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Egypt's Search for Saving Face Domestic Politics and Regional Role

With the country on the verge of parliamentary and presidential elections, the Egyptian regime under Mubarak appears to be severely threatened by both domestic instability and mounting criticism of its declining regional status, as never before since Mubarak's advent in 1981. These two dimensions of Egypt's domestic socio-political and economic milieu, as well as its declining regional posture, are handled in a critical manner in the pages below.

Who Represents Whom? Dilemmas of Egypt's Domestic Politics

At the domestic level, deteriorating economic conditions, escalating religious strife, growing levels of corruption, and problems of representation, equity and socio-political inclusion appear to constitute the grounds for an increasingly dissatisfied public. This prevailing dissatisfaction, that an ordinary observer can easily recognize in the Egypt of today, contributes greatly

to undermining the regime's legitimacy and consequently placing it in a real crisis.

The debate over representation in contemporary Egypt is increasing and taking on new issues and dimensions. Ever since Mubarak's 2002 statement highlighting that the electoral system/law ought to be revised and amended, the public as well as intellectuals have been overwhelmingly occupied with the discussion of elections and electoral systems.

At the heart of such widening debate, a number of red tape-like issues are being tackled in a more open and even critical fashion, thus highlighting the additional challenges to be met. These include the following allegations/concerns, for example: Should the President continue to be the chair of a party, which then becomes the ruling party?¹; Does the division of mandate and functions between the two

¹ Currently the National Democratic Party (NDP); from the fifties to the mid-seventies it was the Arab Socialist Union.

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Abstract

While Egypt is on the verge of parliamentary and presidential elections, the Egyptian regime under Mubarak appears to be severely threatened by both domestic instability and mounting criticism of its declining regional status.

This Policy Brief handles in a critical manner the dilemma of Egypt's domestic politics with its various political, economic and social dimensions; as well as the problematic decline of Egypt's regional role.

It concludes that the Egyptian regime needs to work on introducing reforms and policies to cope with the multifaceted problems of representation, socio-political inclusion, and particularly poverty and various economic hardships at the domestic level; while saving face and improving the country's low-profile on the regional level remains a major challenge for the Egyptian regime to cope with in the years to come.

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chambers of parliament (Peoples Assembly [PA] and Shoura Assembly [SA]) need to be revised in order to empower a more solid bicameral legislature?² Is it in the interest of fair elections that ministers run elections, and utilize governmental agencies to support themselves? Is it about time that the policy of party registration be revised in order to allow moderate political groupings to be formed and work openly, and for the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) to tolerate more opposition representation while securing a large enough majority in terms of seats? The current reversed pyramid structure of political parties is being widely questioned and placed at the forefront of the debate on reforms; is it time to revise the constitution, particularly with regard to the principle of allocation at least 50% of seats in any elected council to peasants and workers, that dates back to the mid-1950s revolutionary and socialist era? And with regard to the recent positive developments in election management³, how can full independence and transpar-

ency of the election supervising committee be guaranteed?

On the economic front, economic reforms have been accompanied by political reforms, however with a lag. The latter have been undertaken at a slower pace than those implemented in the economic sphere. In this regard, while the 1990s witnessed an official commitment to privatize public enterprises, recruit administrative leadership according to a qualification-based selection process, and economic liberalization and deregulation to enhance competitiveness and promote exports, the political front saw the establishment of more political parties and a reform of the electoral system. Egypt still has a long way to go to achieve good governance, however.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that although much of the legitimacy of Mubarak's era is based on achievements (such as economic reform, infrastructure modernization, political opening and regional peace) – as compared with the legitimacy of charisma under Nasser and that of the military victory of 1973 and peace under Sadat – it was not until the beginning of the 1990s that the government adopted comprehensive macro-economic policies and structural reform in an effort to put the country on an export-led, high-growth path. While these efforts have created macro-economic stability, as

well as establishing the basis for economic liberalization and privatization, progress toward a market economy has been slow. In spite of the current situation characterized by high expenditure on the military and domestic security, poor financial resources, a less-than-competitive export structure and a high rate of population growth, Egypt could still avoid a more severe situation leading to social polarization and explosion.

It is important to maintain momentum in the ongoing efforts to fight corruption and encourage fair, transparent economic transactions. In fact, in a proposal raised to the government by the ruling NDP recently, three suggestions have been made concerning abolishment of the 25 year imprisonment penalty, the establishment of a higher council for human rights, and the dismantling of Emergency courts.

Political freedom requires better interpretation of the constitution and relevant laws that clearly identify the functions and authority of state agencies and empower effective participation in public life. Civil, political and human rights need to be better sanctioned, the voice of the poor needs to be better heard, and responsible security actions should be better addressed. In this regard, it is crucial to mention that Egypt's alarming sectarian strife between Muslims and Christian Copts, which has reached its peak

² The constitutional amendments of 2007 assigned the SA new mandate to approve – not only consult about – some legislations e.g. those related to basic rights and freedoms such as the NGO law. However, ministers are not accountable before the SA.

