

Egypt: Stable, but for How Long?

The regime of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak seems to have escaped from the challenges of the 1990s with a steadier political configuration. Mubarak appears poised to rule for at least another decade; even if he were to leave office during that time, political succession would almost certainly be smooth and orderly and would preserve the status quo. The trade-off for stability, however, has been that the regime now relies on a narrower base of support than was the case just ten years ago. For the first time since the 1952 revolution, the Egyptian government has abandoned any pretense of populism; it has opted for elite support and back-room deals rather than broad public support or a vibrant political life. In the longer term, the challenge for the system as it was reconstituted in the 1990s will be whether it has the durability to survive an economic downturn, social unrest, or both.

Egypt on the Brink

Barely a decade ago, the Egyptian government appeared to be tottering. As economic growth turned negative in the late 1980s, Egypt's debt to gross national product (GNP) ratio was among the highest in the world, wages were plummeting, and unemployment was skyrocketing. On top of the economic morass, militants using the slogans and symbols of Islam were waging war on the government, which was responding with repression.

Forty years after the Free Officers' Movement deposed King Faruq, there was a widespread feeling that political and economic life in Egypt had again become sclerotic and corrupt and that the system needed a jolt. Many Egp-

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tians perceived their government to be venal, inept, and inefficient. Islam-inspired organizations, on the other hand, had a proven track record of providing services more efficiently than the government. They seemed honest, and they had a clear message. Furthermore, the militants were the only force in society willing to express their opposition to the status quo, and by virtue of that fact alone they garnered public support.

Mubarak is poised to rule for at least another decade.

After more than a year of disturbances in Upper Egypt, homemade bombs exploded in the heart of downtown Cairo in early 1993. In the subsequent months, reports of attacks on tourists, on Copts, and on government troops were rife, with rumors of incipient attacks even more common. The government seemed out of touch and determined to respond with toughness against an enemy it all too often could not even see.

Conditions in Egypt provoked concern not only among the elites in that country but also in the United States. According to the London *Sunday Times*, U.S. intelligence analysts had concluded in February 1994 that Mubarak was “in grave danger of being overthrown by Islamic fundamentalists, with catastrophic consequences for Western interests in the Middle East.” Based on an apparently leaked National Intelligence Estimate that was then being drafted, the analysts reportedly concluded that “Mubarak is likely to fall and his country slide into economic chaos and civil war if present trends continue.”¹

By the autumn, the mood darkened further. One afternoon in October 1994, 82-year-old Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz slowly shuffled out of his apartment building and into a car to attend a discussion of the week’s events with some 50 friends and intellectuals, as he did every Friday. As Mahfouz settled into his seat, young toughs reached through the car window and stuck a cheap kitchen knife into his neck, almost killing him.

According to contemporary reports, the assault was retribution for a book the attackers had certainly not read, *Awlad Haratina* (available in an English translation by Paul Theroux as *Children of the Alley*), which had been published more than 30 years earlier. Years before the attack, Muslim religious authorities had denounced the books as blasphemous for featuring characters that resembled historical religious figures. But at the time of the assassination attempt, the book was not available for purchase in Egypt and had not been the subject of public discussion.

The Mahfouz attack captured much of what was happening in Egypt in those days. He was a symbol of high-culture Egypt and a source of national pride but seemed distant from the struggles of many Egyptians’ lives. Des-

perate to find work, living in substandard housing, and facing a government that seemed deaf to their concerns, many Egyptians were at the end of their rope. That an icon of Egypt could be attacked and almost killed by a band of young thugs showed how fragile the system really was. The system, like Mahfouz, appeared frail.

By the mid-1990s, warnings of weakness in the Egyptian system had been part of the landscape for years. As early as 1986, one scholar had warned that Egypt was a “stalled society” whose leadership veered between the radical redistribution of property and courtship of the rural *bourgeoisie* in an effort to retain power. Such policies could buy time, but ultimately they could never resolve the underlying tensions and contradictions of Egyptian society.²

This view was confirmed by Robert Springborg, one of the most acute observers of Egyptian politics. Springborg wrote in 1989 that the Mubarak regime was either “fragmenting” or “decaying,” neither one a particularly good option. According to Springborg, the indicators of fragmentation included

the lack of organizational and ideological cohesiveness within the elite, increasing lassitude within state structures, the emergence of counterelites and ideologies within the increasingly active legal and underground political oppositions, and the growing independence of associational groups and even governmental bodies, such as the judiciary.³

The alternative possibility was that the regime was simply decaying. Beset by domestic and international pressures, bereft of coherence or direction, and led by a lackluster president, according to this view, “the regime is sinking into chaos.”⁴

That a challenge to the government would come in an Islamic guise could perhaps have been anticipated. Abdel Nasser had courted and then repressed the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s, and after Anwar Sadat took power he released many Brotherhood members from jail so they could act as a counterweight to leftists opposing the policies of his regime. While Islam-inspired militants made headlines when they assassinated Sadat in 1981, political Islam made many quiet and perhaps more important gains in the late 1970s and 1980s.

