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Research Report

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Pharaoh Reelected

Egypt on the Road to Political Pluralism

Volker Perthes

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's reelection on 7 September 2005 came as absolutely no surprise. The only open question was exactly how the vote would split between the president and his strongest opponent, populist liberal opposition leader Ayman Nour. The comfortable official result of 88.6 percent for Mubarak, 7.6 percent for Nour, and not even four percent for the other eight candidates together will allow Mubarak, who is seventy-seven years old and has held the office of president since the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981, to govern for another six years—assuming his health holds up. The important point, however, is not the result itself, but the mere fact that for the first time an Egyptian president has been chosen in a contest involving more than one candidate, rather than by referendum. This remains true even though the conditions were so arranged that Mubarak's rivals stood no chance of winning. The election brings about gradual change in the political system by introducing the principle of democratic competition for the office of the supreme decisionmaker for the first time, but the real political effect of this development will not be felt until the Hosni Mubarak era is over.

Just a year ago the idea of permitting even a modest degree of competition in the presidential elections scheduled for 2005 was not even under discussion in Egypt. Instead there was speculation within the governing elite and in the wider political arena about whether Hosni Mubarak would serve yet another term after twenty-four years in office, or whether—notwithstanding repeated assertions that the Egyptian presidency is not hereditary—he might find a way to ensure that his son could succeed him. Gamal Mubarak, aged 42 and a trained banker, has steadily

gained in influence as the most important adviser to his father, who in 2000 appointed him to the leadership of the governing party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), where he today heads the policy secretariat. His influence was felt above all in the composition of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif's reshuffled cabinet of July 2004, whose members responsible for economic, financial, and social affairs all come from political circles close to the president's son.

Internal and External Pressure

In mid-2004 a small organization was set up in Cairo under the name of “Kifaya!” (Enough!), with the purpose of starting a campaign under this simple slogan against Mubarak’s reelection or the “inheritance” of the presidency. The loose alliance of various opposition groups drew encouragement—even if it did not admit it directly—from the growing demands for democracy and reform directed at the Arab states by the United States and the European Union.

The regime responded to Kifaya’s activities—wide-ranging but generally involving only a few hundred individuals—with nervousness and repression, and demonstrated a similar overreaction in its treatment of Ayman Nour, independent parliamentary deputy and leader of the newly-legalized Al Ghad (Tomorrow) Party. Nour, a 41-year-old businessman with a populist liberal agenda, had also begun attacking the president and his long hold on power. He was arrested in January 2005 on trumped-up charges. If the government had intended to neutralize him it could not have made a bigger mistake. Nour’s arrest made him widely known for the first time—outside Cairo (where his constituency is) and outside Egypt. Suddenly even CNN and American diplomats were mentioning his name.

At the same time the American government began to address the domestic situation in Egypt. In his State of the Union speech of February 2005 President George W. Bush referred to Egypt directly: “The great and proud nation of Egypt, which showed the way toward peace in the Middle East,” he said, “can now show the way toward democracy in the Middle East.” Egypt, as the United States’ most important Arab ally, was not accustomed to hearing that kind of criticism.

Mubarak demonstrated his sense for political danger and reacted with a move that took the wind out of the sails of all his rivals. Just three weeks after Bush’s speech he announced that he would amend the

Egyptian constitution to allow several candidates to compete for the presidency. However, the conditions created by the constitutional amendment in May were anything but fair, to the extent that Egyptian commentators joked that the most important prerequisite for being accepted as a candidate in the presidential elections was to have many years of experience as head of state. Although recognized parties can put up candidates under certain circumstances, independent candidates have to supply the supporting signatures of at least 250 deputies, and at least 65 of these must be members of the lower chamber of parliament, where the president’s National Democratic Party currently holds 405 of 454 seats. This meant that the strongest opposition force, the Muslim Brotherhood (which has not been legalized as a party or any other type of organization, but whose activities are tolerated to a certain degree), was unable to put up a candidate. The smaller legal parties are marginalized and stand no chance against the NDP machine, the successor to the erstwhile monolithic party of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Even if the NDP is today officially one party among many, it remains *de facto* the party of state and government. Above all, it spans a huge web of patronage that extends across all the regions and into every village.

Pluralist Authoritarianism

Egypt’s political system can be described as pluralist authoritarianism. It allows the educated classes a comfortable degree of personal freedom, and open criticism of the president is even permitted in the opposition newspapers, although their circulation is not exactly broad. A range of ideological currents—from Nasserite and Islamist-influenced to left socialist—can be found in the spectrum of legal parties. The civil courts have generally maintained their independence from the government (which is why trials of oppositionists are often heard by military tribunals). At the same

time, however, institutional mechanisms—and if necessary the state's tools of coercion too—are applied to ensure that the system of power itself and the political majorities remain unchanged. The president, as the supreme decisionmaker, is also the chairman of the governing party; loyalty to the president and his party is the most important criterion for access to positions and economic resources. Many Egyptians speak with a mixture of criticism and approval of a Pharaonic system. Egyptian tradition, they say, has always featured a centralist system with a sacrosanct ruler who embodies the country's unity, protects it externally and—especially in view of new terrorist threats—internally, and at the same time guarantees the political stability that is so important in a largely agrarian economy.

