

“Whoever follows Mubarak will inevitably be weaker and less experienced than the man who has ruled the country for more than a quarter century.”

After Mubarak, Mubarak?

SAMER SHEHATA

In Egypt's more than five thousand years of history, only a few pharaohs and Muhammad Ali, who ruled from 1805 to 1848, have been in power longer than Hosni Mubarak. The 80-year-old President Mubarak, who came to office after the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat in 1981, has now ruled for more than 27 years. In a country with a median age of 25, this means the majority of Egyptians have known only one president. Moreover, Mubarak has never appointed a vice president. Thus it should come as no surprise, even to those who do not follow Middle Eastern politics closely, that Egypt in the not-too-distant future will experience a historic leadership transition.

Speculation about such a succession has been nearly constant since a failed 1995 assassination attempt against Mubarak in Addis Ababa. At certain times—when Mubarak has a birthday or a health crisis, or when elections are held—the speculation intensifies. Interest in the succession question is particularly acute because Egypt is the Arab world's most populous country, strategically located and with considerable regional influence. What happens in Cairo will have repercussions far beyond Egypt's borders—including in Washington.

Egypt is a vital US ally. American warships frequently pass through the Suez Canal and US military aircraft are routinely granted permission to fly over Egyptian territory. The Egyptian government maintains the terms of the Camp David peace treaty with Israel and as a consequence receives billions of dollars annually in US economic and military assistance. Cairo plays a mediating role in the Palestinian-Israeli “peace process.” And Egypt's security and intelligence

agencies have cooperated in the Bush administration's war on terror. The Egyptian succession could have profound consequences for US policy in the Middle East.

Deteriorating economic conditions for the majority of Egyptians could complicate the succession process. Prices are high and people are angry. Record levels of inflation coupled with the government's economic liberalization policies have resulted in unprecedented waves of economic and labor protests over the past two years. Bread shortages earlier in 2008 led to violence among people waiting in long lines for the cheap government-subsidized bread that makes life possible for the 40 percent of Egyptians who live below or close to poverty.

And making the succession more dramatic still is that Mubarak's son Gamal is apparently being groomed for the presidency. Rumors to this effect have long circulated and have made the transition even more controversial. Indeed, Egyptians have openly discussed the possibility of a father-to-son succession since Bashar al-Assad was installed as Syria's president following his father's death in 2000.

But how exactly will the succession take place? How will the transition affect the country's stability? Will the elder Mubarak's passing increase prospects for political reform? And what challenges is Egypt's next ruler likely to face?

HURRY, YOUNG MAN

Gamal Mubarak, the younger of the president's two sons, turns 45 in December 2008. After completing a BA and an MBA at the elite American University in Cairo, Gamal worked as an investment banker for Bank of America in Cairo and then in London. When he returned to Egypt in the mid-1990s he became increasingly prominent in public life, establishing a financial advisory firm and founding a nongovernmental organization fo-

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cused on training Egyptian youth to compete in the global economy.

Gamal Mubarak's involvement in politics, though informal, steadily increased as well. He was appointed to the prestigious US-Egypt President's Council, part of an initiative established by Hosni Mubarak and former US Vice President Al Gore to promote trade and strengthen relations between the two countries. Gamal began accompanying his father on trips to the United States, to European capitals, and to the meetings of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

In the late 1990s, Egyptian news reports indicated that Gamal was planning, along with a few prominent individuals from the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), to establish a new political party. The new party, it was said, would be "liberal" and pro-business. Although the initiative never materialized, this was Gamal's initial attempt to enter formal politics and it foreshadowed his future ambitions.

His official political debut came in 2000 when he was appointed to the NDP's General Secretariat and became head of its Youth and Development Committee. In that capacity, he traveled the country giving speeches to college students and other young people about economic issues and domestic policies. Gamal swiftly rose within the NDP and in 2002 was elected chairman of the party's newly formed Policies Secretariat. At the time, the NDP's secretary general described the new body as the party's "beating heart and mind." The Policies Secretariat quickly became the NDP's center for policy directives and today remains the most significant political body in the country.

