

# MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

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### Egypt at the Tipping Point?

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In the early 1980s, I lived in Cairo as bureau chief of *The Washington Post* covering such historic events as the withdrawal of the last Israeli forces from

Egyptian territory occupied during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and the assassination of President Anwar Sadat by Islamic fanatics in October 1981. The latter national drama, which I witnessed personally, had proven to be a wrenching milestone. It forced Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, to turn inwards to deal with an Islamist challenge of unknown proportions and effectively ended Egypt's leadership role in the Arab world. Mubarak immediately showed himself to be a highly cautious, unimaginative leader, maddeningly reactive rather than pro-active in dealing with the social and economic problems overwhelming his nation like its explosive population growth (1.2 million more Egyptians a year) and economic decline.

In a four-part *Washington Post* series written as I was departing in early 1985, I noted the new Egyptian leader was still pretty much a total enigma to his own people, offering no vision and commanding what seemed a rudderless ship of state. The socialist economy inherited from the era of President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1952 to 1970) was a mess. The country's currency, the pound, was operating on eight different exchange rates; its state-run factories were unproductive, uncompetitive and deep in debt; and the government was heading for bankruptcy partly because subsidies for food, electricity and gasoline were consuming one-third (\$7 billion) of its budget. Cairo had sunk into a hopeless morass of gridlocked traffic and teeming humanity—12 million people squeezed into a narrow band of land bordering the Nile River, most living cheek by jowl in ramshackle tenements in the city's ever-expanding slums. Egypt, meanwhile, was a pariah in the Arab world for having signed in 1979 a peace treaty with Israel that had produced only a "cold peace" between the two countries

## About the Middle East Program

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The Middle East Program was launched in February 1998 in light of increased U.S. engagement in the region and the profound changes sweeping across many Middle Eastern states. In addition to spotlighting day-to-day issues, the Program concentrates on long-term economic, social, and political developments, as well as relations with the United States.

The Middle East Program draws on domestic and foreign regional experts for its meetings, conferences, and occasional papers. Conferences and meetings assess the policy implications of all aspects of developments within the region and individual states; the Middle East's role in the international arena; American interests in the region; the threat of terrorism; arms proliferation; and strategic threats to and from the regional states.


The Program pays special attention to the role of women, youth, civil society institutions, Islam, and democratic and autocratic tendencies. In addition, the Middle East Program hosts meetings on cultural issues, including contemporary art and literature in the region.

**Gender Issues:** The Middle East Program devotes considerable attention to the role of women in advancing civil society and to the attitudes of governments and the clerical community toward women's rights in the family and society at large. The Program examines employment patterns, education, legal rights, and political participation of women in the region. The Program also has a keen interest in exploring women's increasing roles in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction activities.

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The following paper is the first in a Middle East Program Occasional Paper Series featuring the work of our scholars and fellows. The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.



despite a U.S. commitment of two to three billions of dollars annually in economic and military aid for Egypt. There seemed little basis for optimism about either the future of Mubarak or Egypt.

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I returned to Cairo in early 2010 wondering whether I would discover a “new Egypt” rising miraculously from the ashes of the fallen Arab giant I had left behind 25 years before. The new Turkish-built terminal at the international airport seemed to signal a new era was indeed at hand. The efficiency of passport control was impressive. Arriving passengers were able to get a visa on the spot and quickly. There were no rag-tag Egyptian porters hassling tourists with offers of help. More amazing was the baggage reclaim system in the polished arrival hall. It was more advanced technologically than any I had seen in the United States, automated to the point that arriving pieces of luggage halted temporarily on the conveyor belt if others already circling on the baggage carousel below blocked their entry. The whole arrival experience was characterized by an efficiency and speed that was the opposite of the helter-skelter, easy-going approach to services I had become so accustomed to living with earlier.

Downtown Cairo quickly reversed these first impressions. Foreign and local residents of this sprawling metropolis habitually look upon the degree of traffic gridlock as a kind of Rorschach inkblot test for one’s assessment of the general state of Egypt. My first reading of the Cairo traffic test was *plus ça change...* The government had built a veritable superstructure of elevated roads over the city, and something equivalent to the Washington or Boston beltway encircled the entire city. New tunnels carried traffic under the most congested downtown areas. A subway system with lines running in various directions transported a million or more passengers every day, reducing considerably the number of buses. At least there were fewer of the old smoke-belching, noisy U.S.-provided ones that Cairenes had laughingly dubbed “*Sawt al-Amrika*,” meaning the “Voice of America.” Smaller and quieter buses had taken their place.

But authorities had not been able to keep up with Egypt’s mind-numbing growth in humanity and vehicles. There

were now close to 20 million Egyptians, one quarter of the total population, crammed into the capital, and the number of vehicles had doubled since 1985 to reach 1.6 million. It seemed the same old, battered black-and-white Fiat 1100, 1400 and Peugeot 304 taxis that had gummed up the streets back then were still on the road. Their numbers were now 80,000, however, and they were competing with newer Suzuki and Hyundai taxis, some painted yellow instead and even equipped with meters to help tourists dispense with the agony of price haggling. The level of congestion seemed about the same, only now there were two levels of gridlock,

one on top of the other, thanks to the extended system of elevated highways. Even the subway, kept in amazingly clean conditions, did not seem to have provided any relief from the crush of vehicles and people. The characteristic indiscipline of drivers had not changed one iota. Cars still careened through the potholed, dirty streets in tangled lines forever crisscrossing each other.

For most Egyptians and foreign residents, the picture lurking in the traffic Rorschach inkblot seemed still that of a country living on the brink of chaos. But that had been the general feeling 25 years earlier, and Cairo was still functioning against all statistics and odds. Part of the explanation, I discovered, lay in the way the city had expanded ever farther away from the Nile River and deeper into the desert. The equivalent of white flight from America’s rundown city centers had taken place. Hundreds of thousands of upper class Egyptians, their numbers vastly swollen by a six-year-old economic boom, had moved out of Cairo to American-style suburbs and more distant exurbs spreading far out into the desert landscape. They offer spacious villas with green lawns sharing communal amenities like golf courses, tennis courts and swimming pools.

Real estate developers have given alluring names to these communities, like “Golden Heights,” “Sun City Gardens,” “Luna Springs” and “Oriana Villas.” Many are gated. In a country where 40 percent of the population still barely survives on \$2 a day or less, prices for homes are astronomical. A villa with three to four bedrooms and a small garden goes for \$250,000 to \$350,000. In Kattameya Heights, Arabella and Palm Hills, the most expensive mansions were selling for anywhere from \$2.5 million to \$4.5 million. Prices have

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skyrocketed in the past few years. According to the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt, the per-square-meter price for a home in a typical new suburb had jumped from \$150 in 2004 to \$800 in 2008. Old wealth, the newly rich, bank and business yuppies, lawyers, professors and other professionals were all part of the rush to these new “burbs,” some buying purely as an investment and hedge against inflation. But Arabs from the oil-rich states of the Persian Gulf were also snapping up villas to use mostly as vacation homes.

The change in the landscape has been just as dramatic along what used to be called “The Desert Road” leading from Cairo northward to the Mediterranean port city of Alexandria. In the early 1980s, it was one lane each way with the desert coming to the edges starting almost at the gates of the city. Today, farms and orchards stretch out along the entire length of the 140-mile highway which has been renamed “Agricultural Road.” Closer to Cairo, there are now new, middle class suburbs, like “Sixth of October City,” and “El-Sheikh Zayed City,” the latter served by the nearby French-owned Carrefour Shopping Center. The old road had become either a four- or six-lane highway all the way to Alexandria, though Egyptian drivers had quickly added another lane on the stretch leading into Cairo, expanding the downtown traffic gridlock to the outskirts. Huge billboards advertising the latest-model cars, suburban villas and, inevitably, Coca Cola, line the highway from the outskirts into the city’s center. Hi-tech companies, like Oracle, have also moved to Agricultural Road to set up their offices in “Smart Village,” making it possible for some Egyptians at least to commute directly from homes in these outlying suburbs to their jobs.

