



Photos by Josh Stacher

Living with Democracy in Egypt

BY DANIEL CONSOLATORE

HOSNI MUBAREK WAS ALMOST elected president of Egypt in September 2005. Not that the seventy-seven-year-old secular autocrat who has ruled that nation for the past twenty-four years lost the election; by the official count, he took nearly 85 percent of the vote. His nearest competitor, Ayman Nour, the upstart head of the fledgling opposition party al-Ghad (“Tomorrow”), managed less than 8 percent. The only other candidate to take any significant tally was the aged Norman Gamaa of the venerable al-Wafd (“Delegation”) party, who managed less than 3 percent. The Ikhwan al-Muslimeen (“Muslim Brotherhood”), feared by so many Westerners for its purist Islamic social and political agenda, didn’t even field a candidate.

Mubarek’s decisive victory would seem to be reassuring to most people—particularly secular Americans—worried for the future of the few Western-friendly, moderate Arab regimes, threatened as they are by the Islamicization of politics in the region. The Bush administration would also seem to have reason to be pleased, given its recent change of heart about Arab democracy. The missing chemical weapons in Iraq and subsequent justification of the war there

as precedent for democratization have inspired the White House to push for as many elections as possible in the region. In fact, when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spoke at the American University in Cairo in June, she announced to some surprise that “for sixty years” the United States had been mistaken in “pursu[ing] stability at the expense of democracy” in the Middle East. For generations, U.S. pundits were sure that the “Arab street” couldn’t be trusted with the vote, as they might hand over power to communists or fundamentalist Islamists. *Realpolitik* dictated that autocrats and dictators, like Mubarek and Saddam Hussein, had to be coddled in order to maintain “stability” in the region. If they would then stage elections or dispense with them altogether, deny free speech, and let loose secret police to terrorize the population, the White House would likely turn a blind eye. But if Mubarek could now claim a true democratic mandate, that would be the best of all worlds.

The problem is that Mubarek was only “almost” elected because the balloting didn’t quite amount to a legitimate contest, even if it was the first ever in which Egyptian voters had a choice of candidates for

president. Unwilling to come down on a “moderate,” secular Arab ally, as it did on Iran in June, the Bush administration declared the Egyptian vote “an *important step* toward holding fully free and fair competitive multiparty elections.” But the actual process was so ridden with irregularities, manipulations, and outright fraud that it more resembled, as one influential blogger (known simply by the Arab woman’s name Baheyya) put it, a presidential selection spectacle. Even to register, the candidates had to clear an array of hurdles only an authoritarian bureaucracy could dream up. For example, challengers had to obtain approval of sixty-five members of parliament, which, thanks to rigged elections, is conveniently controlled by a two-thirds majority of Mubarek’s National Democratic Party (NDP).



The national media, though conceded some independence in practice, is also entirely state-owned, and so it wasn’t much of a problem for the regime to filter what Egyptians were hearing and reading. One native human rights group determined that the major daily newspapers had been “conscripted for daily propaganda.” The state used its regulatory authority to harass opposition parties, prohibiting the airing of an *al-Ghad* television ad alleging that the party had plagiarized the music. Ayman Nour was imprisoned earlier in the year on trumped up charges. What’s more, the campaign itself was an absurdly short three weeks, and the well-funded NDP was able to plaster the cities with banners, posters, and billboard-sized cutouts of Mubarek. Perhaps most importantly though, decades of staged elections meant that party politics in the country were moribund and the “electorate” had little understanding of its rights or courage to defy the regime.

Mubarek also defied requests, including one from

George W. Bush, to allow outside monitoring of the election. By election day, September 7, 2005, the judges’ syndicate agreed to accept a very limited and inadequate monitoring proposal, and the state-appointed Presidential Election Commission waited until voting had begun to announce that independent Egyptian groups would be permitted. Those groups then reported harassment, including beatings by security services and police, as did opposition party activists and even some voters. In the end, the Egyptian Human Rights Organization calculated that some 15 percent of the votes were rigged, and Nour claimed that he had been cheated of three of every four votes cast for him. Little after all had changed, it seemed, and true democracy on the Nile is obviously still a long way off. In truth, however, flawed as it was, the election may be the continuation of a wave of political change sweeping over Egypt.