One part of those gains was the autonomy that local and independent, or *ahli*, mosques enjoyed. As many as half the mosques in Egypt were unlicensed in the mid-1990s and thus outside the direct control of government religious institutions. Although the clerics in some were government trained, the independent mosques provided fertile ground for opposition movements to form and grow, remote from the purview of the government.

Moreover, the rise of oil wealth affected Egyptian political Islam in two ways. Egyptians who went to work in the Persian Gulf were exposed to a far more austere practice of Islam than that to which they were accustomed. Many took those lessons back home, much the way emigrants to the West

take back tastes, practices, and mindsets to their home countries. In addition, oil wealth created vast subsidies for avowedly Islamic businesses, charities, foundations, and other organizations. Although their activities were not necessarily tied directly into political action, they altered perceptions of the possibilities for political Islam.

As violence rose in the early 1990s, the government of Egypt understood that Islam-inspired militants posed an existential threat to the regime. The government responded partly by repressing and partly by co-opting the movement. Efforts to co-opt the militants were aided significantly by international support for the Egyptian government in general, by international support for Egyptian economic reforms then underway, and by gratitude for the Egyptian role in Operation Desert Storm. The result of those measures not only strengthened the government's control of the domestic situation but also strengthened the regime.

On the coercive side, the Egyptian government employed three main strategies. The first was an aggressive (or perhaps, repressive) law enforcement approach. By one account, more than 17,000 Islamists were arrested for political opposition or militant violence between 1989 and 1997.⁵ Taking advantage of the state of emergency that has remained in force in Egypt since President Sadat's assassination in 1981, the government held many Islamists without charges and tried many others in military courts. One former government official charged that even as late as 1999 "tens of thousands of Egyptians" were being held without charge in Egyptian jails.⁶ Between 1992 and 1996, 74 civilians were sentenced to death by military judges. Troops took to the streets, while Islamist organizations were placed under surveillance, infiltrated, and in some cases broken up.

Second, the government cracked down on its political opponents. Parliamentary elections were heavily stacked in favor of governmental candidates, and opposition candidates were intimidated, harassed, and sometimes physically attacked. In the 1990 elections, the ruling party increased its share of seats in parliament from 68 percent to 79 percent and then increased that to 94 percent in the 1995 elections—the largest majority in the history of the country. In addition, the Egyptian government convinced the Leftist *Tagamu'* party, and to a lesser extent the neo-Liberal *Wafd* party, to join forces against the Islamists. They did so partly by convincing the parties that they shared a common foe in the Islamists, and partly by dangling emoluments such as appointive parliamentary seats and other favors. As a consequence, the government ended up with no real opposition except for the Islamist forces. Among these, it sowed disarray, periodically rounding up Islamists (more than 1,000 members of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood and their sympathizers were rounded up just prior to the 1995 parliamentary

election) in such an unpredictable way that the effect in some cases was more intimidation and harassment than outright repression.

Third, the government cracked down on independent organizations that had proven to be hotbeds of Islamist discontent. To this end, the government reasserted control over independent mosques and began coordinating Friday prayer speeches. It also took action against the professional syndicates and student associations, which had become strongholds of Islamist influence. The government also performed a thorough review of the armed forces, many of the conscripts of which were drawn from precisely the same regions and social classes as the militants.

On the persuasive side, the government took four actions. First, it attempted to co-opt some of the Islamist opposition by making public life more visibly Islamic. Television boasted more Islamic programming, and government publishers published more Islamic books. The call to prayer was heard more loudly in the streets, and religious activity was tolerated more broadly in the educational system. A reporter based in Egypt wrote in 1998, "Religion has become so pervasive in behavior and language in Egypt that Egypt may indeed be more genuinely Islamized than Iran."⁷ As former Sadat spokesman Tahsin Bashir noted, "Political Islam has been checked in its bid for power, but the Islamization of society has gained ground."⁸

Equally important, the government did not actively intervene when Islamist figures argued for censoring and censoring secular intellectuals. A Western scholar has described the process as follows:

Islamist groups ... air criticisms of the government for its failure to uphold Islamic mores in a particular area. The government responds by defending its actions, and, to emphasize its Islamic "correctness," transfers significant administrative powers to al-Azhar in that particular field. The third and most critical stage is that al-Azhar then uses these new powers to either press for more leverage in state affairs, or comes out with a position that is not always in accordance with that of the government.⁹

That cycle worked itself out just last May, when al-Azhar was rocked by rioting students protesting the government's re-publication of Haidar Haidar's 1983 novel *Banquet of Seaweed*, which contains a character who questions the existence of God. Although the Egyptian courts ruled that the novel was not blasphemous, the shaykh of al-Azhar, Muhammad Tantawi, ripped the government for permitting its publication. He issued a statement arguing that "the novel is full of phrases and expressions which scorn and insult all

The challenge is whether the system can survive an economic downturn or social unrest.

sacred religious tenets, including God, the Prophet (Muhammad), the Holy Koran, the Day of Judgment, and religious values.”¹⁰ For its own part, the government used the incident as a pretext to crack down on the Islam-tinged Labor Party, which had led the call for protests against the novel.

The future of an important cadre of business elites is hitched to regime stability.

Second, the government sought to improve its delivery of services to areas of need, especially those that have been traditional backwaters, such as in Upper Egypt. When Islamist groups proved more successful than government officials in providing relief from the earthquake that struck Egypt in October 1992, the government took two courses of action. It improved its own response to natural disasters and barred non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from providing such assistance.¹¹ (After rains brought flooding to Upper Egypt in November 1994, however, the government apparently turned a blind eye to low-key relief efforts by NGOs.)

Third, the government capitalized on the excesses of its militant opponents. To many Egyptians, the assassination attempt on President Mubarak in June 1995 was a wake-up call that speculating about alternate political futures in Egypt was not merely a parlor game but a grim reality. The attempt helped rally support around the government. When Islamist militants butchered 58 tourists at the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut in Upper Egypt in November 1997, it perhaps put the final nail in the militants’ coffin. The crime was so grisly, and the negative effect on tourism dollars that provide so much employment was so dramatic (up to \$2 billion), that Egyptians turned *en masse* against the militants.

Finally, and most significant for the purposes here, the government built strong bridges to the business community. While government-business ties had been a feature of postrevolutionary Egyptian life since Sadat’s *infitah*, or Open Door policy, the Mubarak government actively moved to cultivate elite businessmen. Partly, this was achieved through the privatization initiatives of the Mubarak government, which created new business opportunities for those elite businessmen. Also, the president took businessmen along on more trips and established the “Gore-Mubarak Partnership,” which gave businessmen with government ties additional privileges and access to policymakers in Egypt and the United States. According to one scholar who has studied the Egyptian business community, business associations in Egypt are notable more for what they do not do rather than what they do. Rather than coalescing for political action and the defense of group interests, busi-

ness associations in Egypt “are primarily used as social visibility platforms” from which businessmen can pursue government contracts and contacts.¹²

The price these groups must pay is a lack of autonomy from the state; indeed, an agreement to support the regime is a prerequisite for participation. In addition, the government has made explicit quid-pro-quo demands on the business community. In a widely reported incident in February 1998, Mubarak met with 31 elite businessmen just prior to his annual trip to Washington. Accounts of the unprecedented meeting indicate that Mubarak admonished them for profligate spending, social irresponsibility, and excessive backstabbing in the yellow press.

Configuring Stability: But What About the Succession?

The Egyptian government appears to have definitively dealt with the threat of instability, and it has emerged from the economic and Islamist challenges in many ways stronger than it was in the late 1980s. To an already strong relationship among political elites, the armed forces, and the security apparatus, it has added an important cadre of business elites whose future is hitched to the stability of the regime. The business elites replace the public-sector managers that had long constituted an important element of the regime’s support. In the face of pressure from international financial institutions, continued coddling of the public sector was no longer viable, and the business elites give the illusion of a vibrant economic life while providing valuable support to the regime.

In the near term, the present Egyptian regime appears remarkably stable. In the event of Mubarak’s death or removal from office, it appears all but certain that the current internal and external alliances would hold. Mubarak is not a shrewd micro-manager of competing interests and intelligence intrigue; rather, he has demonstrated patience and a sense of purpose while he built institutional arrangements and crosscutting loyalties to create a web of support for the regime in general, rather than him in particular.

