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Arab Reform Bulletin نشرة الإصلاح العربي

Arab Reform Bulletin
June 2006, Volume 4, Issue 5
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Egypt: The Gamal Mubarak Paradox

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Among the ironies of Egypt's stalled process of political reform is that it is inextricably linked to the future of 42-year old presidential scion Gamal Mubarak. The younger Mubarak fashions himself as a Western-oriented reformer and in fact has championed some notable economic and political liberalization measures. At the same time, many Egyptians would consider his eventual succession to the presidency—widely seen in Egypt as a *fait accompli*—antithetical to genuine political reform and competition.

Even before the Kifaya (“Enough”) movement came into existence in late 2004, anti-Mubarak and anti-Gamal slogans were frequently heard at protests. Beginning with the mobilization against the Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank in the spring of 2002 and continuing through the 2003 anti-Iraq war protests, demonstrations that were originally organized around foreign and regional issues often became opportunities to express anti-regime sentiments.

Public criticism of the president, the regime, and Gamal has become more pointed as the number of independent newspapers in Egypt has increased. Few opportunities to criticize the president's son are missed and hardly a day goes by without at least one front-page story about Gamal. Independent newspapers have had a field day, for example, with Gamal's allegedly secret trip to Washington in May. The headline of the leftist *Al Ahali's* newspaper read, “Mubarak gives America a choice: Gamal or the (Muslim) Brotherhood.” Banner headlines in *Al Usbuu* (nominally independent but closely linked to security services) declared “The Secret of Gamal Mubarak's Mysterious Visit,” reflecting popular suspicion about Gamal Mubarak's meetings with President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley. Other widely read independent papers such as *Al Dustour*, *Al Fagr* and *Sawt Al Umma*, in addition to the liberal and more professional dailies *Nahdat Masr* and *Al Masry Al Youm*, also prominently feature Gamal in their coverage.

Opposition to Gamal Mubarak's increasingly prominent role and likely succession has also motivated the creation of protest movements in recent years. The Egyptian Movement for Change, known as Kifaya and its numerous offshoot organizations were founded on the slogan “No to extension [of President Mubarak's rule], no to hereditary succession, yes to freedom.” Even newly-formed issue-oriented reform groups, such as the March 9 Movement for the Independence of Egyptian Universities, are largely composed of individuals publicly opposed to hereditary succession.

The Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's most popular and powerful opposition movement, as well as secular opposition parties, also oppose Gamal's succession. The Brotherhood's Supreme Guide Muhammad Mahdi Akef recently declared that his organization “completely rejects” the possibility of Gamal “inheriting” the presidency. In a May 2006 statement, Akef highlighted Gamal's elitist image, saying that the younger Mubarak “has nothing to do with the people and knows nothing about the people.” Deputy Supreme Guide Muhammad Habib made similar remarks, interpreting a recent government crackdown on protests as “preparing the stage for an idea that is completely rejected by the Egyptian people, which is hereditary succession.”

In the increasingly free-wheeling political debate in Cairo, Gamal Mubarak's future has become daily fare. Public figures as diverse as veteran political commentator Muhammad Hassanayn Haykal, civil society activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim, and popular poet Ahmed Fouad Negm have all made public statements about Gamal's possible succession. At an event at the American University in Cairo on May 21, vice presidents of the Court of Cassation Mahmoud Mekki and Nagi Derballa were asked about a Gamal succession scenario. The judges responded that they had no objection to Gamal being elected president as long as the election was free and fair, but the mere fact that the issue was raised in a forum about judicial freedom reveals how intertwined political reform, Gamal Mubarak, and the nation's future have become.

Despite the ongoing controversy, if Gamal Mubarak were nominated as the ruling party's candidate and stood in controlled presidential elections, he would undoubtedly win. The process would be legal as per the amended Article 76 of the Egyptian constitution. Considering the weakness of the opposition and the Muslim Brotherhood's reluctance to challenge the regime directly, it is unlikely that the inevitable protests would result in anything more than temporary but surmountable turbulence for the regime.

The larger issue is that significant segments of the public would not welcome Gamal's installation and would consider his assumption of the presidency illegitimate. It is difficult to predict the precise problems that might arise from such a legitimacy deficit, for example, whether opponents to Gamal in the military or security services would take advantage of such a situation. The potential for trouble will be increased if Gamal Mubarak becomes president under currently anticipated conditions—with no term limits, no clear plan for political reform, and few economic deliverables for the general population.

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