

## The NDP Conference and Egypt's Future

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### Brief Analysis

On October 31, Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) will hold its sixth party conference. Coming a year prior to the November 2010 parliamentary elections, the NDP will use the conference to articulate its platform and campaign agenda. Broadly speaking, much of the party's electoral strategy has already emerged, via Cairo's current policies of coopting and harassing the Islamist and democratic opposition. More than decisionmaking, the conference will serve as an NDP vehicle to attempt to legitimate and further ensconce the party as Egypt's ruling elite for the next generation. In this regard, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's son Gamal, the deputy secretary general of the NDP and heir apparent to the presidency, is sure to feature prominently in the conference proceedings.

### Background

Hosni Mubarak has served as president of Egypt and leader of the NDP since the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981. Since then, and throughout Mubarak's twenty-eight-year tenure as chief executive, the NDP has served as Egypt's ruling party. Although there are twenty-three other political parties in Egypt, the only group with significant popular support is the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Since the MB is technically illegal, however, candidates are not permitted to stand for elections under the MB flag.

In a departure from the longstanding practice of one-candidate presidential referendums, in February 2005, Mubarak bowed to domestic pressure, and the constitution was amended to allow for multi-candidate presidential elections. Subsequently, in the 2005 presidential elections, the regime subjected the only serious opposition contender for office -- Ayman Nour of the secular pro-democracy party al-Ghad -- to severe intimidation, ultimately arresting and convicting him of forging signatures on his candidacy petition. Nevertheless, Nour took 7.3 percent of the votes to Mubarak's 88.6 percent. In the parliamentary elections a few months later, Islamist candidates running for seats as "independents" took 88 of 454 seats, or approximately 20 percent of the body.

### The Conference

The NDP conference, which takes place from October 31 to November 2 under the campaign slogan of "Only for you," will serve two purposes: to disseminate the NDP's platform to the Egyptian public via three days of intense and positive press coverage starting with President Mubarak's televised keynote address on October 31; and, through ongoing internal elections, to consolidate Gamal Mubarak's control over the party.

The platform. According to the NDP website, the meeting will focus on "social justice" themes that resonate widely across Egypt: investment, unemployment, education, and health care. High on the agenda, says NDP secretary-general Safwat al-Sherif, will be "providing services and job opportunities" to Egyptians. Not surprisingly, on political reform -- a theme the NDP has long sought to avoid -- the party will discuss the uncontroversial issues of citizenship, decentralization, and women's empowerment. Senior NDP officials have also made it clear that the campaign would focus on the perennial winning issue of "combating corruption."

Consolidation of Gamal's position. While al-Sherif has stated that no leadership changes are envisioned during the conference (for instance, the elevation of Gamal to secretary general of the party), other important internal developments will take place. The NDP is currently holding internal elections to change local leaders in 300 constituencies throughout Egypt, and it is believed that this balloting will usher in a younger, better educated cadre of "new guard" technocratic supporters of Gamal. This new guard now controls the ten most senior positions within the party's decisionmaking apparatus, and three of these men currently serve as ministers in the Mubarak government. Reportedly gone from this inner circle are several former older stalwarts of Hosni Mubarak, including most prominently Kamal Shazli.

### Targeting the Opposition

In preparation for the 2010 parliamentary elections and the 2011 presidential balloting, the government has taken steps to limit the success of the Islamist and secular opposition. In 2007, constitutional amendments were passed that precluded Islamists from participating as "independents" in elections, and

based on these regulations the government rejected hundreds of Islamist candidates who tried to run for local council elections in 2008. By the end of 2008, nearly a thousand MB members had been arrested, including key political and financial leaders.

In addition to cracking down on and excluding Islamists from participating in 2010, the government is maneuvering to ensure that opposition forces do not coalesce into a bloc contesting NDP hegemony. Several opposition blocs have already been proposed, including one by Ayman Nour called Dhud al-Tawarith (Against Inheritance).

To head off this development, Egyptian press reports suggest that the government has offered to give the MB's parliamentary seats to two opposition parties (al-Wafd and al-Taguma), provided they do not boycott elections, request international election monitors, or join a coalition against the NDP. Meanwhile, in October, Nour filed claims in court asserting government collusion in the sacking of his Nour Culture Center -- just prior to a conference titled "Poets against [hereditary] Succession" -- and alleging official involvement in a 2005 assassination attempt against the then presidential candidate.

#### Gamal on the Campaign Trail

As Egypt's incumbent party and with no history of peaceful transition of power, the NDP would seem to be in a comfortable position as elections approach. Nevertheless, with 20 percent of Egyptians below the poverty line, over 10 percent unemployment, and with an unprecedented 800 worker strikes last year, the NDP is not taking its reelection for granted. Indeed, in recent weeks, Gamal Mubarak has been hitting the campaign trail and stumping for his party, shaking hands, kissing babies, and making promises. Mubarak's reform government, moreover, has moved to a preelection policy of accommodating strikers, acceding to almost every demand.

Of late, Gamal has made several high-profile visits to different governates to establish his populist credentials. In September, he traveled to Aswan and Nasr Nubia, accompanied by a delegation of government heavy-hitters, including six cabinet ministers and the governor of Aswan. While in upper Egypt, Gamal's stump speech reportedly focused on water and housing. And just last week, in the Qana and Luxor governorates, Gamal spoke of NDP policies in support of farmers, and efforts to bring additional investment and create more jobs, including a pledge that his party would "solve the problems of the falaheen (peasant farmers)" in Egypt. While in Luxor, Gamal was accompanied, among others, by the minister of housing, who discussed the "thousand villages" program, a government development assistance project. In addition to large public appearance in Qana, Luxor, and Aswan, Gamal held open town hall meetings where he fielded questions from the audience.

#### One Year On

Despite the guaranteed massive media coverage, the NDP conference is unlikely to generate any significant news. Perhaps the most important takeaway from the meeting will be the public reaction to the proceedings; the conference and its aftermath will provide an indication as to whether the party's efforts to shift the focus away from political reform to social issues are broadly viewed as credible by the Egyptian street.

For Washington, the conference represents the beginning of a sensitive two-year period of elections and potential political transition in a key Arab ally. The Obama administration has made it clear that it is not weighing in on succession and will not press for political reform in Egypt any time soon. As U.S. ambassador to Egypt Margaret Scobey recently said, "This is a 100 percent Egyptian issue and it is entirely left to the Egyptian people to decide." But the absence of U.S. involvement in the coming transition does not obviate U.S. interest in a transparent process. While the administration has largely distanced itself from the democracy promotion agenda in Egypt, Washington has an abiding interest in the popular legitimacy of the Mubarak regime.

In this context, although the elections will be less than democratic, Washington should take steps to ensure the existence of a vibrant liberal opposition. Although the Obama administration has to date largely avoided controversial meetings (for example, with the Dalai Lama), it should consent to a meeting with the non-Islamist Egyptian opposition, some of whom are slated to visit Washington next month.

More importantly, while the administration regrettably will not comment on the lack of political reforms, it should encourage the NDP to follow through on its promised social programs. In the absence of real political reform, the NDP can gain popular support and legitimacy only through the provision of effective services. Although improving local conditions and the standard of living will not necessarily stem the Islamist tide, in the long term, it could help to mitigate the threat of this alarming trend in Egypt. This will likely remain deeply problematic, however, since pursuing real reform and populist politics simultaneously is seldom a recipe for either political or economic success.

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