THE BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

In a curious twist, it may have been the war in Iraq that led to multiparty democracy in Egypt. Bombing in Baghdad in March 2003 prompted angry Cairenes to protest in the streets denouncing U.S. aggression and burning the American flag. As if with intended symbolic irony, state Central Security Force troops blocked crowds from Tahir (“Liberation”) Square, citing a ban on street protests under the infamous Emergency Law, which, invoked throughout Mubarek’s rule, effectively makes the country a police state. Protesters were permitted to gather in front of Al-Azhar Mosque, one of the Muslim world’s most famous worship sites, and amass on the campus of Al-Azhar University, known for centuries as a center of explicitly Islamic learning.

Some brave demonstrators included Mubarek in their denunciations, even tearing down posters with his image from NDP headquarters. Intellectuals and opposition leaders then began calling more openly for the Egyptian president to step down, and hundreds were arrested. But their daring was the beginning of a movement that may yet prove historic. As one close observer put it, “The chipping away at the untouchable halo surrounding the president had begun.” By winter, the long standing sense of frustration within Egyptian society began to burst forth in a number of protests. On December 12 some five hundred people congregated in front of the national court building, tellingly not to champion much in the way of ideology

and making few specific political demands. Instead, many wore a piece of yellow tape with a single word written on it in red lettering—*Kifaya* (“Enough”). A movement by that name was founded that day, stimulating, as one observer put it, “a palpable social ferment that swept Egyptian society” over the next several months.

MORE FERVENT ON THE STREETS

The *Kifaya* leadership insists that it is a movement and not a party, reflecting the fact that it was born out of the cooperation of a diverse group of mostly older politicians and activists with major ideological differences and historical antagonisms. None of the presidential candidates used the movement’s name, although they were all beneficiaries of its work.

Despite some internal strife and limited success in mobilizing popular support, *Kifaya* has been remarkably effective in changing the Egyptian political landscape, particularly in stimulating defiance of the regime. Journalists and intellectuals began challenging censorship in the state-owned media, and an organization of university professors issued a statement openly calling for Mubarek to step down. Protests became a regular sight in Cairo, including a major gathering on May 25, 2005, when Mubarek’s proposed constitutional amendment to allow for the multi-candidate election was put to a referendum. *Kifaya* leaders denounced the changes as inadequate, called for a boycott, and rallied several hundred supporters in different locations in central Cairo, especially outside the office of the journalists’ syndicate. As people on the scene described the day, gangs of rowdy young men, reportedly paid for their trouble, began to harass and attack the protesters. Some women, a few of them veiled, were groped and even had their clothes torn—a story that was then picked up by the world press to the great embarrassment of the regime. The amendment passed, but the opposition was only strengthened.

THE SLEEPING GIANT

Despite the help offered by the security forces, *Kifaya* had limited success rallying public support, in no small part because ordinary Egyptians already have a champion: the banned Muslim Brotherhood. Founded in 1928 as part of the resistance movement to British colonialism, the Brotherhood has been a thorn in the side of the Egyptian state since Gamal Abdal Nasser turned on them after securing power in 1954. In 1966

the government handed the Brotherhood a martyr when it imprisoned, tortured, and executed the man now often identified as a founder of modern Islamism, Sayyid Qut’b. Some branches of the movement radicalized in immediate response to Qut’b’s death, and that radicalization continued during the Mubarek’s years. But the main Brotherhood organization has increasingly framed itself as a moderate, centrist movement. It is intent on nurturing a pure Muslim society and seeing Egypt ruled by Islamic law and has explicitly denounced the use of violence to achieve that end.

Almost unquestionably the Brotherhood enjoys enormous public support. Much like other “faith-based” political movements, its members are perceived to be incorruptible and truly dedicated to God and God’s community of faithful. That doesn’t make its members reactionaries, however. As in the larger Islamist movement that Qut’b helped to inspire, *Ikhwan* theory holds that there is nothing about Islam that is incompatible with modernity. In fact, members of the Brotherhood play a role not unlike that of puritan radicals in Reformation Europe, and the more established clergy often suffer by comparison in the eyes of the public, who see the more traditional Imams as too close to the regime. The Brotherhood has also profited over the years from state failures—especially the national humiliation of defeat to the Israeli enemy in the wars of 1967 and 1973. And it moved into the post-cold war ideological vacuum left as socialism and secularism were discredited together. Perhaps most importantly it has developed remarkable organizational capacity to meet the demand for social services that the inept Egyptian state has continually failed to do. Much like Hamas in Palestine, the *Ikhwan* has deep roots in Egypt’s villages, simply because locals know that they can turn to it for education, medical care, or emergency relief.

