

Democratic Forces Will Face Tough Times in Egypt's Election

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Although Egypt's heir apparent Gamal Mubarak says next year's election "is going to be free and fair," his father Hosni's regime has tightened the election laws to block other contenders to his presidency, an American magazine says.

Mubarak senior has also used the odious Emergency Law to jail five of the 16 leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in the past year and is imprisoning secular critics as well. People are afraid to speak out, much less run for office. Gamal Eid, executive director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, told Joshua Hammer of The New Yorker magazine that "Hundreds of bloggers are being summoned, kept for days, or weeks, or months, and then released." One blogger, Mosaad Abu Fajr, who ripped the government's human-rights abuses against Bedouins, has been imprisoned since 2007 and Kareem Amer, who mockingly referred to boss Hosni as a deity, is serving a four-year term for his joke.

Enacted in 1981, the Emergency Law "has been used to jail thousands of people without charges," Hammer writes, and bans public gatherings of more than five people without prior official permission. This makes it nearly impossible for opponents of the dictatorship to fill the streets with protesters in a show of support. And just so his political opponents get the message, Mubarak's regime jailed Ayman Nour, a lawyer who finished second in the farcical 2005 presidential election. Nour, whose "fraud" conviction bars him from running again, was freed last year ahead of schedule perhaps because of U.S. pressure (Washington gives the Egyptian dictatorship \$2 billion a year).

Even as the U.S. says makes a show of calling for fair elections in Egypt, its CIA has rendered suspects there without due process of law for interrogation and likely torture by electro-shock. Egypt is one of 28 countries that detain U.S. suspects from its bogus "War on Terror."

In an article called "The Contenders" in the April 5 issue, Nour tells Hammer Gamal's succession would be a "catastrophe." "It will kill democracy. It will encourage the militant groups to become even more militant, because the regime is illegitimate," Nour says.

One formidable threat to a Mubarak dynasty is Mohamed ElBaradei, the former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. "His international stature and his reputation for integrity have made him an appealing symbol in a country where forty per cent of the population lives on less than two dollars a day, and where anger with Mubarak's regime is growing," The New Yorker's Hammer observes. "The gap between rich and poor is widening dramatically," ElBaradei told him.

ElBaradei's reputation was earned in part from standing up to Bush administration lies that Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein was developing nuclear arms. ElBaradei was to later term the U.S. invasion of Iraq "a glaring example of how, in many cases, the use of force exacerbates the problem rather than solving it." ElBaradei also was widely praised for urging Libya to dismantle its nuclear program as part of his campaign against nuclear proliferation. For good measure, his long-standing opposition to Israel's nuclear arsenal might not be lost on Egyptian voters, should he run. "This is not really sustainable that you have Israel sitting with nuclear weapons capability there while everyone else (in the region) is part of the non-proliferation regime," ElBaradei remarked during his tenure at the watchdog agency. Foreshadowing a nuanced diplomatic stance he might take if ever he were to get elected president, ElBaradei said, "I don't think it's a matter of pressure. It's a question of providing Israel with a credible alternative that they are better off without nuclear weapons."

Hala Mustafa, an Egyptian academic, told Hammer that ElBaradei enjoys "wide appeal—he can attract supporters from different backgrounds, and different generations, which gives him more leverage than any other figure. He doesn't look like someone who has been co-opted by the regime." However, Mustafa called El Baradei's ambitions for democratizing Egypt unrealistic against "a real state machine." She said, "Even ElBaradei himself, unless he gathers a huge number of people into the streets, can't succeed."

Asked if he felt ready to serve as Egypt's president, Gamal Mubarak told Hammer, "in the last nine years, my social and political exposure has given me a better understanding of the issues, of the problems that average citizens feel." He added, "The government must show people that we are making a difference in their daily lives. And then we have to organize, mobilizing our activists, and supporters. This is our focus. Any talk beyond that, about 2011, is simply premature."

The world's focus, however, will be on Egypt to see if the presidential campaign under the Mubarak regime is indeed going to be "free and fair." If it conducts next year's elections the way it ignores the rule of law and runs its prisons, there's little hope of it."

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