The American University in Cairo (AUC) has become yet another example of the flight to the desert. Once located on Tahrir Square, the city’s dead center, AUC has built a new 260-acre, \$400 million campus a full hour’s drive from the old one located in one of the half-built desert exurbs called “New Cairo.” Founded 90 years ago by Presbyterians, AUC has become the premier symbol of the American presence and contribution to the building of modern-day Egypt. It has graduated thousands of sons and daughters of the country’s business and political elite, including President Mubarak’s wife, Suzanne, her son, Gamal, and his wife, Khadiga. The

university has a student body of 7,000, mostly Egyptians and mostly undergraduates (5,500), who pay a hefty \$20,000 a year to attend this distant campus of ultra-modern sandstone and marble buildings reminiscent of universities in the rich Arab emirates of the Persian Gulf. The university has had to buy a fleet of buses to shuttle students and faculty back and forth from the city. Private universities like AUC have become much more common in Egypt, numbering 15 in and around Cairo, the best of them being non-profits supported by the governments of Germany, France, Russia, Britain and other countries. Most are concentrating on degrees in business, engineering and the sciences.

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Like the new suburbs, these new private universities stand out as a signpost of the enormous expansion underway in Egypt’s upper class stemming from the rapid conversion of the economy from socialism to capitalism. In the mid-1980s, the state controlled two-thirds of the economy; now the same proportion belongs to the private sector. This remarkable makeover of the economy has given rise to the Egyptian equivalent of Russia’s oligarchs, a small class of super rich industrialists, bankers, multinational company CEOs and IT promoters. They number around 100 families in the estimation of Ahmed Galal, managing director of the Cairo-based Economic Research Forum. Below these oligarchs is a group of young entrepreneurs numbering perhaps “a few thousand” and growing steadily in number.

The new oligarchs are driving the change underway in Egypt’s economy and upper levels of society. One example frequently mentioned is Ahmed Ezz, dubbed the “*Malek al-Hadid*,” or “Steel King,” of the country. Ezz had been involved in the steel import business since the 1970s. He took advantage of the privatization of state assets to acquire in 1999 the Alexandria National Iron and Steel Company and then began building his own empire. By 2007, Al-Ezz Steel and its subsidiaries were producing 5.3 million tons of various steel products—70 percent of the country’s total production—to become the Arab world and Africa’s largest producer. Other oligarchs come from the Sawiris family, a father-and-sons operation owning a telecom, construction and hotel conglomerate called Orascom, boasting a net





worth in 2007 of \$6.2 billion. Orascom Telecom Holding, led by Naguib Sawiris, has 20,000 employees and 15 million mobile phone subscribers in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Another son, Nassef, runs Orascom Construction Industries, with a cement production capacity of 24 million tons in plants located in Egypt, Algeria, Pakistan and Nigeria. The Sawiris are also notable because they belong to Egypt's Christian Coptic community and three of them—Onis, Naguib and Nassef—are the only Egyptians to have made Forbes' "Middle East's 20 Richest People" list in 2007. The most illustrious friends of these new oligarchs are doubtlessly the Mubarak brothers, Alaa and Gamal. Gamal spent more than six years in Bank of America's London office before founding his own private equity fund, Medinvest Associates Ltd. The new oligarchs and their friends have used the Egyptian Federation of Industries and Egyptian-American Chamber of Commerce to form a powerful lobby to promote their reforms together with their own interests.

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At the center of the reform process from the start has been a U.S.-financed think tank, the Egyptian Center for Economic Studies (ECES). Founded in the early 1990s, this propagator of free enterprise and trade took on its central role after the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) endowed it with a \$10 million grant in 2001. Its publications, studies and proposals have all been about promoting liberalization of the economy, encouraging private and foreign investment and expanding foreign trade. Among its founders was Gamal Mubarak, who rose by 2002 to also become head of the ruling National Democratic Party's powerful "Policies Committee." The center's board of directors in 2009 read like a Who's Who of the country's political and economic elite. It included Nassef Sawiris, head of Orascom Construction Industries; Ezz, the country's "Steel King;" and three cabinet members—Trade and Industry Minister Rachid Mohamed Rachid, former Unilever CEO in Egypt; Transportation Minister Mohamed Mansour, representing 10 of the top Fortune 500 companies and once head of the Egyptian Federation of Industries; and Housing Minister Ahmed el Maghraby, former chairman of Accord Hotels operations. Gamal Mubarak is said to have

been responsible for drafting these ECES directors into the government together with Ahmed Nazif, a Cairo University engineering professor and prime minister since 2004.

The takeover of government by "Gamal's cabinet" marked the very belated start of Egypt's economic revival. Incredibly, it had taken President Mubarak 23 years to make the commitment and take on the risks. Suddenly, growth rates jumped to seven percent or higher. Egypt's Gross Domestic Product more than doubled from \$78.8 billion in 2004 to \$162.8 billion four years later. By late 2004, there was just one exchange rate instead of eight, and the value of the Egyptian pound was left to float on the world market. Foreign direct investment, mainly in energy and real estate, increased more than sixfold, from \$2 billion in 2004 to \$13 billion in 2008. At long last, 165 deficit-ridden state companies, more than half the total, were sold off to private investors.

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Egyptian and foreign analysts often compare Turkey and Egypt because they are both major Muslim countries, former hubs of the Ottoman Empire, similar in population size and similar in their histories of secular military rulers having to cope with a rising Islamic challenge. Turkey's economy also went through a similar statist-to-capitalist transition, though it started 20 years earlier and with far different political consequences. Both, too, saw the development of a new class of entrepreneurs who became politically active. In Turkey, they morphed into a dynamic force promoting multi-party democracy and the rise to power of a Muslim-oriented party. Known as "the Anatolian Tigers," this new class of devout, hard-working "Muslim Calvinists" drove the phenomenal growth in that country's Gross Domestic Product as it soared from \$67 billion in 1985 to \$794 billion in 2008, nearly five times that of Egypt. From the start, the Turkish military and business elite, imbued with the secular ideology of Kemal Ataturk, founder of modern-day Turkey, looked upon these Muslim entrepreneurs as subversives and sought to shut them out of power. So the Anatolian Tigers turned to backing the nascent Islamic opposition, which finally won the parliamentary elections of 2002 under the banner of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The

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Islamic-inspired AKP is today the dominant political party in Turkish politics, and its leaders, Abdullah Gul and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, are the country's president and prime minister, respectively. The question naturally arises whether Egypt might follow the "Turkish model" of a peaceful transition from secular military to Muslim civilian rule.

One major difference between Turkey and Egypt is that the latter's new capitalist entrepreneurs have been welcomed with open arms into the ruling NDP. They have flooded its highest ranks and stacked its Policies Committee to win approval of their policies. Gamal became assistant secretary-general of the party. Ezz, the "Steel King," was named the party's organizational secretary. In 2004, they took over the government under Prime Minister Nazif. Mubarak's authoritarian rule has been just fine with Egypt's oligarchs and entrepreneurs, who backed him unquestioningly in the 2005 election when he became president for life. Their fusion into the ruling party has made it extremely difficult for Egyptian secular opposition parties, not to mention the Muslim Brotherhood, to attract upper class financial or political sympathy for their pro-democracy cause much beyond the literate of Cairo and bloggers in cyberspace.

The only contribution to political change made by Egyptian entrepreneurs has been the new private newspapers that have sprung up recently. Altogether, there were 21 private papers in early 2010, and they had cut seriously into readership of the long-dominant, state-run newspaper, *Al-Ahram*. These publications have definitely added spice to the public debate, often criticizing ministers, if not Mubarak himself, and questioning government domestic and foreign policies. The two most widely read are *Al-Shorouk* and *Al-Masry Al-Youm*. The former was launched in 2009 by Ibrahim el-Moallem, chairman of Dar Al-Shorouk Publishing and Printing Company, which was founded by his father in the 1960s. It has quickly made its mark as a feisty critic of government with an Arab nationalist slant inherited from the Nasser era. Even more popular is *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, established in 2004 by a group of wealthy businessmen led by Salah Diab, chairman of Pico Group, a conglomerate dealing in oil, tourism, agriculture and real estate. His brother, Tawfiq, is head of the paper's

board of directors. With a circulation of more than 100,000, *Al-Masry Al-Youm* is the first private newspaper planning to buy its own printing press so that it will no longer be dependent on the goodwill, and printing plants, of the state-owned *Al-Ahram*.

