

Gamal Mubarak: Successor Story in Egypt?

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Brief Analysis

British foreign minister Jack Straw met for an hour last week with Gamal Mubarak, the youngest son of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. According to a British official cited in al-Qanat, an Arabic online daily, Straw met Gamal because he "is a very important person who certainly enjoys great influence." The meeting was significant because it took place less than a month after President Mubarak appointed Gamal to a high-level post in the National Democratic Party (NDP), Egypt's governing political institution. Despite repeated, emphatic, and official assertions to the contrary, all indications point to Gamal being groomed to succeed his father.

Background

Hosni Mubarak assumed Egypt's presidency in 1981 and now ranks among the Middle East's most veteran leaders. Egypt's two previous presidents both served until their deaths (Gamal Abdel Nasser by natural causes; Anwar Sadat by assassination), and there is no sign that Mubarak anticipates retiring from public life when his fourth six-year term expires in 2004. Unlike both his predecessors, however, the seventy-four-year-old Mubarak has never designated a vice president.

According to Article 82 of the Egyptian constitution, if the president, "due to any temporary obstacle, is unable to carry out his functions, he shall delegate his powers to a Vice-President." Article 84 states that in the absence of a vice president, "the Speaker of the People's Assembly shall temporarily assume the Presidency."

Constitutional contingency plans notwithstanding, there are practical reasons for anxiety over future leadership in Egypt. Mubarak has been the target of at least two close-call assassination attempts. The first was a June 26, 1995, attack by the radical group al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The second, believed perpetrated by an unaffiliated individual, took place on September 6, 1999, in Port Said, Egypt. These attacks were poignant reminders that Mubarak would not be ra'is forever.

Gamal's Appointments

Although he lacks an appointed successor, Mubarak began to focus attention on his son Gamal in 2000 by appointing him to the general secretariat of the NDP. The president also named his son as head of the party's Youth and Development Committee.

Egypt was soon abuzz with the rumor that Gamal was being groomed to succeed his father. But both Mubaraks

denied any plan to create a family legacy in Egypt's presidential palace. "We are not a monarchy," said Gamal in 2000. The following year, he offered a more nuanced formulation: "Neither the president nor I would agree that I seek, accept or be offered any executive post while my father is the chief executive."

His father also downplayed the notion of his son's succession: "I cannot determine who my successor will be according to my whim. . . . If he does not have the support [of the people] the process begins again. If I say this or that person should be my successor, the people can reject him."

Mubarak's senior foreign policy advisor, Osama el-Baz, insisted in a September 2002 Newsweek interview that "Gamal Mubarak is not running for any official office. He's interested in public issues, like any young man interested in the future of his country, but he's not going to pursue any official position."

Days later, however, before a televised audience and an estimated 6,000 powerful bureaucrats, the NDP named Gamal as secretary-general for policies, the party's third most powerful position. His father even hinted about plans for his son's succession: "Broadening the participation of young people in political life," said the president, "is an essential guarantee of a smooth handover of responsibility from one generation to the next."

Who Is Gamal?

Gamal, thirty-eight years old, is the younger of Mubarak's two sons. A graduate of the American University in Cairo, he served as an executive for Bank of America International in London from 1988 to 1994. Following that, he was executive director of the Egyptian MedInvest Associations Ltd, a financial services company. Recognized as a proponent of economic liberalism, democratization, and bureaucratic reform, Gamal serves as head of the Future Generation Foundation, a protopolitical organization that describes its aims as preparing young Egyptians for the job market and increasing their political awareness. After he formally joined the NDP in January 2000, there was talk that he would vie for parliament in the November 2000 elections. In the end, however, he chose not to run.

The Syrian Model

Will Hosni Mubarak buck the precedent of his two predecessors and arrange for his son's succession? If so, he would take Egypt further away from its role as Arab trendsetter and down the path of leadership-by-inheritance already trod by another Arab republic, Syria.

The Asad family story is now well known: Former Syrian strongman Hafiz al-Asad first groomed one son, Basil, and then turned to another, Bashar, when the former was killed in a 1994 automobile accident. An ophthalmologist by training, Bashar was whisked up the military ladder to prepare for leadership. Hafiz, known to be in poor health, further ensured his son's succession by purging potential challengers and then arranging, shortly before his death, for Syria's parliament to amend its constitution by lowering the legal age for the presidency from forty to thirty-four. After Hafiz's June 10, 2000, death, Bashar won a reported 97.29 percent of the presidential vote and formally succeeded his father.

There is much that President Mubarak could have taken from the Bashar episode. The first lesson is the lack of popular opposition to the principle of arranging for one's son to succeed -- what in the West would be derisively termed nepotism. Although Syria was ridiculed in international and regional media, there were virtually no critical voices inside the country to stand in the way of either the elder Asad's plans or the younger Asad's aspirations. In Egypt, the arrest and jailing of Saad Eddin Ibrahim -- who was among the few Egyptian voices who criticized the possibility that the Mubarak family would follow the Asad model -- has had the effect of further silencing any prospective opposition.

The second lesson Mubarak may have learned is the importance of giving Gamal significant policy responsibility well in advance of succession; hence his NDP appointment. This could preempt the sort of international criticism

Bashar suffered for having little experience in government when he took office.

The third lesson is the necessity of clearing the path for his son. Whereas this required the sacking and public humbling of certain officials in Syria, Mubarak is able to achieve these ends by keeping the vice presidency vacant and making sure no other public figure achieves significant national popularity.

Implications

Since 1952, all Egyptian heads of state, including President Mubarak, have been military men -- Gamal is not. His succession could usher in a new era of civilian, and perhaps liberal, rule.

The likelihood of this, however, is by no means certain. While the NDP is Egypt's most powerful party, it is infused with two decades of old guard corruption and bureaucratic inertia. Even if Gamal's commitment to democratic, liberal reform is real, it will take more than the herculean efforts of one person to remake the NDP into a vibrant force for positive change.

Meanwhile, the senior Mubarak seems to want to avoid too hasty a process of empowering his son, evidenced by the conspicuous absence of Gamal among the list of eight presidential appointees to the NDP's politburo. Nonetheless, Gamal does hold a very powerful post in the NDP, answering only to two close associates of his father, longtime information minister and current NDP secretary-general Safwat al-Sherif and the NDP's number two, Kamal al-Shazly.

If Gamal achieves success in reforming the NDP, this might legitimize his possible appointment as political heir and perhaps show that he has what it takes to lead a country as powerful, proud, and important as Egypt. If he fails to implement reform and falls in with Egypt's old guard, then his rise to the top will only affirm a sad trend of dynastic mediocrity among other Arab states.

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