As Gamal gained prominence in the party, he and a group of like-minded colleagues attempted to change the NDP's image from that of an old-fashioned and corrupt government party into one of a modern political organization. The slogan at the party's 2002 general convention was "New Thinking," and increasing numbers of smartly dressed, well educated, younger professionals from Cairo University's prestigious Faculty of Economics and Political Science could be seen moving up in the organization. As Gamal used the party as a vehicle for his own political ascension, the sections of the party connected to him also became more powerful.

President Mubarak traveled to Germany to undergo back surgery in the summer of 2004, and when he returned a new cabinet was appointed. The cabinet was distinctive because it included a number of younger faces, several of them Gamal's associates. This was especially apparent in the cabinet's economic, finance, and investment portfolios. The independent press quickly labeled the new ministers "Gamal's cabinet." Since then, a number of others associated with the president's son have also been appointed to ministerial positions.

Gamal in fact is not popular among Egyptians, and his popularity has declined since he came on the political scene. He is associated with disliked economic reforms and with rich, fat-cat business types who thrive in the ruling party. Yet Gamal's rise within the NDP has continued unabated. He was made one of the party's three assistant secretary generals in early 2006, while remaining as head of the influential Policies Secretariat. At

the 2007 NDP conference, a Higher Committee was established—according to a 2005 constitutional amendment, this committee will nominate the party's candidates in future presidential elections—and, not surpris-

ingly, Gamal was appointed to the committee. Meanwhile, as Gamal and his associates have gained leadership positions within the NDP, old-time party stalwarts have lost ground.

MIND THE AMENDMENTS

In 2005 and 2007, the Egyptian parliament passed much-heralded constitutional amendments that have altered the rules of the game in favor of Gamal's potential succession. The 2005 amendment created a constitutional mechanism that may enable Gamal's succession through the ruling party. The 2007 amendments, among other things, expanded the government's powers of surveillance, eliminated the independent judicial supervision of elections, and placed further restrictions on the legal political participation of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's most powerful opposition group.

Hosni Mubarak initiated the 2005 constitutional change when he unexpectedly asked the parliament to amend Article 76 of the constitution to allow for multicandidate presidential elections for the first time in the country's history. (Previously,

Senior officers could collectively reject the notion of Gamal Mubarak as president.

citizens had merely participated in presidential referendums in which they could cast “yes” or “no” votes on a candidate nominated by the NDP-controlled parliament.)

The 2005 amendment carried significant consequences for Egyptian politics, but it was not the radical, democratically transformative measure that its proponents claimed. Indeed, the amendment placed significant new restrictions on who could run for president. It required candidates to be high-ranking members of political parties that had existed for at least five years. It further mandated that parties had to hold at least 5 percent of seats in the parliament in order to nominate candidates. And it required nominees to have held leadership positions in their parties for at least one year before they could become eligible to run for office.

Restrictions placed on independent candidates were even more severe. According to the amendment, independents need the endorsement of 250 elected officials—including 65 members of the parliament’s lower house, 25 members of the upper house, and 10 members of municipal councils in 14 different governorates (totaling 140 municipal councilmen)—in order to stand in elections. All these bodies are dominated by the NDP. The requirements are so restrictive that they essentially eliminate the possibility of independent presidential candidates. The measure was widely interpreted as an effort to prevent a Muslim Brotherhood candidate from competing in presidential elections as an independent.

The amendment allowed an exception to the rules for the 2005 election—all registered parties were able to nominate candidates in the first presidential election. Without the exception, not a single political party—except the NDP—would have met the requirements needed to nominate candidates for president. The amendment, along with the exception, allowed Mubarak to “run” against nine other candidates in the 2005 election and to “win” a fifth six-year term, which is set to expire in 2011.

In 2007, as 34 far-ranging constitutional amendments were enacted—including more restrictions on the Muslim Brotherhood—Article 76 was further modified to allow parties with as few as 3 percent of the seats in the parliament to nominate candidates for presidential elections, compared to the previous 5 percent. And in elections held before May 1, 2017, political parties with just one seat in parliament will be eligible

to nominate candidates from their higher boards. These exceptions potentially set up another farcical presidential election in 2011, in which weak and inconsequential parties would run candidates against the NDP.