Government censorship of the media has ebbed but far from ended, according to reporters and editors working at these two newspapers. Censors no longer insist on reading stories prior to publication. If the presidency or government were unhappy, they would call to complain after the offending story had already appeared. However, self-censorship is the quid pro quo, and there exist very definite "red lines" to

be crossed at one's peril. These include critical stories about President Mubarak, the Egyptian military or the State Security Investigations Services. Nothing prevents them, however, from giving plenty of space to the opposition. In early 2010, both *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and *Al-Shorouk* were giving extensive coverage to the presidential bid by the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Mohamed ElBaradei.


The boldest risk-takers are the bloggers. According to the *Daily News*, the main English-language paper, there are today 1,481 Egyptian blogs, though only 320 have taken an interest in politics. One blogger, Abdul Kareem Amer, was sentenced in 2007 to four years in prison

for insulting Islam and President Mubarak. Another, Wael Abbas, has photographed scenes of police brutality and sexual harassment of women and then posted them on his blog as well as on YouTube for worldwide viewing. The government has tried to silence Abbas by periodically shutting down his accounts with YouTube, Facebook and Yahoo. In March, a court sentenced him to six months in jail for "providing a telecommunications service to the public without permission."

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Egypt's breakout from the socialist Nasserite straight-jacket has created a whole new set of destabilizing social and economic problems. It has led to high inflation, serious industrial unrest and worsening social inequality; in short, the makings for real political trouble. Inflation reached over

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13 percent in 2009, and workers held over 600 strikes and protests last year, demanding higher wages and job security. Many of the measures were directed at the 165 state companies turned over to private owners. The official minimum daily wage of 35 pounds (less than \$7) has not changed since 1984. In April 2008, a strike by 1,500 workers at the state-owned Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in Mahalla al-Kubra sparked the creation by Cairo-based activists of the national April 6 Youth Movement in solidarity with worker demand for higher wages. Using their blogs, Facebook pages and the like, they endeavored to organize a nationwide strike. It failed miserably but did serve to shed light on the plight of Egyptian workers at a time of an unprecedented economic boom.

The extent of poverty in Egypt was detailed in a 2009 eye-opening study by an AUC economics professor, Ahmed Kamaly, undertaken for the General Authority for Investment. The study concluded there had been no “trickle down” to the bottom of society from the economic prosperity the upper class was reveling in. In fact, the opposite had happened: the proportion of Egyptians living below the poverty line had increased, and 44 percent of the population was now trying to survive on less than \$2 a day. The study discredited all the American-inspired theories at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund of downward-spreading economic benefits from free markets.

In early 2010, the widening gap between rich and poor was very much on the minds of Egyptians and foreigners alike simply because it had become so blatantly obvious and troubling. According to Hanaa Kheir-El-Din, the Egyptian Center for Economic Studies’ executive director, one quarter of Egypt’s 80 million people had become dependent on charity for survival. Another 40 percent hovered just above the poverty line struggling to make ends meet, many of them civil servants earning \$170 to \$200 a month. The gap between rich and poor was steadily worsening and had resulted in, as one resident American economist expressed it, “a lot of conspicuous wealth and a lot of conspicuous poverty.” Making matters potentially explosive, government officials were talking about cutting back on the billions of dollars being spent on food and energy subsidies, the same

issue they had faced in the mid-1980s and never tackled for fear of upsetting the country’s fragile social peace.

So what had happened to Egypt’s middle class in the midst of boom? Was it rising to join the ranks of the wealthy or sinking into those of the poor? This was the question I put to Kamaly, co-author of the “no-trickle-down” study. He himself had become so fed up with Cairo’s chaos that he was thinking of moving to the suburb of Kattameya—a good example of professional class attitudes. Kamaly wasn’t sure who counted as middle class any longer. What about the millions of Egyptians working in the Arab gulf states, one million in Kuwait alone? Certainly they were earning a lot more than \$2 a day, but

were they part of a new middle class? He also drew a distinction between the “economic” and “cultural” middle classes. The former might be growing in number, but the latter was shrinking in his view. The newly affluent were not as well educated as the old upper class and were far less interested in the arts or politics. Worse yet, they were too easily intimidated by the Muslim Brotherhood’s campaign to infuse society with Islamic values and uproot Western liberal ones.

Kheir-El-Din, the economic studies center executive director, had a slightly different take on how Egyptian society was evolving. Egypt’s new entrepreneurs were indeed merging into its old upper class, many of whose members were new entrepreneurs themselves after losing their land and factories in Nasser’s socialist revolution. Meanwhile, a new middle class was forming, drawn from white collar workers and other higher-level employees of the new private banks, factories and commercial enterprises born of the economic boom. She estimated the average starting salary of a middle class worker at around \$600 a month, less than sufficient to fulfill the rising aspirations of the new middle class and its dream of moving out to the new suburbs. Many simply could not afford a car, an essential prerequisite for suburban living. On one point Kheir-El-Din was in total agreement with Kamaly: the new middle class was less well educated and far less interested in cultural pursuits. It was less dynamic and definitely not “the motor of change” in Egyptian society.

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One of the hottest issues Egyptians, foreign residents and diplomats are all debating today is how the government should deal with the Muslim Brotherhood, which shocked the country by capturing 88 seats—20 percent of all elected deputies—in the 2005 parliamentary elections to establish itself as the main opposition bloc. The Brotherhood is the oldest Islamic political movement not only in Egypt but the entire Arab world, founded by the Egyptian scholar Hassan al-Banna in 1928. Its primary goal has long been to establish an Islamic state. One of its more fanatical members nearly succeeded in assassinating President Nasser in 1954. In retaliation, Nasser arrested thousands of Brethren, while thousands others fled to Saudi Arabia. When Sadat allowed them to return in the mid-1970s, most of them had been thoroughly imbued with the puritanical Islamic code of conduct preached by Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi sect.

Whatever Egyptians think of the Brethren, almost all agree they have had great success in progressively imposing their values on society over the past three decades. Western-oriented Egyptians blame them for promoting first scarves and now face veils on women, censoring alcohol and putting a crimp in the country's traditionally liberal society. The Brethren have also been responsible in their view for stifling public debate, because "you can't quarrel with God."

They are seen as a mortal threat to the Western social values many upper class Egyptians have long ago integrated into their underlying Muslim culture. One of the most vocal opponents of the Brotherhood is Ezz, Egypt's "Steel King," who has been heard in private ranting against its creeping domination of Egyptian society. The problem, according to Abdel Monem Said Aly, Al-Ahram's board chairman, is that the "Saudi clan," as he called Wahhabi-influenced Brethren, have come to dominate Brotherhood thinking on all social policies.

There is considerable disagreement as to whether the Brotherhood constitutes Egypt's main obstacle to democracy or its best hope for a breakthrough. Economists like


Ahmed Galal at the Economic Research Forum argue the Brotherhood has done Egypt a huge disservice by giving Mubarak justification for keeping in place the "state of emergency" decreed 29 years ago upon Sadat's assassination, a proclamation used to strengthen his authoritarian rule and crush all opposition parties. The Brotherhood's first attempt in 2007 to produce a platform in preparation for launching a separate political party resulted in what Galal called "a purely religious text." Western-educated Egyptians like Ali Sawa, an economics professor at Cairo University, distrust profoundly the Brotherhood's motives for wanting to be in Parliament, believing it has used its presence there simply to push its Islamist agenda while making no constructive contribution to solving the country's economic and social problems.