The question of who precisely would lead a successor regime is murkier. Mubarak ascended to power by virtue of being the vice president at the time of Sadat’s assassination in 1981. Mubarak broke the vow he made upon taking office to serve only two terms, and he has neither named a vice president nor given a clear nod to any successor. In addition, he has acted decisively against those seen to be jockeying for his job. The most notable example is Field Marshal Muhammad Abdel Halim Abu Ghazala, who was sacked from his post as defense minister for demonstrating too much ambition. Indeed, there are whispers that “the most dangerous job in Egypt is to be the second-most powerful person in the country.”

**Egypt's relations
with the outside
world would
remain unchanged.**

Some have interpreted the open chair for a successor as an attempt to leave a place for Mubarak's younger son, Gamal. A former investment banker in London, Gamal Mubarak has become involved in political life in a way that his business-oriented brother, Ala', has not. Gamal also lacks his brother's reputation of using his position for private financial gain. He participates in political events, is active with the National Democratic

Party, and was spearheading a now-dormant effort with long-time presidential aide Osama el-Baz to create a new political movement in Egypt. Still, he is unlikely to take power. El-Baz's name also makes some short lists of civilians, as do the names of People's Assembly member Ahmad Fathy Sorour and Foreign Minister Amre Moussa.

Politically attuned Egyptians and other close observers, however, put their money on domestic intelligence veteran Omar Suleiman. Although he has virtually no public profile, he has been deeply involved in the efforts to strengthen the regime in the last decade. His loyalty and avoidance of publicity make him even more attractive in the current environment. Another, perhaps less likely, choice is Armed Forces Chief of Staff Magdi Hatata, who has excellent international contacts, having led Egyptian defense delegations abroad for years. Hatata also has performed a large number of protocol duties in Egypt and is a familiar figure on the public landscape. Whether he is enough of a master of the "inside game" remains unclear at this point. Inside speculation tends explicitly to exclude the current Egyptian defense minister, Field Marshall Muhammad Hussein Tantawi. Tantawi is often seen at Hatata's side and maintains a high public profile. He is widely thought to be a loyal supporter but not a serious contender for the top post.

The naming of a successor from inside the military or security establishment would enable the present system to endure unchanged. The military's huge economic activities—representing as much as half of Egypt's manufacturing capabilities—serve as a powerful source of patronage for the regime. In addition, the security forces are perceived to have saved the country from ruin and represent a bulwark against social unrest. Although some elements of the business community may be agitating to push the military out of politics and back into the barracks, the current configuration of domestic political forces suggests such an event is unlikely in the near future.

Moribund Political Life

One of the fascinating features of contemporary Egyptian political life is that, for the first time since the 1952 revolution, the government has abandoned even the pretext of populism. In a country that mandates that fully half the members of parliament must be either peasants or laborers, the current configuration of power is solidly tilted toward a tiny elite. Even the corporatist organs of the past—the professional syndicates, government-sponsored labor unions, and others—have been eviscerated in an effort to keep them out of Islamist control. Combined with an electoral system that appears to rule out any conceivable challenge to the regime and the passage of a disputed law tightly regulating the activities of NGOs, Egypt is a society that is quickly deliberalizing.

The current constellation of power is dependent upon public acceptance of the status quo, which should not be difficult to achieve in the short run. The militant Islamists have discredited themselves, and there is no alternative on the horizon. The economy is indeed improving, if not quite as speedily as the government insists it is. Partly as a reward for Operation Desert Storm and partly for compliance with International Monetary Fund dictates, \$20 billion in debt relief has considerably lightened pressure on the Egyptian treasury.

But political life in Egypt is moribund. As the *Financial Times* put it last year, “at the heart of the political debate facing Egypt as it moves along the path of economic reform, is the fact that there is no real debate taking place.”¹³ The opposition parties have either been defanged or crushed. The public cannot challenge the regime but also cannot let off steam, and therein lies the threat.

With a deferential public, the security/business/political alliance is sufficiently durable to maintain control. But such a structure will also find it difficult to bend to the public will, if and when that public will gets galvanized. In its response to the Islamist threat, the government has eliminated many of the organs that could act as conduits for public opinion and help broker accommodation. Egypt is virtually devoid of mediating structures at this point, dealing political change from above rather than responding to calls for change from below.

If unrest were to recur, the current configuration of power would hamper the regime’s ability to respond. Increased literacy, a widening array of alternate channels of information, and the increasing ineffectiveness of censorship combine to make it essential that the Egyptian government and other Arab governments prove more responsive to popular demands. Rather than being more supple, however, the Egyptian government appears headed in the opposite direction, with possibly negative results for those in power.

