

Egypt's crawl from autocracy

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Egypt's presidential election campaign is heating up as it approaches its 7 September climax. The result may be a certain "victory" for the incumbent of twenty-four years, Hosni Mubarak, but the very range of candidates on offer is an indication that *something* is happening in the Arab world's most populous and important country.

Ahmed al-Sabahi [1], a 90-year-old Egyptian who heads the *al-Umma* (Nation) party, publicly boasts about the guidance he receives from "his connections with the superior souls in God's universe". He is promising Egyptians that, in return for their votes in Egypt's presidential election, he will reinstall the *tarbouche* (a tall, air-filled, crimson-coloured hat or *fez* that was prohibited by Kemal Atatürk in Turkey in the 1920s) as Egyptian males' official headgear.

Ayman Nour [2], the young leader of the *Ghad* (Tomorrow) party, who was jailed briefly earlier this year despite – or perhaps because of – America's positive vibes towards him, is addressing more pressing issues in his campaign: a comprehensive change in Egypt's political system, including an overhauling of the constitution. His theme is, simply, liberalism.

Also by Tarek Osman in openDemocracy:

"Egypt: who's on top? [2]" (June 2005)

Noaman Gomaa [3], leader of *Wafd*, is continuing his party's more than seventy-five-year tradition of promoting liberal democracy. Yet, with even his name recognition at less than 15% (according to an American University of Cairo survey), progress will be difficult. Dr Gomaa responded to a question about his achievements by emphasising that in the 1950s he left law school to join resistance against British occupation of the Suez Canal. When 60% of Egypt's population are under 30 years old, it is hard to see the relevance.

The two Nasserite runners – proud defenders of the victor of Suez and of Egypt's great secular, socialist figurehead [4] of the era – speak of fighting corruption and promoting political reform. Yet a 2005 presidential campaign based on socialism and Arab political unity, the two pillars of the Nasserite tradition, is neither appealing nor realistic.

The mammoth yet subtle player of Egyptian politics, the Muslim Brotherhood [5], has not fielded any candidate. It remains to be seen who – if any – it will back. The movement's supreme leader, Mohammed Akef [6], replied to an inquiry about the brotherhood's possible support for President Mubarak with a telling statement; he "(urged) Egyptian brothers not to support an oppressor or a dictator" (Khaleej Times, 21 August 2005 [7]).

The litany leaves one serious candidate: Hosni Mubarak [8] himself. The president announced his rosy programme of ambitious deliverables in poverty reduction, political reform, and economic development in the immaculately designed, beautiful surroundings of Cairo's al-Azhar

Park. A survey conducted by one of the leading Arab news stations in its aftermath found many Egyptians – especially the young – asking: why didn't we achieve that in the preceding twenty-four years?

A field of candidates and a foregone result [9]: is this presidential election drama, comedy, or a mix of the two? Is Egypt on the verge of an historic change that would turn the country into a democracy by October 2005? I would argue that this election is serious, that democracy is not on the agenda yet – but that Egypt *is* moving towards a political structure that will be far healthier and more vigorous than the current one; albeit very slowly.

A slow revolution

The dynamics of the presidential election definitely constitute a historic change in Egypt. The election's achievement is to have created at least the semblance of normal political democracy. Several serious contestants represent different (and in some cases, clashing) standpoints about Egypt's political and economic future; they are mobilising time, effort and large sums of money; they are managing to provoke Egyptian citizens into deliberation, criticism and (as always with Egyptians) jokes; they have stirred the steady waters of Egyptian politics; and crucially the process of campaigning itself put the ruling regime's history, track record and views under the microscope.

Such change is historic, for two reasons:

- it is unprecedented in Egyptian history. Apart from the period from 1936 to 1952 when Egypt had a vigorous political scene, the country's political history has always been dominated by a top-down ruling system where benign or malign autocracy was the norm and popular participation the rarity. The current election, with its pulsating campaigning, not only invites ordinary Egyptians to participate [10], but also seeks their approval and consent
- Egyptians, having tasted this power, will not surrender it. This is not wishful thinking. Post-1945 global political history – from Latin America to east-central Europe, southeast Asia to Turkey – shows that most countries do not revert from democracy to autocracy, albeit their pace on the political-development route varies significantly.

Egypt's pace on the same route will undoubtedly be very slow; the establishment of a functioning democracy in Egypt is still years ahead. Two factors guarantee the comparative lethargy.

First, political participation, as the psychologist Abraham Maslow's [11] "humanistic theory" argued, is for the "butter class" (the middle classes – the analogy refers to the butter between two slices of toast). The logic is that rich classes determine or influence politics, rather than participate in it; the poor classes are too preoccupied with their basic needs to care about participation.

But Egypt's middle classes, as Egyptian sociologists have long argued, have been systematically crushed over recent decades. The weakness, even (some would argue) absence, of such groups makes the development of a healthy democracy more remote than it would otherwise be.

Second, religious belief (Islamic or Christian, and for good or ill) is the dominant social power in Egypt; and religion is not the most progressive or democratic of ideologies.

The next wave

The process of change itself may be slow, but Egypt's newly dynamic political scene is opening a window, albeit narrow, enabling the people to glimpse an alternative way of being citizens.

The election is encouraging Egyptians to reflect on their present and future, express their frustration [12] with the status quo, and become involved in a ferment of ideas. The resulting combination is acting as a form of social safety-valve, diverting Egyptian society from what might have been destructive or disruptive forces.

By destructive, I mean a surge in religious fundamentalism and reverence of violence; by disruptive, I mean revolts similar to Lebanon's brief "cedar revolution" or Ukraine's "orange revolution". Egypt's election has instead channelled the "energy" (to borrow the language of new-age healing) towards a peaceful, healthy, if less than fully self-liberating direction.

And the election itself? What will happen in the Arab world's central nation-state, and the birthplace of modern Islamic fundamentalism?

President Mubarak will win on 7 September, albeit with a narrow majority; and his son Gamal [13] – the "parallel president", as a widely circulated Arab newspaper has described him – will continue with the slow-paced yet ambitious reforms he instigated after the July 2004 cabinet under Ahmed Nazif [14] was installed.

Meanwhile, Ayman Nour, the Wafd [15] party, the Nasserites and the cabals of opposition journalists and syndicates will continue to criticise the regime and expose its flaws; the United States (busy with Iraq, Iran and Palestine) will continue its mild pressure on Egypt to open up; and the more liberal minds around Gamal Mubarak will attempt to influence the decision-making process and push Egypt in a progressive direction.

The moment of reckoning, however, will come only when the divine powers intervene and Egypt's pharaonic post becomes vacant. Then, Egypt will become even more interesting; at that point, the slow process toward Egyptian democracy will really begin.

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