

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

House of the Rising Son

by Jon B. Alterman

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It is a strange kind of republic in which presidents serve for life. It is an even stranger one in which rulers inherit power from their fathers. Yet, that is the direction in which the Arab Republic of Egypt is going.

Egypt has had millennia of hereditary rule, from the pharaohs who began their reign five thousand years ago to most (but not all) of the dynastic rulers who have called Cairo home for the last thousand years. The dissolution of the Egyptian monarchy in 1952 marked a turning point in Egyptian politics, ushering in military control and eliminating privileges that had accrued to some families over centuries.

In the five and a half decades since the Egyptian revolution, army officers accrued their own privileges. They occupied senior positions in government, and they retired to senior positions in business. Formerly middle class officers became part of the new upper class, and their children—many of whom did not follow their fathers' footsteps into the military—comfortably assimilated into the elite.

Gamal Mubarak, the son of Egypt's leader and a growing favorite to be his successor, is part of this broader trend. President Hosni Mubarak grew up in a village in the Nile Delta, one of five children of a low-level bureaucrat. The military academy was Mubarak's ticket out of rural poverty, and he worked so hard he finished in two years rather than the usual three. His son Gamal, however, grew up in the bosom of the officer corps, attended English-speaking schools and saw his father become the air force chief of staff when he was six and sworn in as vice president when he was twelve. Hosni Mubarak must have spent much of his early years thinking about how he would rise; Gamal Mubarak must have spent much of his early years thinking where he would land.

For more than a decade, Gamal Mubarak has evinced increasing interest in government. He became a student of the British Parliament, and he became increas-

(continued on page 2)

Texting for Food

For the poor and displaced in the Middle East, text messaging promises to feed mouths and fill pockets. Souktel, an SMS service based in Ramallah, allows organizations to send information about humanitarian aid distribution, blood donation, and job openings rapidly via text.

Operating primarily in the West Bank and Gaza, with services in Iraq, Morocco, Sudan and Somalia, Souktel's user base has swelled from 500 to 30,000 in just three years.

During the 2008-09 Gaza War, Souktel helped U.S.-based non-profit CHF International coordinate United Nations food supply deliveries for 11,000 Gazan families. Souktel designed software enabling the organization to group aid recipients by location and send them customized SMS alerts about when and where aid would be distributed. In Northern Iraq, Souktel partnered with U.S.-based NGO Mercy Corps to create an information-sharing network for 200 female community leaders. Souktel also runs a job matching service in the West Bank and Somalia linking employers with applicants through SMS-based questionnaires.

Mobile phone ownership far outstrips Internet access in the Middle East, and in the Palestinian Territories, 3.5 times as many people have cell phones as have Internet access. Among the poor, the disparity is even higher. To help meet the needs of that community, the UN World Food Programme and mobile provider MTN recently took Souktel's idea to the next level with a pilot program that sends 1,000 Iraqi refugees in Syria food vouchers as text messages. ■ AH

CSIS Multimedia

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ingly active in Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party. At the same time, his father proved allergic to the idea of cultivating a pool of potential successors. Hosni Mubarak not only failed to appoint a vice president, but he seemed to undermine anyone who might aspire to such a position. While there is no indication that it was his father's intention, Gamal Mubarak has been, for more than a decade, the only Egyptian for whom it was safe to harbor high political ambitions.

In his time as a rising force in Egyptian politics, Gamal Mubarak has made some interesting alliances. Most visibly, he has sought to woo the business community and intellectuals by wrapping himself in the mantle of reform. By instituting a broad consultative process—at least among the elites—Gamal Mubarak has cast himself as an executive and not a dictator; by reaching out, he won friends among hundreds of powerful Egyptians who feared the country would slide ever further into poverty and decay. With the government untrusting of change, proximity to the president's son has long been the safest way to promote it.

More subtly, Gamal Mubarak seems to have reached out to the security services as well. The military and the domestic intelligence services retain tremendous power in Egypt, and in a rapidly liberalizing media environment, investigating them—or even questioning them—is one of the few remaining taboos. Almost 60 percent of Egypt's governors are former generals, and virtually every ministry has retired military men in its senior ranks. If there is any set of institutions that could prevent someone from coming to power, or ensure that an alternative candidate came to the fore, it would be the security services. Close observers note that Gamal Mubarak is increasingly seen in the company of generals, and he increasingly talks about the need for security. Egyptians whisper that Gamal has sought to make a deal with the security services in which he agrees not to meddle in their perquisites, and they agree to leave him alone. However, those who know don't speak, and those who speak don't know.

Many Egyptians seem distressed at the idea of a Gamal Mubarak presidency. In October, the legendary Egyptian journalist Muhammad Hassanein Haykel proposed in an interview with an Egyptian paper that Egypt would be much better off with a committee of senior Egyptians ruling the country—and he explicitly left Gamal Mubarak off the list. Egypt's leading modern novelist, Alaa al-Aswany, is a leader of a fledgling political movement, *ma yahkomsh*, or “He Will Not Rule.” Appealing for followers earlier this month, Aswany described the goals of the movement as simple: “To prevent a great country like Egypt from passing from father to son, as if it were a piece of land or a poultry farm.” In the streets there seems to be little affection for the younger Mubarak, but there are few visible alternatives, and little sense the public can affect the outcome in any event.

Should Gamal Mubarak rise to power, he would inherit a governmental apparatus that seems weaker now than at any time in the last century. There is also no guarantee he could retain power. On his major initiatives, from floating the currency in 2003 to opening up parliamentary elections in 2005, others have had to lend a hand when his initial efforts have stumbled. As the son of privilege in an authoritarian system, he does not always seem to have a sure sense of politics. One of his initiatives, the annual convention of the National Democratic Party, is attractively staged but arouses little public interest.

Whatever Gamal Mubarak's political fortunes, it seems unlikely Egypt will slide into chaos. The military and intelligence services remain strong and respected, a guarantor against the abyss. And in any event, his 81 year-old father shows little sign of leaving office. With presidential elections looming in 2011, the most likely victor appears to be Hosni Mubarak. ■ 11/16/09

Links of Interest

Jon Alterman was quoted by Reuters in “[Analysis: Clinton starpower flickers in diplomatic arena.](#)”

Jon Alterman spoke at the J Street conference on a panel entitled “[What Next? Analysis and Advice for the President from Washington Insiders.](#)”

Jon Alterman was quoted by *Politico* in “[‘Back down to earth’ for White House diplomacy.](#)”

Haim Malka was quoted by Bloomberg in “[Clinton Seeks to Calm Arabs Over Settlement Dispute.](#)”

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