Succession's Implications

Even if the present ruling alliance were to disintegrate in the longer term, however, such an event would be unlikely to have a drastic effect on Egypt's foreign policy. Egypt has neither the ability nor the inclination to pose a threat to Israel, and, although the tone of its rhetoric may rise or fall to suit the public mood or the regime's perceived political needs, its commitment to peace is unwavering. Along its other borders, Egypt seems destined to cast a wary eye toward other neighbors, Libya and the Sudan, especially as long as the present regimes in those countries remain in power.

As the most populous Arab state, and one with large numbers of workers abroad, Egypt will continue to seek to provide leadership for the Arab world. It is also likely to seek to play its traditional role as a bridge between the Arab world and the West, even between Africa and the West. Being a bridge, however, necessitates that there is a distance to be spanned. To preserve this role, Egypt is unlikely to become a docile client state.

Still, in a world with a single superpower, turning away from that superpower makes little sense. This is especially true as long as a military regime rules Egypt, since the \$1.3 billion in military aid that the United States provides annually is useful as the present regime distributes patronage in the armed forces. U.S. economic aid, just under \$800 million annually and slowly declining, also helps the regime consolidate its patronage networks. This is also especially true if such aid shifts, as is projected, from technical assistance, large development projects, and consulting (which tend to reward U.S.-based contractors in the first instance) toward commodity import supports, investment guarantees, and subsidies that aid elite businessmen.

The United States, therefore, is hamstrung in its relationship with Egypt. Short-term interests in stability appear to conflict with longer-term interests in economic and political liberalization that would promote long-term stability. U.S. hand-wringing will continue, and Egyptian officials will assure the United States that they agree in principle with its goals but differ on matters of timing and details.

Even in the aftermath of the Cold War, Egypt is counting on relatively free access to capital from international lending institutions and governments. As a so-called "pivotal state," Egypt can look forward to tens of billions of dollars of future assistance and enjoys some autonomy from international pressures for economic reform. Private bankers and investors, however, will prove less forgiving in the coming years and could constitute a leading force demanding change in the domestic economic and political scene.

The government of Egypt surely must recognize that the mood in the country has changed since the militant Islamist challenge arose and was

checked. As one veteran correspondent in Cairo wrote,

outspoken religious conservatism now characterizes Egyptian attitudes, coupled with frustration at a state that is seen as arbitrary, corrupt, and unrepresentative. Islamists have achieved this much. They have fallen short, however, of either seizing power or of mobilizing mass political action.¹⁴

The most dangerous action the government could take would be to assume that the regime's present, narrower base is viable in the long term, for it is unlikely to be. The Egyptian public is more literate, better informed, and more "wired" than ever before; at the same time, its avenues into governance have been severely restricted.

How the system will be challenged, and how it will adapt to those challenges, is far from clear. Egypt has shown remarkable resilience through the years, and precarious ruling configurations have long outlived their critics. However, one of the characteristics of Egyptian political life for the last 150 years has been periodic, sharp outbursts of public discontent. While the present regime was able to withstand the last such outburst, its response may have weakened its ability to withstand the next one.

The current power configuration would hamper the regime's ability to respond to unrest.

Notes

1. James Adams, "Mubarak at Grave Risk of Being Overthrown by March of Islam," *Sunday Times*, February 20, 1994.
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3. Robert Springborg, *Mubarak's Egypt: Fragmentation of the Political Order* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1989), 9.
4. *Ibid.*
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6. Mohammed Ghanem, "The Tragedy of Administrative Detention." The article was cut from the June 21, 1999, edition of the *Middle East Times* by the military censor but is available online at <www.dfn.org/Voices/Mideast/egypt/metimes/detention.htm>
7. Max Rodenbeck, "Is Islamism Losing Its Thunder?" *The Washington Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 185.
8. Fouad Ajami, "The Sorrows of Egypt," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 5 (September/October 1995): 78.
9. Steven Barraclough, "Al-Azhar: Between the Government and the Islamists," *Middle East Journal* 52, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 240.

10. *Middle East Mirror*, May 18, 2000.
11. Steve Negus, "The Muslim Brothers Keep a Low Profile, But Their Main Activity—Charity Work—Still Goes On," *Cairo Times* 1, no. 3 (April 3, 1997).
12. See John Sfakianakis, "Crony Capitalism, the State, the Characteristics of Egyptian Business, and the Business Elite," paper delivered at the First Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, European University, Florence, Italy, March 22–26, 2000, p. 40.
13. "Political Forces Fight for a Voice," *Financial Times*, May 11, 1999 <www.ft.com/ftsurveys/country/sc2a96.htm>.
14. Rodenbeck, "Is Islamism Losing Its Thunder?" 184.