The Mubarak regime has portrayed the changes to Article 76 as democratic reforms of historical significance. They are hardly that. The amendments were a shrewd response to domestic and especially international pressure. This response allowed President Mubarak to give the appearance of undertaking reform while in fact gaining a fifth six-year term in office through putatively democratic elections, rather than an anachronistic presidential referendum. At the same time, the constitutional amendments removed the military from the succession process and laid the groundwork for a father-to-son succession—a classic case of pseudo-reform.

HOW TO SUCCEED

No one knows how or when a succession will take place. At the age of 80, Mubarak could survive until the next presidential election—or he could die tomorrow. No matter the timing, the succession seems likely to play out in one of four ways. In two of the scenarios, Gamal Mubarak becomes president. In the other two, a high-ranking military officer ends up in command. No other outcomes seem likely.

In the first and most likely scenario, Hosni Mubarak announces—either well before the next scheduled presidential election or immediately preceding it—that he will step down. Mubarak declares that the time is right because he has served the country for many years and Egypt is now ready for a step forward on the path to democracy. The announcement is heralded as momentous by the government press, state intellectuals, and the regime-dependent business class. Some unease exists among the general public, and opposition figures criticize the maneuver as a ruse to install Gamal Mubarak as president, so “spontaneous” demonstrations in support of Gamal break out in Cairo. Rank-and-file NDP members urge him to run for president.

Gamal initially refuses the call, but he is ultimately forced to accede to appeals by the public and his party that he serve the country. Of course he meets the eligibility requirements laid out in the twice-amended Article 76, and he soon becomes the NDP’s nominee for president. Business leaders endorse him, saying a Gamal Mubarak

presidency will be beneficial for Egypt's economic growth. State intellectuals busily argue that Gamal possesses the requisite experience and skills needed for the job and should not, simply because his father is president, be denied the right to compete for elected office. Several opposition parties, including some that are completely unknown, nominate candidates to play supporting roles in this amateurish theatrical production. After a short campaign, Gamal "wins" a controlled election that has the trappings of legality but is completely devoid of legitimacy.

Independent intellectuals, opposition parties, and the Muslim Brotherhood condemn the sham election. The Brotherhood refrains from taking to the streets, however, correctly calculating that the cost of direct confrontation is too high when measured against the low likelihood of successfully preventing Gamal from becoming president.

Limited protests take place in Cairo and other cities, including demonstrations by university students and by *Kifaya* (Enough), the protest movement founded in 2004 to oppose both President Mubarak and Gamal's "inheritance" of power. But none of the protests comes close to seriously destabilizing the regime or threatening national order. And with Hosni Mubarak alive in this scenario, the president's hands remain on the levers of power during the hand-off. The father's standing with the military and the security agencies remains intact, and deals negotiated ahead of time can be enforced. Loyalties paid for in advance can be maintained. The costs of defection are extremely high.

The second scenario also leads to Gamal's becoming president. The major difference is that in this scenario Hosni Mubarak dies *before* the next presidential election, without having appointed a vice president, and the prime minister (as the

constitution stipulates) assumes limited powers until elections can be held. Still, as in the first scenario, "spontaneous" demonstrations in Cairo and other cities encourage Gamal to run for president. Also as in the first case, inconsequential opposition parties field "competing" candidates in sham elections, and again Gamal emerges victorious. We can call this the "Syrian model," along the lines of Bashar al-Assad's inheritance of Syria's presidency in 2000.

Because the older Mubarak is not alive to ensure a smooth transition, the second scenario is accompanied by greater uncertainty and potentially

by increased turbulence. More actors are possibly willing to challenge Gamal's inheritance of power; some may feel emboldened to try to derail the plan. In this respect, paradoxically, Hosni Mubarak's personality poses perhaps the biggest threat to Gamal's becoming president. The octogenarian Mubarak, extremely risk-averse, has hinted that he will never step down from office. Mubarak said twice in a 2006 speech before the parliament that he would stay in power "as long as there is in my chest a heart that beats and I draw breath." Yet if Mubarak does not attempt a transition before he dies, the probability that his son can be installed as president

decreases significantly. Even the best-laid plans could go awry once the elder Mubarak is dead.

IF THE MILITARY WEIGHS IN

The third scenario, like the second, begins with Mubarak's death and no vice president in place. But before the sequence of events described in the second scenario can fully unfold, a senior military officer seizes control. This could happen in one of two circumstances.