The other view of the Brotherhood is that this fount of Islamic conservative activism has mellowed considerably and progressively come to accept the rules of engagement in a multi-party democracy. Since they form the country's largest organized political constituency, only by incorporating Islamists into the political system can Egypt ever hope to become truly democratic. Egyptian and foreign scholars who hold this view draw parallels to the Christian Democrat parties of Western Europe and the Euro-communists in Italy, who all underwent a transition from orthodox militancy to political pragmatism in the pursuit of wider public support.

The Brotherhood at least seems to have given up the use of violence. None of its partisans has been implicated in any of the periodic terrorist attacks against Western tourists, police and government officials that have marred recent Egyptian history. The vast majority of the 485 incidents that took place between 1970 and 2009 as tracked by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in its Global Terrorism Data was the work of al-Gamaat al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Group). This was the faction responsible for Sadat's assassination and probably also for the attempt to kill Mubarak in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1995. But even the Islamic Group eventually abandoned terrorism as a tactic, after prolonged theological debate among its jailed

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leaders. Mubarak released hundreds of its followers from jail in 2003.

Still, Mubarak has been unwilling to relent when it comes to the Brotherhood. He has never lifted the formal ban on the organization and has availed himself regularly of state of emergency laws to round up hundreds of its officials and activists, seeking to keep it perpetually off balance. The main reason seems to boil down to power. There is only one grassroots movement, or party, capable of challenging the governing NDP and that is the Muslim Brotherhood. This became painfully clear in the 2005 elections when Brethren candidates won 88 seats in Parliament compared to only 17 in the previous election. Probably close to four million Egyptians—around 40 percent of those who bothered to turn out, which was only 28.5 percent of 32 million registered voters—cast a ballot for Brotherhood candidates. Those same elections exposed a precipitous drop in the popularity of the ruling NDP: only 145 of its 444 candidates (32.6 percent) were elected. To keep its hold over Parliament, the NDP has had to depend on elected independents to keep its majority. The three secular opposition parties together had only won 12 seats.

Since its 2005 election victory, the Brotherhood has done much to undermine its own cause. Its reformist leaders tried for five years to set up a separate non-religious party to attract more voters, just as other Brotherhood branches in Yemen, Jordan, Kuwait and Algeria had long since done. These would-be reformers went so far as to approach Middle East specialists at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, D.C. for advice on formulating a party platform. Their advice came in the form of a public response that outlined key issues the Brotherhood should clarify regarding its attitude toward women, Christians and human rights.

After a great deal of internal debate, the Brotherhood published in August 2007 a draft of its proposed party platform. The document proved equally disastrous at home and abroad. Not only did it provoke a serious rift between reformers and diehard conservatives inside the movement, it created serious doubts outside Egypt that the Brotherhood was ready to accept a separation of mosque and state. The draft proposed setting up a “council of Muslim scholars” to judge which laws and bills before Parliament were in keeping

with Islamic law, evoking theocratic Iran’s powerful Council of Guardians. The document also excluded women from running for president and non-Muslims from serving in senior government positions. Apparently the two Christian Copts in the cabinet, Finance Minister Youssef Boutros-Ghali and Environmental Minister of State Maged George, would have to go. Carnegie scholars Nathan Brown and Amr Hamzawy, who had been involved in the dialogue with Brotherhood leaders over the platform, concluded the whole exercise had backfired terribly. Instead of projecting “an image of a vital and democratic movement,” the draft platform had left the impression the Brotherhood was “confused, divided, devoid of a strategic calculus and unable to decide on a course of action or clear set of beliefs at a critical juncture in its history.” The idea of launching a political party had crashed on take-off.

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two newspapers.*

Fast-forward to early 2010 when the Brotherhood chose a successor to its retiring 81-year-old Supreme Guide, Mohamed Mehdi Akef, and re-elected members of its governing 16-member Guidance Office. By then, State Security Services had inflicted considerable damage on the organization by jailing hundreds of local and national officials and closing down 40 companies funding the movement. Security also made sure that not a single Brotherhood candidate won a seat in the Shura Council, the upper house of Parliament, in the 2007 elections or in those held for municipal councils in 2008. In the latter, 10,000 Brethren candidates had initially run for

office, but after 4,000 were disqualified at the last moment, the Brotherhood withdrew from the race. The government’s aim was clearly to squeeze them out of government, and the pressure had provoked a deep schism within the Brotherhood over whether they should indeed abandon the political process altogether. In this atmosphere, it came as no surprise that conservatives edged out reformers in elections for the new 16-member Guidance Office and then chose Mohamed Badi’, a 66-year-old veterinary professor known as a proponent of disengagement, as the new Supreme Guide. Egyptian commentators noted he had shared a prison cell with Sayyid Qutb, a defining Brotherhood figure whose political militancy and anti-Nasser writings had led to his execution in 1966.

One of the defeated reformers was Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh, a balding medical doctor in his late 50s who has been in and out of jail regularly since the early 1980s. I found him the day after Badi's victory at the Arab Union of Medical Doctors, where he serves as secretary general. He was anxious to take issue with the prevailing view in the media that Badi's election constituted the victory of "conservatives" over "reformers" and an end to the Brotherhood in politics. "There is no change at all now in our position regarding participation," he insisted. "Now, no one says, 'don't go into Parliament.' It's accepted that we work within the system." The Brotherhood would run candidates in the coming November election, though it had a deliberate "policy" of not seeking to win a majority in order to avoid antagonizing the government needlessly. He blamed "extreme secularists" in the media and government for portraying the Brotherhood "like a devil ready to take over society and the state." Its purpose in being in Parliament was to train members in its workings and to demonstrate to Egyptians that the Brethren were committed to the political process, non-violence and providing services to constituents. He readily conceded NDP deputies did a much better job delivering pork to their supporters, but that was due to their majority in Parliament. "Still, it's worth being there to show that we want to work peacefully."

Abul Fotouh offered an interesting explanation for the Brotherhood's victory in the 2005 elections. It was, he said, all due to President George W. Bush's campaign to promote greater democracy in the Arab world. Bush had specifically called upon Egypt to take the lead. According to Abul-Fotouh, Mubarak had protested loudly against U.S. interference in Egypt's internal affairs but then responded positively. Among the steps he had taken was to allow the Brotherhood to run candidates in more districts than ever before. "Bush's pressure helped us get 88 seats." It wouldn't happen again in the coming November election. He was resigned to the Brotherhood having to accept a sharp reduction and said it would probably be forced to strike a pre-election agreement with the government. "I expect that elections will be fixed ahead of time," he said matter-of-factly. "We expect the

government to allow us to win only five or ten seats." He assumed this would be fine with the Obama administration, too, since it had backed off Bush's push for greater democracy in the Arab world. He warned that Mubarak's efforts to marginalize the Brethren would be "very dangerous for Egypt and all the Middle East" because the Brotherhood was committed to "moderate peaceful means." Others, like Osama bin Laden, were not, and they projected "a loud voice" across the Arab world.


Abul Fotouh did not believe Turkey's AK Party, which had dropped its Islamic agenda to gain wider support, could serve as a model for the Brotherhood. He personally had come to accept the separation of state and religion in Brotherhood doctrine. On the other hand, the majority in the ruling Guidance Office had not, even though the movement's founder, al-Banna, had given his blessing to setting up a separate non-religious party. Abul-Fotouh blamed the government for the reformers' defeat because, he said, its repressive tactics had discouraged moderation and encouraged "social extremism." The government had given free reign to Saudi-influenced clerics who were pressing Egyptian women to wear not only head scarves but the *niqab*, the face veil covering all but the eyes. He expressed his own opposition to the *niqab*, but said, "You can only change

this by allowing moderate voices." Surprisingly, Abul-Fotouh seemed to be of the same mind as Said Ali, Al-Ahram's board chairman, as he, too, had concluded the Brotherhood had fallen under the control of "the Saudi clan."