What would an Egypt dominated by the *Ikhwan al-Muslimeen* be like? One could be forgiven for taking the organization today as one dedicated to Jeffersonian democracy. Consider these thoughts offered by the newly selected supreme guide, Mohammed Mahdi

Kifaya has been remarkably effective in changing the Egyptian political landscape.

Akef, to an interviewer from London's Q magazine:

Life isn't worth living without freedom. . . .
As long as there's an emergency law, as long as
the constitution and the law can be put tem-
porarily out of service, there will be no real
progress. . . . We pray that maybe in the future
. . . rulers will know that they're worth nothing
without their people's consent to their rule.

Some analysts argue that these positions are sincere and that the Brotherhood has tired of violent confrontation with the regime and is ready to share power with rival parties. But its many critics insist that there would be no democracy, pluralism, or freedom in the Muslim Brotherhood's ideal "Islamic" society. Whatever the Ikhwan's ultimate agenda, however, there is little doubt that it will wield a tremendous influence in a truly democratic Egypt. Some analysts estimate that, if the Brotherhood can overcome the ban and choose to run candidates, it would easily sweep to a majority in parliament.

MAKING PEACE WITH EGYPTIAN CHOICES

What then are interested outsiders to think about the status and, maybe more importantly, the future of democracy in the most important Western-friendly, secular, and "moderate" Arab state? Hosni Mubarek has promised both his Washington sponsors and the Egyptian people that he will use his new mandate to make his government truly accountable. Some skepticism about that claim is almost certainly warranted, and there are plenty of old hands in Foggy Bottom who would ignore Kifaya and the emerging democratic movement in Cairo. They emphasize the anti-American sentiment among the activists and the elitism that keeps them at a distance from the masses. And with a better-the-devil-you-know logic, they urge the Bush administration to stick with Mubarek and stop making noise about democracy. But that wait-and-see approach is fraught with contradictions and risks of its own.

The Bush administration might be, and often is, commended for finally rejecting the old biases about the Arab world and shifting U.S. foreign policy to be more in line with the nation's values and principles. The message Secretary Rice sent in Cairo applies well beyond the Middle East and signals an abandonment of what liberals in the developing world have long seen

as a policy of "democracy for us, dictators for you." But much is still dependent on the untested commitment of the Muslim Brotherhood to the kind of open or "civil" society assumed to be necessary for elections to have real meaning. The problem is not the Muslim faith *per se*; just as with Catholicism in South America, democracy has now proven to be compatible with Islam in Turkey, Bangladesh, and India with its 140 million Muslims. But the Ikhwan al-Muslimeen isn't just faithful—some elements within the movement are undeniably fanatic.

If Western governments are going to live up to their principles and support Egyptian democracy, they'll have to take a leap of faith. The argument in favor of doing that is that competitive multiparty democracy tends to empower moderates, precisely because radicals usually reject institutions and arrangements where they might have to share power. That is, we might have to hope that those Muslim Brothers who would run for office in a democratic Egypt would look a little more like Texas Republican Representative Tom Delay—fervent in faith but committed to holding power through the vote—than like Osama bin Laden. They have already made common cause with Kifaya, stopping short of embracing it but signaling a willingness to cooperate. What's more, the pressure that's been building under the Mubarek regime for decades may now be reaching the kind of explosive force that destroyed the Shah of Iran and brought to power the most radical Islamists in the country. By this logic, stability is an illusion and democracy the best of a set of imperfect options.

Egyptians go to the polls again in November 2005 to choose a new parliament in what optimists are hoping will be another step toward real democracy and an improvement over the September election. Whatever the result, it may be as soon as the next few months that Western policymakers will have to face the hard choice between living up to principle and supporting the embryonic democracy movement or playing it safe and sticking by the autocratic Mubarek. On the other hand, the genie may be out of the bottle and the world may have no option but to accept that the Egyptian people are bringing about their own regime change. And we all may have to make peace with their choice, whatever it is. ■

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