First, senior officers could collectively reject the notion of Gamal Mubarak as president. The



Gamal Mubarak
The prince-in-waiting?

military is the most powerful and coherent institution in Egyptian society and, unlike any of the political parties, it enjoys a significant amount of legitimacy. But Gamal does not have a military background, as all previous Egyptian presidents have had. Recent reports suggest that Gamal has strengthened his ties to the military, but the highest echelons of the officer corps might still deem unacceptable the idea that a 45-year-old without military credentials, whose major qualification is that he is the president's son, could become president and command the armed forces.

Similarly, if Gamal Mubarak's candidacy were considered threatening to the military's or senior officer corps' material interests, this could prompt action to prevent Gamal or another civilian from becoming president. The Egyptian military is deeply involved in a wide range of economic activities, from heavy manufacturing and light industry to agriculture and food production. Extensive government programs also afford the officer corps a comfortable standard of living. If a non-military succession threatened these arrangements, some in the armed forces could attempt to block a civilian from the presidency.

A second circumstance in which a military officer could seize control relates to domestic stability. After Mubarak's death, securing Cairo and other cities would be an immediate priority of the security forces. In the unlikely event that major disturbances occurred during the transition—sustained protests, social unrest, riots, or the destruction of property—a military officer might assume control on national security grounds. With tanks on the streets, a military commander could plausibly justify suspending the constitution in order to ensure domestic stability.

When observers discuss the possibility of a military officer's succeeding Mubarak, the name most often mentioned is that of Omar Suleiman, the director of intelligence. Suleiman—a former general, a veteran of both the 1967 and 1973 wars, and one of Mubarak's closest confidantes—is deeply connected to both the military and the security services. He is also responsible for managing sensitive security aspects of Egypt's involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a responsibility that has entailed participation in negotiations both between Palestinian factions and between Palestinians and Israelis. This assignment has earned him the trust of Washington and Tel Aviv. And unlike longstanding Defense Minister Mohammad Tawfiq, who is generally dismissed as a possible suc-

cessor because he lacks charisma and enjoys little regard within the army, Suleiman is considered smart, responsible, and serious.

The fourth succession scenario—and the least likely—also ends with a military officer as president. In this instance, the president dies in office. But unlike the scenarios described above, Gamal Mubarak in this case is pushed aside and a high-ranking officer, most likely Suleiman, is nominated as an independent candidate in presidential elections following Hosni Mubarak's death. Although truly independent candidates face seemingly insurmountable restrictions against running for president, it is not so difficult to imagine such a candidate succeeding as long as he enjoys the full backing of the military and the ruling party.

The benefits of this scenario for the regime and the military are obvious: The messy illegality of an unconstitutional seizure of power, as described in scenario three, would be avoided. The same farcical elections among competing candidates could occur, but with victory guaranteed to the officer-candidate.

THIS IS DEMOCRACY PROMOTION?

Washington would be comfortable with either Gamal Mubarak or Suleiman. Both men are familiar to US officials and both are committed to maintaining the current US-Egyptian relationship. Many in Egypt, however, believe that Gamal has already gained the backing of the United States. And they have good reason to think so. His economic views are in line with Washington's, the World Bank's, and the International Monetary Fund's. More importantly, he has made frequent trips to the United States for high-level discussions with American officials.

Gamal visited Washington twice in 2003, meeting with then-National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Pentagon officials. He also accompanied his father to President George W. Bush's Crawford ranch in 2004 and paid a "secret visit" to the White House in May 2006. During the 2006 trip he met with, all in the course of a single visit, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, Secretary of State Rice, Vice President Cheney, and President Bush. The visit would not have been reported publicly if not for a sharp Al Jazeera journalist who happened to spot Gamal, along with the Egyptian ambassador, entering the White House. The Egyptians later stated that Gamal was in the

United States on personal business (renewing his pilot's license) and simply decided to drop by 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. This account is implausible; even heads of state rarely receive such a reception at the White House.

When the succession plays out, it will be difficult for the United States to credibly claim neutrality in the process. If Gamal is "elected" president, a State Department spokesperson will likely be asked about the administration's position during a daily press briefing. The spokesperson will likely declare—to an incredulous press corps—that the United States does not intervene in the domestic politics of other nations, that it maintains strong relations with Egypt, and that it encourages Egypt's leaders to continue down the path of reform. So much for democracy promotion.