With the Mubarak system Egypt has indeed developed a relatively durable trade-off between dictatorship and democracy, involving elements that other Arab regimes use selectively. For that reason even gradual changes in Egypt are always also of wider regional significance.

Modernizing within the System

Despite its dominant position, the NDP was made to feel the effects of widespread dissatisfaction over corruption and mismanagement at the last parliamentary elections in 2000. It lost more than half its seats, mostly to candidates who themselves belonged to the party but had not been selected as candidates and had therefore run as independents. The party was only able to retain its overwhelming majority in parliament because more than two hundred of these “independents” joined the NDP parliamentary group after the elections—not least in order to enjoy patronage themselves and gain benefits for their own constituencies.

Nonetheless, the election result was a warning sign. Mubarak responded by giving his son Gamal responsibility for modernizing the structures of party and regime.

Gamal specifically recruited reformers and representatives of the middle generations to his policy secretariat and as of 2004 also into the cabinet, which pursued a course of reform, for example in education and law, and economic liberalization. There is, however, absolutely no guarantee of success for the experiment of turning the old mass regime party of functionaries, civil servants, peasants, and village elders into a modern reform-minded party.

Opposition Weakness

Egyptian politicians insist that steps toward political reform can only come from within, and cannot be initiated through external pressure. This position is hardly credible even at home, given the very short interval between Bush's speech and Mubarak's announcement that opposition candidates would be allowed to take part in the presidential election. However, stressing sovereignty over and above the reform process also serves to present the regime as the guarantor of national rights and to divide the opposition. Parts of the Kifaya movement share this nationalist slant, protesting loudly against any outside interference and themselves participating in the defamation of those opposition figures who openly attempt to harness Western calls for democracy to their own agendas or suddenly find themselves on the itineraries of American visitors. This applies to Ayman Nour, for example, who quickly declared his intention to stand for the presidency. It is no wonder that the already weak secular opposition groups were unable to agree on a shared line or a joint candidate.

The one and only opposition force that would be in a position to offer a real challenge to the NDP's machinery of patronage is currently the Muslim Brotherhood, which as both a social and a political movement can draw on its deep roots in the middle classes and its network of countless mosques. The Brotherhood is itself undergoing a protracted process of clarifying its

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identity—social movement for Muslim improvement, force for political reform, or fundamental opposition to the system—and its positions. Although it now relatively clearly accepts the principles of democracy, it is still very vague on questions such as the equality of Muslims and non-Muslims before the law. Nonetheless, the Brotherhood's socially conservative ideology is popular and it enjoys a reputation of being effective and uncorrupted. That has brought it regular successes in elections to parliament (where it has seventeen deputies who officially had to stand as "independents") and in the main professional organizations. It also played a role in the presidential contest, even though it was prevented from putting up a candidate of its own. Mubarak's NDP, Ayman Nour, and other candidates all courted the endorsement of the officially banned Muslim Brotherhood. There may not be any truth in rumors that the NDP had offered to release a number of its imprisoned leaders if it called for Mubarak's reelection, but the Brotherhood certainly found a middle way that satisfied its own institutional interests, calling on its supporters to participate in the election without saying who they should vote for. Although neutral, this stance legitimized the process itself and was rewarded with the release of some of the prisoners.

Promoting Institutional Change

Although the result was predictable, the first multicandidate presidential election is significant for Egypt—above all for its political culture and future. Introducing political competition for even the highest office of state removes a central pillar of the Nasserite state model. The effect will be delayed, however, given that elections with genuinely open outcomes are unlikely to be held as long as Hosni Mubarak is still alive. In fact, the constitutional amendment increases Gamal Mubarak's chances of succeeding his father in six years time without the stigma of having inherited the

position. He could then be elected "properly," still as the candidate of the most powerful party but against one or more serious opponents. That would be important both for his domestic legitimacy and for close relations with the United States, whose favor the Egyptian leadership certainly wishes to avoid losing.

German and European policy should focus on medium-term transformation in Egypt's political and institutional framework—rather than on questions of personnel. At the forefront should be efforts to strengthen the rule of law and potentially democratic institutions such as the parliament, which is also due for reelection in November 2005. In the absence of large-scale manipulation these elections will permit more real competition than the presidential election.

Here, for once, we can follow the American Secretary of State. In a public speech at the American University in Cairo, Condoleezza Rice called surprisingly clearly for promises of electoral freedoms to be fulfilled, for opposition groups to be allowed to meet freely, and for voting to be conducted without intimidation. Similarly refreshing, undiplomatic remarks by European visitors would do nothing but enhance the standing of European foreign policy.