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The picture emerging from this snapshot of Egypt in early 2010 seemed full of contradictions and currents flowing in opposite directions. It had embraced liberal economic reform wholeheartedly, leading to the first real economic boom in recent times. This had produced a vastly expanded upper class but also a deep rift in society between rich and poor. At the same time, society was becoming much more conservative under the Brotherhood's direct and indirect influence. If the economy was moving in one direction and society in the exact opposite, what did this foreshadow for political reform? This

*There is considerable disagreement as to whether the Brotherhood constitutes Egypt's main obstacle to democracy or its best hope for a breakthrough.*



was the question I put to pro-democracy and pro-government advocates, human rights activists, editors, columnists and businessmen as Egypt approaches parliamentary elections in November and presidential elections in 2011.

Two questions already dominated the debate. First, would Mubarak stand again for president in 2011, after three decades in power when he will be 83 years old? Or would he hand over the reins while still alive to his son, Gamal? Unlike Sadat, who had selected Mubarak as his vice-president, Mubarak has never named a deputy. However, he has helped Gamal rise from political obscurity to assistant secretary-general of the ruling party as well as head of its strategic Policies Committee. The status of Mubarak's failing health, long regarded a state secret and banned from media speculation, finally became a public issue after his office announced in February that he had gone to Germany to undergo surgery for removal of his gallbladder. The other question was whether Mohamed ElBaradei, Egypt's most famous international figure, would press on with his uphill campaign to challenge Mubarak or his son.

ElBaradei, 68, looms as the great hope of reformers and opposition groups including the Brotherhood. Nevertheless, he is also still the great unknown to most Egyptians. A Ph.D. graduate in international law from New York University School of Law, the balding, owl-looking diplomat has spent his entire professional career working abroad either for the Egyptian foreign ministry or at the International Atomic Energy Agency in Geneva. For 12 years he was the IAEA's director general, emerging from bureaucratic obscurity with his outspoken criticism of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its confrontational policy toward Iran. His deep commitment to a non-nuclear world and efforts to avoid a U.S.-Iranian war doubtlessly helped win him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. His sterling international stature and "clean hands" in a corruption-ridden society make him potentially a serious contender. Whether he has the stomach and stamina to take on the Mubarak dynasty—or the charisma to mobilize the average apolitical Egyptian—remains to be seen. Already some of his would-be supporters are worried he is too aloof and cerebral for the task ahead. All the

same, his first steps toward launching a presidential campaign have definitely roiled the Nile political waters.

The observers I interviewed varied widely in their views, and were united only in their inability to see a clear path forward for Egypt.

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Salama Ahmed Salama, editorial board chief of *Al-Shorouk* daily, is one of Egypt's best known columnists. Now 78 years old, he has been writing about domestic politics most of his professional career, usually with a very critical eye and an Arab nationalist slant. From his viewpoint, the cause of press freedom has made a lot of progress in the past few years. Private newspapers like his own were flourishing, and there was an unprecedented amount of free debate in the press, cyberspace and on television. Still, he was cynical about its impact. "They don't give a damn what is written or said on talk shows," he said of the government. The only voice that counted was that of Mubarak, and it would remain that way until he died or resigned.

The best Egypt could hope for from the new freer atmosphere, according to Salama, was the creation of conditions for "the right moment for change." He felt there was a lot of pressure building up from both within society and abroad for real change, and the "right moment" could come when Mubarak left the scene. Egypt might even see the end of military rule, provided the Muslim Brotherhood did not decide to "make a power play" using violent means. In his view, the army's influence on politics was slowly waning. Furthermore, he said, "there is no strong military personality who can take over or lead the country." His analysis of the three secular opposition parties sitting in Parliament with now just nine seats was scathing: they were ready to make whatever deal necessary with the government just to survive the threat from the Brotherhood. He also felt the ruling NDP was pretty much an empty shell. "The NDP is really just Hosni, Gamal and 10 or 12 people around them," he said referring to the president and his son. So who, then, would decide the succession issue? Salama was

*After a great deal of internal debate, the Brotherhood published in August 2007 a draft of its proposed party platform. The document proved equally disastrous at home and abroad.*

unclear but noted that the country's security forces remained probably "the real king maker."

Was it possible Egypt might become another Iran? Might opposition activists take to the streets en masse in Cairo as they had done in the summer of 2009 in Tehran to protest President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's re-election? Salama doubted either a social or political explosion was imminent. "Egyptians are very docile people unless something drastic happens. They only went into the street en masse when Nasser died." That event in 1970 saw two million Egyptians wailing collectively in the streets of Cairo as the great Arab nationalist was taken to be buried. Rather, Salama's main concern was for the rise in tensions between Egypt's majority Muslim population and its eight million Christian Copts. An ugly incident had occurred in Upper Egypt in early January 2010 when three Muslims opened fire on Copts as they were leaving church after a midnight masse celebrating their Christmas. Six Copts and a Muslim policeman were killed. The incident had served to remind Egyptians of the country's unending religious fault line.

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Bahey El Din Hassan, general director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, was surprisingly optimistic about the political situation. He had spent three years on the government-sponsored National Council for Human Rights before resigning after he discovered "it wasn't serious about human rights." This lifelong human rights crusader and former journalist described himself as "usually pessimistic." Still, he said he detected a "new spirit" taking hold in the land and a "new momentum" toward greater democracy because of ElBaradei's entrance onto the political stage. All opposition groups were rallying to his cause, and he was "very positively viewed even within the Muslim Brotherhood." Opposition groups could build on the political experience they had gained in the 2005 election and create an even bigger movement for the coming ones.

Hassan talked about ElBaradei as a potential game changer because the government in his judgment would not dare to

manhandle a Nobel Prize laureate the way it had Ayman Nour. A former deputy, Nour had formed a new party, Al Ghad ("Tomorrow"), in 2003 and then challenged Mubarak in the 2005 presidential race, coming in second with seven percent of the vote. For his success, he was then thrown into jail on dubious charges involving alleged forged signatures gathered to start his Al Ghad Party. Nour stayed there for four years, becoming one of President George W. Bush's favorite examples of a courageous dissident fighting for democracy in the Arab world. Similar government measures taken against ElBaradei, Hassan opined, would boomerang seriously and create a groundswell of support for his presidential bid.


Hassan thought mistreatment of ElBaradei might be the one event capable of galvanizing the Obama administration into speaking out on behalf of democracy and human rights in Egypt, subjects it has been soft-pedaling in hopes of repairing Washington's strained relations with Mubarak over these very same issues during the Bush years. Like many Egyptian human rights activists, Hassan was convinced President Obama's actions, or inactions, would be crucial for the fate of democracy in Egypt. He was only too well aware of Obama's lukewarm commitment. On the wall of his office off Bab Al-Luq Square in central Cairo hung a picture of himself standing next to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. It had been taken while she was accompanying Obama on his trip to Cairo in June 2009 to deliver his watershed "A

New Beginning" address to the Muslim world.

Hassan noted that he was the only representative from an independent human rights group invited to meet Clinton; the others were all from state-sponsored ones, the only groups to which the U.S. government provides funding at Cairo's insistence. "A lot depends on the United States and European Union, but mostly the United States," Hassan said. If the government turned to repressive measures to squash ElBaradei's campaign, "Would Obama remain silent?" He hoped not, but wasn't certain. Would Egyptians take to the streets to express their outrage the way Iranians had after their hotly disputed 2009 presidential election? "I doubt it will be the same as in Iran," he said. "Egyptian society doesn't have

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the same dynamics. It will depend more on the international response than domestic pressure.”

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Ahmed Maher, a 30-some civil engineer and disheveled pro-democracy activist, had already plunged into the still disorganized ElBaradei campaign. Maher is the archetype of the new tech-savvy Egyptian political activist plugged into the latest cyberspace techniques of mobilizing supporters and fully cognizant of the regime changes brought about by popular non-violent uprisings in Czechoslovakia (the Velvet Revolution), Ukraine (the Orange Revolution) and Georgia (the Rose Revolution). With his dirty jeans and sweat shirt and intense stare from behind rimless glasses, he looked every bit the street activist he has been for the past six years. Maher belonged to Kefaya, meaning “Enough,” the unofficial title of the Egyptian Movement for Change. This was the grassroots movement organized helter-skelter to oppose Mubarak in the 2005 presidential election. After that, Maher helped found in 2008 the April 6 Youth Movement that had relied on Facebook, Twitter, blogs and cell phones to try to organize a general strike in support of workers at the Mahala Kobra Textile Factory in the Nile Delta. The strike fizzled quickly. But Maher said they had one great victory: they forced Gamal Mubarak himself to turn to Facebook to defend the government’s crackdown on the strikers.