APRÈS MOI, LITTLE CHANGE

In the end, however, the difficulties facing Egypt's next president will arise not primarily during the succession period, but rather during the weeks and months that follow. Whoever follows Mubarak will inevitably be weaker and less experienced than the man who has ruled the country for more than a quarter century. The new president, after he has secured power, will almost certainly attempt to enhance his standing and redress the legitimacy deficit that will be inherent in a nondemocratic transition. Egypt's next ruler, like newly established leaders elsewhere, will promise reform, commit to democratization, and make assurances about development. He will vow to reduce corruption and pledge to increase the government's responsiveness to ordinary citizens.

Fears of instability during the transition are probably unfounded. Sustained nationwide protests are unlikely. Sporadic demonstrations on university campuses and smaller protests by *Kifaya* supporters will almost certainly occur, but will not threaten the regime's stability. The legal opposition parties are weak, internally divided, and dysfunctional. As opposition parties established within a semi-authoritarian system, they have never aspired to power and are incapable of seriously challenging the regime.

Speculation about a Muslim Brotherhood takeover is also misguided. Whether one thinks of the Brotherhood as a progressive Islamist organiza-

tion or as an antidemocratic force, there can be little argument about the group's recent history: The Brotherhood has consistently demonstrated a commitment to nonviolent political participation in the face of overwhelming regime repression. Moreover, the group has neither the organizational capacity nor the hardware needed to overthrow the regime. Any attempt at mass mobilization during the succession period—even nonviolent protest—would be met with overwhelming regime force, and the Brotherhood knows this.

Conflict and tension are more likely to erupt between forces within the regime than between the regime and the opposition. Noticeable movement within the elite may occur, and one may expect a reshuffling of positions. Some regime insiders may remain while many old-timers are removed. (Likely candidates for removal include NDP chief Safwat al-Sherif and old-time party boss Kamal al-Shazli.)

The new ruler will be pressed on a wide range of issues by political parties, opposition groups, intellectuals, nongovernmental organizations, journalists, and reform-minded judges. These

groups and individuals will call for reducing the power of the executive branch, imposing presidential term limits, amending antiterrorist legislation, enhancing judicial independence, reforming the law governing NGOs, and

eliminating prison sentences for journalists convicted of press offenses. They also will demand a lifting of the Emergency Law. (In effect since 1981, it grants tremendous powers to the executive and security forces to detain citizens without trial for extended periods, to censor and shut down newspapers, and to prohibit strikes, demonstrations, and public meetings.)

The new government will promise to carry out some of these measures, possibly including the establishment of presidential term limits. Genuine political reform, however, remains highly unlikely. Egypt's new ruler will not usher in democracy. As the head of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights once told me about the NDP reformers, including Gamal Mubarak, they are willing to reform as long as reform does not mean losing power.

The current US-Egyptian relationship will almost certainly be maintained. The next Egyptian president will look for continued military, economic, and political support from Washington. The Camp David accords with Israel will remain

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intact, and we should expect no major geopolitical realignments out of Cairo.

Meanwhile, the pace of Egypt's economic reform could actually slow. Starting in 2004, the government initiated renewed efforts at economic reform, including subsidy cuts and privatization. These policies have come attached to significant social costs in a nation where the state traditionally has dominated the economy. If, in the immediate post-transition period, continued economic reform is deemed overly destabilizing, a new government could slow or suspend economic reform—as Egyptian governments have done in the past.

Although who will emerge as Egypt's next president remains uncertain, it is unlikely that Hosni

Mubarak will be sorely missed. His accomplishments have been remarkably thin after 27 years in power. While other countries and regions have experienced significant political and economic development during this period, Egypt has largely languished. Democracy is no closer than when Mubarak entered office, Egypt's regional influence has waned, corruption and human rights abuses are still common, and the majority of citizens remain poor and vulnerable. Egyptians are frustrated and yearning for change, yet the government has lost all credibility when it comes to political reform. Sadly, the upcoming political transition is unlikely to produce the type of change that Egyptians desperately desire and deserve. ■