance on the question of succession, ignores whether there is a vice president. Thus, even when the post of vice president is filled, the speaker of parliament (or "president of the People's Assembly")—who is specifically prohibited from running for president—assumes the office of president temporarily (up to a maximum of 60 days) and works with the People's Assembly to choose the next president.

Here is where the mischief is possible. Clearly, Egypt's constitution does not provide a definitive answer on succession. And as long as a vice president is not named, many possibilities can emerge—including a constitutional putsch from within the military, which is, after all, where all of Egypt's presidents have come since 1952. This scenario merely requires that a leading military figure place his name before parliament and mention the obvious damage that could occur to Egypt's military morale should parliamentary "civilian politicians" reject the military's clear desire. A similar situation would occur if the military threw its support to a civilian candidate, such as Amr Moussa.

But given the apparent nonstop effort to thrust Gamal into public life and develop his own cult of personality as an "outsider-insider"—a civilian reformer with the ultimate *wasta* (connections)—this scenario seems most likely at present. (The

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president's eldest son, Ala, appears uninterested in these political maneuverings.)

GROOMING GAMAL

Nearly 40 years old, Gamal Mubarak was educated at the American University in Cairo. He spent over six years working in London with the Bank of America, returned to Egypt, and has become a successful businessman as the executive director of MedInvest Associates, a financial advisory firm. His father began the slow but deliberate process of "injecting" Gamal into powerful positions. Gamal became Egypt's spokesman on the Egypt–United States Presidents' Council, which includes a small number of Egypt's business elite. In January 2000 he was appointed a member of the ruling NDP's general secretariat. By then, speculation was so rife about his father's intentions that Gamal had to make the denial of any interest in the presidency that is quoted at the beginning of this essay.

By summer 2002, speculation about Gamal took an interesting direction. A sense developed among some opposition leaders that the "coronation" of Gamal was inevitable—and that might not be such a bad thing. Gamal became known as a "broom," sweeping corruption from within the NDP. Three scandals involving NDP loyalists in summer 2002 received very public attention and condemnation; one of the fallen leaders of the NDP was a right-hand man to the powerful party leader and minister of agriculture, Yousef Wali. Gamal was seen as taking on the old guard. Some opposition leaders even went so far as to praise not only his youth (which is a fact) but also his purported ties to civil society (which is questionable). Perhaps their support comes mainly from the prospect that Gamal's succession would be a stark departure from how Egypt's presidents have assumed power. Any shift from the past practice of naming a president from the ranks of the military is not a bad thing, especially for those calling for an end to Egypt's military-dominated political system. Gamal's potential succession may thus receive endorsement from some unlikely quarters: the opposition groups opposed to his father and to the military that supports him.

But opposition support is not what gets an individual into the presidency. If the security and military establishments are not unified in their support for Gamal, his name almost certainly will not emerge as a candidate. In the current atmosphere in Egyptian politics, with limited political freedoms, a rubber-stamp parliament, and a divided and ineffective opposition, the military remains the

only institution with sufficient power and ability to influence the succession process. If it is not to be President Gamal, Egypt after Hosni Mubarak may look much like it looks now: another military man in civilian clothing in charge of civilian technocrats mismanaging both the economy and the political system.

A HEREDITARY DEMOCRACY?

Does the United States accept the idea of hereditary republics in the Arab world? Will the United States continue to prefer stability to democratic procedure? For Egypt, as for all the Middle East, United States policy is geared toward stability for friendly Arab regimes; democracy (let alone human rights) is a distant afterthought. And Egypt is far from the "democracy" it claims to be. Thus, only a small number of Egyptians will actually determine who will be the next leader of their country.

American policymakers face an unenviable problem on the question of succession—at least if it arises in the current atmosphere, where Egypt sees the United States as applying pressure on human rights (the Saad Eddin case) while uncritically supporting Israel's belligerent prime minister, Ariel Sharon, and pushing for war against Iraq. If the United States seeks to be proactive, either on human rights or even the naming of a vice president, Mubarak will continue to resist a meddling United States. If the United States tries to send a warning, such as who not to appoint, this will backfire as well. Thus, the moment the United States asserts its opposition to Gamal as successor may be the moment Gamal's succession is secured. Hosni will easily fend off United States pressure—and will not be condemned at home for "disobeying" Washington's wishes. In the current atmosphere of distrust of America's real intentions in the Middle East, Egyptians generally will rally around the one person the United States seems not to want—and it will become a personalized issue rather than a structural or policy concern.

The only real course available to the United States is to stay neutral (and silent)—and mean it. The only statement on the succession question should be one that calls for the Egyptian people to have their direct (itself a loaded word) say in who will lead them after Mubarak. The United States should keep the focus on participatory government, which allows for the Egyptian people's voices in the election (not selection) of the president. And the United States should acknowledge that none of this will happen for a long time to come. ■