Maher was currently part of what he called “The Egyptian Campaign Against Presidential Succession,” meaning Gamal’s bid to take over from his father. He had been busy going door to door in the leafy, upper-class suburb of Maadi urging residents to register to vote, back ElBaradei and probe what their deputy in Parliament was doing to solve local problems. His coalition was on the verge of merging with another being formed—the National Coalition for Change—to promote the ElBaradei campaign, which only took on life after the Nobel laureate returned from his home in Austria in mid-February. He stayed just long enough to form a coalition with 30 opposition figures and gathered nearly 200,000 signatures for his presidential bid. His supporters quickly

introduced the stately ElBaradei to the world of Facebook, setting up three pages for him that collectively boasts nearly 200,000 “fans.” Since his initial 10-day visit in February, the would-be energizer of Egyptian democracy has returned several other times to try to broaden his rainbow coalition to include all opposition groups from the Communist Party to the Muslim Brotherhood.

As Maher described the pro-democracy movement, it consists of a loose network of a dozen different groups with no more than 500 to 800 activists at the center. They had studied the various “color revolutions” of Eastern Europe and concluded that similar mass demonstrations were unlikely to unfold in Egypt. Could he imagine seeing 100,000 Egyptians demonstrating for ElBaradei in downtown Tahrir Square? “Maybe 50,000,” he replied. “It is much easier now than in 2005, because ElBaradei is not Ayman Nour,” a reference to the latter’s lesser international renown. Anyway, it was better now to concentrate on the forthcoming parliamentary elections. “My dream is seeing twenty to thirty young people monitoring every ballot box, and if something happens we go into the street to protest.”

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Ali El Dean Hillal, a 66-year-old Cairo University political science professor who has become a chief strategist of the ruling NDP, had a very cynical view of Egyptian politics in general and the opposition’s prospects in particular. Hillal joined the Mubarak government in 1999 as minister of youth and worked on a seminal “state of nation” study that took two years to complete. It became the basis for the rejuvenation of the NDP. Nattily dressed in a creaseless dark suit, Hillal proceeded to deliver a perfectly-timed, one hour lecture at party headquarters overlooking the Nile in downtown Cairo. The entrance was adorned with the party’s main slogan today—“New Thinking” or “New Vision.” Hillal had just finished writing a book on Egypt’s political legacies and options for the future. Regarding the former, he had concluded that ever since the time of Mohammed Ali, the founder of modern-day Egypt in the early 19th century, the only form of government the country had known was “easy authoritarianism” under

*Like many Egyptian human rights activists, Hassan was convinced President Obama’s actions, or inactions, would be crucial for the fate of democracy in Egypt.*

one big party. The supposed heyday of Egyptian democracy between 1929 and 1952, he had discovered, witnessed 40 cabinets with an average lifetime of nine months. Only one Parliament had finished its prescribed five-year term. “These are not legacies favorable to democracy.” It was his view that the current portrayal in the Western media of Egyptians pining for democracy was a liberal delusion. Egyptians, he claimed, were non-political by nature; even the discontented were agitating only for jobs, wage increases and better housing or maybe social justice issues. “Political demands come exclusively from the intellectuals, but they are not ready to sacrifice for them.” They aren’t very numerous either, “maybe 10,000.” The most serious pressure coming from within Egyptian society, according to Hillal, was “for more Islam.”

The political opposition, in his view, was hopelessly fragmented, showing no ability to form more than fleeting coalitions and no disposition for compromise. “There is a culture of fragmentation,” he said. “Every attempt to make a coalition has been a failure since 1984, when the liberal Wafd Party tried to form one with the Muslim Brotherhood.” In any case, political platforms, including that of the NDP, were virtually identical and largely meaningless to the electorate.

Echoing an old American political adage, he noted all politics in Egypt was local.


Hillal maintained that the real power in the political system was still the military and would remain so. The military might be willing to accept a civilian leader now, but it still intended to protect “core issues,” primarily the country’s stability. Thus, the military and state security services enjoyed a special status unlike any other institutions. They stood immune from criticism or civilian oversight. Not even Parliament was allowed to discuss their budgets. “The army—no one touches it, no one. National security issues, you don’t touch them.” He did not, however, suggest that the military had the same self-professed role as that in Turkey, namely assuring secular rule. Still, in his view all politics in Egypt boiled down to one central issue: making sure the Muslim Brotherhood never came to power.

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As for the succession issue, Hillal believed that if Mubarak Senior were still healthy in 2011 he would run again, because “he believes God saved him for a mission,” a reference to his close escape from assassination together with Sadat. Hillal had heard the president declare publicly two years ago that “as long as I have a breath in me, I will continue to serve the country.” He maintained Mubarak had never spoken even to his closest associates about his intentions for his son, unless he had left secret instructions nobody knew about. (Lee Hamilton, director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and former head of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said Mubarak had assured a group of leading U.S. foreign policy experts while visiting Washington in August 2009 that they should not worry about the succession issue. “We have that worked out,” Mubarak told the group. Hamilton said they took his words to mean he had arranged for Gamal to become his successor).

Hillal insisted it would be the NDP in charge of the transition, but then seemed to contradict himself by declaring, “In all cases, the crucial factor will be the army.” In his judgment, Gamal Mubarak’s main challenge would not be coming to power but keeping it. He would have to build a new kind of legitimacy as Egypt’s first non-military ruler since the 1952 revolution, and he would have to decide early on whether the Muslim Brotherhood should be included or excluded from politics. To include the movement would require amendments to the constitution that would inevitably make Egypt “more Islamic.” That option would constitute a “noble gamble,” one that Gamal could only risk after establishing his own legitimacy, which in itself would be no easy task. The last three presidents had enjoyed the military as their backstop; Gamal would be the first to rely solely on civilian support. “Has Gamal been tested?” he asked rhetorically. “No. No. No.”

The one option the wily NDP strategist did not put forth in his various succession scenarios was the possible rise to power of Omar Suleiman, 75, head of the ubiquitous Egyptian General Intelligence Services. He is regarded among many Egyptians as the second most powerful figure in the



country, the only intelligence chief ever to have had his name made public. Suleiman is well known abroad as well because of his lead role in negotiating among feuding Palestinian factions and in dealing with Israel and the United States on security matters. If he harbors political aspirations, he has never revealed them, and at his advanced age may well have none. Were he to become a presidential candidate, he would have to join the NDP leadership at least a year before the election presently set for September 2011. At least, that is what the constitution dictates, and it would put him in direct competition with Gamal Mubarak starting this fall.

Hillal excluded an Iranian-style power struggle over the succession. Egypt didn't have the same divisions within its political elite or ruling institutions, he noted, and the opposition was also far less disposed to, or capable of, mounting huge rallies or massive street marches. But he did feel Egypt was badly in need of a "moment of enthusiasm," something like the United States had seen when it elected an African-American president in 2009. "Maybe the succession will bring our 'moment of enthusiasm' for change."

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Abdel Monem Said Ali, Al-Ahram's board chairman, oversees the main government-run newspaper, boasting by far the biggest daily circulation.

The newspaper's editor traditionally has served as the president's mouthpiece and sometimes become his alter ego, like Mohammed Hassanein Heikal was for President Nasser. Said Ali ranks higher than the paper's editor. He is responsible for all 17 publications of the Al-Ahram Publishing House and its 9,000 employees. Al-Ahram even prints all opposition newspapers. It may be another sign of the times that fewer and fewer Egyptians are interested in what *Al-Ahram* has to say. The paper's circulation has dropped from 800,000 to half that number as the 26 private dailies now publishing have steadily cut into its readership. He also noted that just as in the United States reading habits are changing. Young Egyptians, like young Americans, are turning increasingly

to other sources for their information. Seventeen million Egyptians now use the Internet, he noted. He believed the focus of public interest was also changing, from "soccer matches to politics."

