

Alexandria:

The Twin Faces of Arab Reform

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Mar 19, 2004

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Brief Analysis

A gathering of Arab civil society activists convened by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, Egypt, last weekend provided a revealing glimpse into the two faces of reform in the Middle East today. In an opening address, Egypt's president for the past twenty-three years, Hosni Mubarak, presented the traditional case for stability as the touchstone of any reform, the argument dismissed by President George W. Bush as one of the great failed policies of the last six decades. Offering an alternative model of reform in the name of "democratic transformation" were the Alexandria conferees themselves, who issued a closing "declaration" that deserves careful scrutiny with regard to its articulation of operational objectives for reform -- for Arabs and by Arabs. That details of both models were disseminated in a special newsletter by the Egyptian Embassy in Washington this week suggests, at the very least, that the reform impulse has gained enough strength for the Egyptian government to give the conferees a respectful hearing, even if this vision -- radical in implications, moderate in ambitions -- collides head-on with the case that Egypt's veteran president presented to the delegates.

The Mubarak Model

According to the Egyptian embassy account, Mubarak's speech highlighted five points:

That the Arab world strongly believes in the need to modernize and rectify the political, economic, and social structures of their states and societies.

That Egypt has made a strategic decision to pursue reform through modernizing its education system and adopting free-market and free-trade policies. As for democratic reforms, Mubarak endorsed strengthening political parties, modernizing institutional and legislative structures, upholding human rights and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women.

That Arab countries have already begun implementing reform "bearing in mind the cultural, religious, and demographic specificities of each Arab society and the need to adopt a reform model that would not destabilize their societies, nor allow the forces of radicalization and fanaticism to overtake the reform process."

That an array of mechanisms for "international cooperation in reform" already exists, including the Euro-Med

forum, bilateral partnership agreements with the European Union and Trade and Investment Framework Agreements with the United States, as well as agreements with such countries as China and Japan -- all of which, he noted, include "reciprocal commitments."

That for Arab reform to succeed, "equal attention" must be paid to "reaching a comprehensive settlement to the Middle East crisis."

Mubarak's message was clear: The "strategic decision" on reform would be limited to change in the realms of education, economics, and trade. Existing political structures would be "strengthened" and "modernized" but there would be no strategic overhaul, such as the introduction of real competitive elections, the end to emergency regulations, or the suspension of restrictions on civil-society organizations. No comment at all was made on the question of political succession. To Washington, the not-so-subtle message from Mubarak was that the region already has enough international reform-boosting mechanisms and therefore has no need for a Greater Middle East Initiative, especially since -- unlike those famously reformist agreements with China -- the initiative lacks "reciprocity." In this worldview, the guiding principle is caution, not progress. In perhaps the most progressive admission of his remarks, Mubarak did at least give reform equal billing with the peace process; the usual formulation is that the Palestinian issue deserves pride of place.

The Alexandria Model

For their part, the conferees issued a declaration that built upon the analysis of the Arab Human Development Reports and offered both a set of policy recommendations and a rudimentary implementing mechanism to help bring them about. Key points are as follows:

Political Reform. The conference endorsed separation of legislative and executive powers; the peaceful rotation of power and the regular holding of elections; term limits in office; loosening restraints on media; and permission for all "ideologies and civil political forces" to create political parties. In addition, it called for the abolition of political crimes, emergency laws, and state security courts.

Economic Reform. The conference urged Arab governments to adopt "specific economic and structural reform," reduce bureaucracy, and increase efficiency of government entities working with investors and businesses. It underscored the importance of privatization, the elimination of governmental monopolies, and the need to liberalize inter-Arab trade.

Social Reform. The conference focused on the need for education reform through "creating independent standardization and quality control entities, and supporting scientific research and increasing its budget."

Cultural Reform. The conference took a firm stand against "religious extremism that may still exist in education curricula, mosque sermons, and official and non-official media" and called for a "review of religious discourse to reflect the enlightened and progressive character of our societies, ensuring full intellectual freedoms and stressing the continued opening of the gates of ijtihad (scholarly development of jurisprudence) as a response to stagnation of thought in understanding and interpreting religious texts and edicts."

Two important themes received consistent support throughout the declaration -- promoting full gender equality (in education, employment, political rights, etc.) and opposing all constraints on free speech (whether imposed in "the name of religion, political or cultural tradition, or so called public interest"). Interestingly, the focus on women was the one clear item in which both Mubarak and the conferees overlapped.

To implement these objectives, the conferees not only created an ongoing "Arab reform forum" under the auspices of the Alexandria library but committed themselves to establish "a social observatory" to evaluate ongoing Arab reform efforts in each of the fields detailed above. Perhaps most usefully, the conferees went beyond the regional

level to call on civil-society organizations within each Arab country to convene their own "national conference" on reform. The library offered to serve as host of the first such conference, on reform in Egypt.

The message of this declaration was as direct as Mubarak's. Although some of the suggestions smacked of old-style Arab socialism (e.g., a call for "policies guaranteeing equitable distribution of wealth") and a pan-Arabist emphasis on uniformity (e.g., the standardization of education throughout Arab countries and the absence of reference to the hot-button issue of minority rights), most of what the conferees proposed consisted of mainstream liberal, free-market, pro-democracy ideas. Indeed, these conferees were not wild-eyed radicals, calling for the overthrow of autocratic regimes and their replacement with "popular democracies." Their fairly modest call for a "peaceful rotation of power" -- and neither a demand to replace military rulers with civilian leaders nor a demand for competitive presidential elections to replace Egypt's referendum-style vote -- suggests a realistic understanding of political constraints.

From Alexandria to Washington

The moderate, nonthreatening tone of the Alexandria declaration makes it especially useful for U.S. policymakers grappling with the proposals for the Greater Middle East Initiative, because it legitimizes topics of Arab reform about which -- according to various press reports -- Washington seems increasingly gun-shy. Now that the Alexandria signatories have opened the door by endorsing such traditional liberal-democratic values as the limitation of state power, the defense of personal freedom, and the promotion of equal opportunity for all, it would be odd for the Bush administration to be any less enthusiastic.

Alexandria's two models provide a context for two upcoming events: the Arab League summit in Tunis and the Bush-Mubarak meeting in Crawford, Texas. At the former, Arab heads-of-state are expected to endorse some commitment on reform, not least to head off U.S.-inspired plans. At the latter, Mubarak is sure to press his case for a conservative, stability-focused -- not a progressive, democracy-focused -- concept of reform. Throughout, Washington will be under pressure to shelve its own proposals and instead endorse the local leaders' version of reform as the embodiment of Bush's "forward strategy of freedom" in the Middle East. Thanks to Alexandria's alternative model, Washington now has an authentically Arab leg to stand on should it wish to press the case for revolutionary change through evolutionary means, rather than settling for an agenda of cosmetic change that may kick up some dust, but leave the region's societies largely unchanged.

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