

The Road to Democracy in Arab World Goes Through Cairo

By Amandeep Sandhu

For a leader whose best day at work is when nothing new happens and who assiduously avoids media, of late the 76-years old Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak, is frequently making news for his ill health. Since his nationally televised near collapse last November during a speech opening parliamentary session, the discussion on Mubarak's successor has raised the anxiety level among Egyptians.

Mubarak's announcement this past month to temporarily transfer power to Prime Minister Atef Obeid while he undergoes a disc replacement operation in Munich has raised speculation whether Mubarak will pass the political baton to his banker-turned-politician son Gamal, thus keeping alive the Middle Eastern tradition of dynastic succession. But the growing level of disquiet in Egypt makes Gamal a hard sell to the populace—and the interest of Egyptian Army in the transition makes it less likely that Egypt will follow the dynastic pattern of wider Middle East.

At 40 Gamal, who spent six years in London working for Bank of America after graduating from American University in Cairo (AUC), is said to represent the new generation of Egyptians—with two third of population under 35—who feel disaffected from old guard politics. The economic reforms introduced at the beginning of 1990s have spawned a young generation at home in a world of cell phones and reality television beamed from pan-Arabic satellite stations in Lebanon and the Gulf.

In contrast to the father-figure political administrative style of his father, Gamal understands the need for a more inclusive and open governance. The recent images broadcast on the national channel of a ruling National Democratic Party meeting with an exasperated looking Gamal toying with his pencil among the old guard septuagenarians, give experts reason to believe that he is impatient with old form of politics.

The growing public debate in Egypt following Hosni Mubarak's first health scare, however, has lessened the chance of a dynastic succession. Since Hosni Mubarak had taken charge of Egypt, the golden rule in Egyptian journalism has been that you cannot criticize the president or his immediate family, but everyone else is a fair game. Prime Minister Atef Obeid takes up the flack for the failures of government, and although Hosni Mubarak has made him the interim leader, he remains hugely unpopular.

In light of economic problems stemming from the war in Iraq and instability in the wider Middle East—an almost 50 per cent devaluation of the Egyptian pound and a ballooning deficit—Mubarak’s standing has taken greater hits. The President and his grooming of Gamal for political succession have come in for particular criticism from the Nasserite Al-Arabi and Al-Shaab newspapers.

Hosni Mubarak has twice publicly denied that Gamal will succeed him. In a 2001 Newsweek interview, he unequivocally stated, “My son is not going to be the next president.” Again, this New Year day in an interview on Egyptian radio, Mubarak said, “the regime in Egypt is republican, and there is no hereditary transfer of power.”

Gamal Mubarak at a lecture last year at AUC denied that he wanted to turn Egypt into a dynastic republic and that “running for president” was on his mind. Despite these denials, Gamal Mubarak could still be in contention for presidency; but it will not be a dynastic succession.

If Mubarak dies suddenly without appointing a successor, the decision to appoint the successor will fall to the old guard of ruling party politicians and army officers. They will select someone with military connections, as has been historically the case in Egypt, and the head of Egyptian intelligence, Omar Suleiman, is a leading possibility.

If Hosni Mubarak makes it to the next elections, however, he might actually have Gamal Mubarak run in an open race with other contenders—where the result might not favor a dynastic succession nonetheless.

As all important political trends in Arab world in the last 50-years—from nationalism to socialism to Islamism—were anchored in Egypt, democratic transition in the region will be no exception. It will have the best chance to flourish if Hosni Mubarak sees Egypt through elections next year.■

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