Said Ali, too, looked upon ElBaradei as the country's "rising star," though one still more a "virtual phenomenon" with most his supporters located in cyberspace. On the streets of Cairo, he was hardly known and had yet to rally much support. But Said Ali didn't view the street as a very good gauge of public opinion, since rarely did more than 2,000 Egyptians turn out for any political cause. In his estimation, ElBaradei might make a difference in five years, but not immediately.

He found it significant that ElBaradei, like Gamal Mubarak, was courting support primarily from civilian groups rather than the military establishment. In fact, Said Ali's prognosis for the military's future in politics was the exact opposite of Ali Hillal's. In his judgment, the army was in the process of taking its exodus. "If you look at the military's role over the past 200 years since Mohammed Ali, I would say they're out for good." Even the prestige of a military career was fading. Children of the military were no longer following in the footsteps of their fathers. Increasingly, they instead had an eye on making money in private business.

Said Ali believed changes were definitely underway in Egyptian politics, but they were still well short of adding up to anything dramatic. "It has not reached a critical mass yet," he said. "We are not in a new era, but

we will get there." Still pending in his view was a transfer of power in both the ruling party and the Muslim Brotherhood to a younger generation of reformers. The old guard continued to dominate the leaderships of both, state-control Nasserites afflicting the NDP and Islamic hardliners tainting the Brotherhood. "Both are in need of reform."

*Al-Ahram* itself seemed one example of the changes Said Ali detected. He had just published an editorial putting forth a proposal that could hardly reflect the thinking of his boss, President Mubarak. He had suggested that the NDP should loosen its stranglehold over the People's Assembly, the Shura Council and municipal councils, and allow its members to endorse ElBaradei as a presidential candidate, if they chose

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to do so. Complicated rules included in the constitution meant to discourage any challenge to Mubarak require candidates to have the signatures of at least 250 elected members from these bodies, including 65 deputies and 10 delegates in each municipal council from at least 14 provinces. Said Ali thought that amending the constitution would be too time-consuming and politically difficult, suggesting the NDP itself should help ElBaradei meet the requirements. So why should the ruling party do anything to help the person representing the most serious challenger ever to Mubarak's long reign? "It would be good for the country, and it would be good for the NDP. It would raise the standard of politics and debate. It would restore Egypt's image abroad."

That Al-Ahram's board chairman was talking and writing in these terms truly was a change.

Others who have sought to question the status quo have not been treated so well. One has been Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a 71-year-old sociology professor at the American University of Cairo who taught Mubarak's wife, Suzanne, and his son, Gamal. Ibrahim's wife, Barbara, is American and currently the director of AUC's John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement. Ibrahim first got in trouble while serving as a commentator for an Arab satellite television station that was covering the funeral of Syrian President Hafez el-Assad in June 2000. He found himself in a discussion with a caller about Assad's likely successor which already seemed destined to be his son, Bashar. Could something similar happen in Egypt, the caller asked? Yes, opined Ibrahim, his country, too, could end up with a "hereditary republic."

His comment led to the magazine, *al-Majalla*, asking him to expand his views on the father-son phenomenon in Arab politics for a cover story. Ibrahim came up with a special term to describe it: "*jumlukia*," a combination of *jumhuriya* (republic) and *malikiya* (royal) that was really neither a republic nor a monarchy. He wrote somewhat tongue in cheek that military men wearing a crown appeared to be the Arab contribution to political order in the 21st century. All copies of that issue of *al-Majalla* were immediately seized in Egypt, and Ibrahim was arrested and jailed initially for 45 days. Just two weeks earlier, he had been busy writing a keynote speech that Suzanne Mubarak was to deliver at a

UN-sponsored social conference in Geneva. It was the end of their friendship. Mubarak showed his wife the *al-Majalla* story and warned her to stop talking to him "before he gets into our bedroom."


Ibrahim posed another problem for Mubarak, he was interested in human rights. Starting in 1983, he had become a promoter of the Arab human rights movement. Then, in 1988, Ibrahim founded the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies that soon became involved in election monitoring. Still, he was able to maintain a special link to the president. When Mubarak became interested in how Egypt might begin moving toward a more democratic system, he asked Ibrahim for a report on how other authoritarian governments in Eastern Europe and Latin America had accomplished the transition. Ibrahim advised him that Egypt should follow the example of Mexico. This did not go down well with Mubarak, because the long-ruling PRI there was on its way to losing power.

After the Ibn Khaldun Center identified 80 cases of fraud in the 1995 parliamentary elections that it took to court, State Security decided to keep a close watch on Ibrahim's activities. He was finally arrested in 2000 on charges that his center had taken funds from the European Union

illegally. Found guilty in a State Security court, he was sentenced to seven years in prison. He appealed and won, only to be tried and imprisoned again as his health steadily deteriorated. President Bush, among other world leaders, continued to raise his case in private with Mubarak and even publicly until Ibrahim was released in 2003. He then ran somewhat symbolically against Mubarak in the 2005 presidential election, mostly, he said, to gain publicity for his persistent demand for greater democracy. He was sentenced to another two years in prison in 2008 for "defaming Egypt" with his continuing criticisms of the Mubarak regime. This time, he was granted bail, allowing him to leave the country and seek exile at various universities in the United States. In early 2010, he was an adjunct professor at the Center on Religion, Culture and Conflict at Drew University in New Jersey. Despite all his travails, Ibrahim remained optimistic that important changes were taking place inside the Egyptian political system and that "a sustained social movement" was

*Egyptians, he claimed, were non-political by nature... "Political demands come exclusively from the intellectuals, but they are not ready to sacrifice for them."*





slowly building in favor of democracy. “Things do change in Egypt and we’ve seen the changes.”

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Hala Mustapha, editor in chief of *Democracy Review*, a bilingual publication of the Al-Ahram Foundation, was not so sure. For several years, she has been battling State Security officials who, she claimed, were determined to shut her journal down even though she is a member of the NDP’s prestigious Policies Committee. She had joined the party seven years ago, when, she said, “they were trying to co-opt liberals.” She has since tried to resign, but her resignation has been rejected. Her review addresses not only the problems of democracy in Egypt but those of its women and Christian Copts.

When I visited her at her office atop the Al-Ahram building, I found the feisty French-educated Mustapha in a tizzy. She was awaiting the outcome of an official investigation into her conduct last September, when she had the temerity to invite the Israeli ambassador to Cairo, Shalom Cohen, to her office to discuss a conference on Middle East peace as a follow-up to President Obama’s speech to the Arab world three months earlier. In doing so, she had broken the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate’s ban on any contacts with Israeli diplomats that most members have respected ever since Sadat’s peace accord with Israel in 1979.

State Security apparently found that suspect, or at least decided to use the incident as a pretext to step up harassment of her. Security officials were now stationed in the review’s offices on a permanent basis and demanding she give up half the space it occupied in the building. “It’s like the rule of Nasser again,” she lamented. “The whole country is ruled by security officers. Liberal views are not welcome. My case is a good example.” After working for political change for 27 years, she had come to the conclusion the only thing that mattered was foreign pressure. She did not anticipate any action by Mubarak to make upcoming elections for Parliament or the presidency more open, because, she said,

*Gamal Mubarak’s main challenge would not be coming to power but keeping it. He would have to build a new kind of legitimacy as Egypt’s first non-military ruler since the 1952 revolution.*

“Obama has backed off pushing for democracy. Why even make cosmetic changes now?”

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This welter of conflicting views about whether Egypt was on the cusp of real political change formed the background tapestry to my own assessment, namely that pressures of all kinds—economic, social and political—are definitely building for something to happen. Might Egypt have its own version of Eastern Europe’s “color revolutions” or Iran’s mass street protests? No Egyptian I talked to felt either was very likely. They cited the apolitical and easy-going nature of most Egyptians, the limited number of activists and the government’s skill in keeping economic and social discontent from turning into a political opposition—at least so far. “The Dream of the Green Revolution,” the title of a new book timed to ElBaradei’s return, was pretty much just that. On the other hand, Western diplomats reported that the Mubarak government appeared to live in constant fear of a major social explosion at any moment. They worried how long Egypt could remain peaceful while faced with such a yawning gap between rich and poor, a bulging population, mounting worker unrest, worsening living conditions in Cairo and high unemployment among the of thousands of graduating university students.

Pondering these conflicting views, I reminded myself that I had written articles about these very same seemingly hot button issues in 1985, reflecting similar worries about a pending social upheaval. Twenty-five years later, no massive streets protests have taken place, nor are there any inklings of a “color” revolution. Egyptians are still putting up peacefully with Cairo’s daily horrendous traffic snarls and Mubarak’s authoritarianism.

The Egyptian temperament was clearly one factor in explaining why no social explosion had yet occurred; another, of course, was the ubiquitous security forces. They stood ready to quash any unauthorized street gathering of more than five people and arrest whomever they wished under the “state of emergency” decreed in the wake of Sadat’s assassination 29 years ago. (On May 11, the government

extended the emergency decree another two years. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared the extension “regrettable”). According to some estimates, the various civilian, police and military security forces employ upwards of two million agents to keep tabs on what Egyptians are doing, writing and thinking. State Security has already established a special unit to track the activities of all aspiring presidential candidates including those of ElBaradei. It also keeps a close eye on foreign tourists at hotels and wherever they might go, partly to protect them from attacks by Islamic extremists. There are even numerous security agents at Sadat’s burial site inquiring about the nationality of visitors and their reason for being there.


Keeping in mind the Egyptian ability to endure endless social stress, I still found disconcerting parallels to Egypt on the eve of Sadat’s assassination. For instance, tensions between the Muslim and Christian Coptic communities were once again inflamed, this time by a drive-by shooting in early January of Copts outside their church in the village of Nagaa Hammadi. The death of six Copts marked the highest death toll among Christians in a decade. Three Muslims were immediately arrested, and the media reported the shooting might have been in retaliation for a Copt having allegedly raped a 12-year-old Muslim girl last November. In any case, Copts in Nagaa Hammadi took to the streets attacking Muslim properties and then the police were rushed in to quell the rioting.

This sectarian violence had set the whole country on edge, just as it had during the summer of 1981 as a result of clashes in Cairo’s slums that had worsened Sadat’s relations with both the Coptic Church’s leaders and Muslim militants. A month before his death, he had deposed Pope Shenouda III and rounded up hundreds of suspected Islamic extremists, thus infuriating both communities. Now as then, Copts were extremely worried about their future in a country falling increasingly under Muslim fundamentalist influence. Unlike Sadat, Mubarak did not say anything to make matters worse, but it took him two weeks to say anything to help calm the tense situation. Finally, he called upon religious authorities from both communities to “confront the despicable sectarian strife that threatens the unity of our society.”

*Said Ali believed changes were definitely underway in Egyptian politics, but they were still well short of adding up to anything dramatic.*

There were other unsettling parallels to 1981. Once again, the public dress of Egyptian women was at issue. Sadat had sharply criticized the sudden upsurge in their wearing of the *higab* (headscarf) and long robes, arousing the ire of Islamists who were already turning against him. Many women had donned the *higab* to make a political statement of their disapproval of him. Now the issue has become the *niqab*, the face veil leaving only a woman’s eyes exposed. Mubarak was careful not to criticize the new fashion as Sadat had the *higab*. Yet the government-appointed grand mufti of Al-Azhar, Sheik Mohammed Sayyed Tantawi, had started in the fall of 2009 publicly denouncing the *niqab*, saying it had “nothing to do with Islam.” He even banned students wearing it in all al-Azhar schools, and the government did the same for all Cairo University residences. Would the *niqab* controversy become for Mubarak what the *higab* had been for Sadat—a symbol of disapproval and resistance? After talking to the Muslim Brotherhood’s Abul Fotouh, I concluded the *niqab* had more to do with the cultural war between moderate and conservative Islamists than with national politics. He, too, was denouncing this latest mode in Islamic dress. On this issue at least, the government was simply acting to help tip the balance in favor of moderates.

A closer parallel between the last months of Sadat’s regime and Egypt in early 2010 was the relentless crackdown on Islamists. Sadat’s focus had been on the Islamic Group; Mubarak’s was on the Muslim Brotherhood with the same intensity. Ever since the Brethren’s 2005 election victory, State Security Service agents had been relentlessly badgering the organization with rolling arrests of its local and national leaders. They had also rigged elections to assure the defeat of its candidates for the national Shura Council and in unions representing students, lawyers and engineers. In early 2010, 350 Brotherhood activists were in jail including four members from its governing Guidance Office. There was one disturbing difference, however, between 1981 and 2010: Sadat had gone after suspected extremists, Mubarak was targeting well-known moderates, meaning those who wanted to participate in the political process. The president seemed determined to reduce the Brotherhood’s 88 seats in Parliament to at best a symbolic presence. Indeed, he seemed to be pressuring the



group to abandon politics altogether. This tactic risked tipping the struggle for power in favor of extremists, perhaps provoking new terrorist attacks against the government.

Was Mubarak deliberately seeking to polarize Egyptian society and politics? Was he purposely creating an “us-or-them” scenario—my government or an Islamic state—in a bid to maintain the support of the vastly expanded upper class, the United States and other Western governments? That had been Sadat’s gambit, and he had paid with his life. Mubarak might not have to pay with his because he is clearly on his guard. He would require an ever more powerful State Security Service and ever greater political manipulation and repression to keep the Brotherhood out of politics and protesters off the streets. The latter got a taste of government intentions when a group of 93 political activists from the April 6 Youth Movement tried to celebrate its second anniversary this spring with a rally in downtown Cairo. Police immediately rounded up all of them. Subsequently, 33 were charged with creating a disturbance and belonging to an illegal group.

Overall, the picture emerging from my Egyptian visit was one of a very disjointed society and country. Economically, it had become far more liberal and dynamic. Socially, it had moved considerably to the right. Politically, it was becoming more authoritarian under the thin veneer of a freer media. Mubarak’s great dilemma was whether to follow the advice of Al-Ahram’s board chairman and allow ElBaradei to run for president, thereby risking defeat for himself or his son but opening the way toward real democracy. In 29 years of rule, the president has never been known as a gambling man or risk taker. For him to undermine his son’s chances for succession would be out of character.

Two unknowns might well decide the outcome. The first is a possible outburst of social discontent perhaps triggered by a cut in bread and food subsidies, an action the government is contemplating. (Subsidies last year accounted for \$19 billion, or more than one-third of total government expenditures.) When Sadat decreed higher bread prices in 1977, widespread street rioting had broken out across the country. This might happen again and touch off a larger protest movement with political demands. A second potential match lighting the fires of street protest could be an Egyptian Neda Agha-Soltan, the young Iranian woman shot to death during a protest demonstration in Tehran last June. She had become a rallying cry for the opposition at home and abroad.

In either case, another unknown is whether either the secular or religious opposition is capable of seizing upon an outburst of social protest and turning it into something wider. Can Egypt’s new activists, armed with their courage and Twitters, take advantage of such a moment to convince Egyptians to fight for political reform? Will the Brotherhood, with its proven capacity to mobilize tens of thousands of supporters, seek to channel any widespread street anger to push for it? This is what happened in Algeria in 1988 when an

inchoate social explosion was turned into a pro-democracy movement led by Islamists. It had even led briefly to a multi-party democracy and an Islamic victory at the polls before the military intervened to restore its own rule. Egypt seems to be inching its way toward a tipping point of some sort. Whether it will be more than just a facelift from a military to a civilian ruler remains to be seen.

*Might Egypt have its own version of Eastern Europe’s “color revolutions” or Iran’s mass street protests? No Egyptian I talked to felt either was very likely.*



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