³ An independent Higher Election Commission (HEC) was created in 2005 to handle election management, composed of judges and figures nominated by parliament.

in the past few years (with the recent shocking attacks and clashes in upper Egypt being just one example) is another major challenge that the government has to deal with urgently. This is because the absence of any seemingly coherent action by the government has contributed to shackling the long established trust between the Egyptian Christians as well as the Coptic Orthodox Church and the government. This point is very important, as Coptic Christians – estimated to number approximately 12% of the Egyptian population – have usually been considered supporters of the Mubarak regime for its secular albeit authoritarian posture in a country where the most powerful opposition on the street is the Muslim Brothers.

Major Domestic Challenges

That said, the following concerns indicate major dimensions of debate over necessary institutional and legal reforms, at the heart of what may be referred to as the dilemma of representation in Egypt's domestic politics.

- Openness of the political system and ability to include representational mechanisms for opposition increased. However, there are two kinds of question here: one regarding “banned” political groupings i.e. Islamic groups and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular;
- and the other regarding the freedom of political parties and civil society to outreach grassroots. Other representational concerns have to deal with women, Copts and the poor. For example, while the businessmen's community is much better represented/has better access to decision making, the independence of workers' associations is questioned.
- Representative institutions continue to be based on both election and selection. Therefore both chambers of parliament include appointed members, some of the senior positions in the ruling NDP are occupied by appointed “leaders”, and the chair of the national federation of NGOs is to be appointed. The question is then raised about the future reform of representation-based institutions and entities.
- Political parties are allowed, yet they come about through registration at the Political Parties' Commission (composed of 7 persons, most of whom are ministers and/or regime adherents). This commission has the right to refuse to register a political party, at which point the party cannot legally exist.
- The extent of the president's power is not clearly defined. He holds wide-ranging authorities, thus leaving political institutions too dependent and vulnerable. Does the nature of regime continue to be valid for Egypt? In other words, the regime is too biased for the Executive, and places a vested interest in the person of the President, who is, among others, able to control political institutions, bureaucracy and resource management. The President is the chair of the Executive, yet he is not accountable before parliament, unlike the ministers. However, the ministers are not chosen according to parliamentary majority; the President hires and fires them at will. He has absolute hire and fire authority for many key positions, ranging from governors to university chairs and editors in-chief of national newspapers. So, can such a regime, born and strengthened since the 1952 revolution, still fit with contemporary Egyptian polity, in terms of generation change and the impact of globalization, as well as the changing role of the state in economic life?
- Mubarak assumed office in 1981 and is now in his fifth six-year presidential term. This started in 2005, following the first direct election with the constitutional amendments of 2005. He “may” assign one or more deputies, yet there has been no vice-president

since then. It is not yet clear whether he will run for a sixth term in the upcoming presidential elections due in 2011, or will pave the way for his son. However, in the light of the recent momentous public attention to the heavy-weighted potential presidential candidate Mohammed El-Baradei – former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – one would suggest that Mubarak will have no choice but to run for a sixth term himself, as a way to secure a safe exit and the transfer of power to his son.

- The relationship between the state and the “ruling” party is not clearly explained. The president is the chair of the ruling NDP, although he is considered to be a judge of all parties (which assumes that he is impartial and above partisan affiliations). The 23 opposition parties are too weak to compete with the NDP; hence the “government” party prevails in the PA with an overwhelming majority. It is said that if the president disconnects himself from the NDP, the latter will hardly win 35-40% in “fair” elections of both the SA and the PA this year.
- A tiny group of new businessmen has emerged and made large fortunes due to weak prudential banking regulations. A

number of them have fled leaving scandals behind them, and a few collaborating politicians have been brought to the criminal courts e.g. former ministers of finance and tourism, and members of parliament. The question of transparency and accountability, though improving, still remains a pressing issue.

- Women’s representation in the political system is marginal. All in all, the current PA includes only 8 women (1.8%). However, the newly established National Council for Women, headed by the first lady, is being seen to catalyze and empower women for more pro-active participation. The NCW backed about thirty candidates in the 2000 parliamentary elections with a mediocre outcome i.e. none of them won. On another front, Mubarak has appointed the first woman as judge of the Supreme Constitutional Court. Judge Tahany El-Gebaly is also a profound civil society and human rights activist. This move was greatly celebrated both at national and international levels. There is almost no significant post that excludes women, including in the police and the military. Yet, one strong criticism in this regard is of political parties not showing much trust in women candidates, nor allowing a

single woman to have a leading position in the 24 current political parties. After finally having found a way out for a quota system proven to be in conformity with the constitution and thus empowering women’s representation to at least 13% in the Peoples’ Assembly⁴, how will the NDP and the National Council of Women select the “right” nominees, and how will the larger number of women MPs affect the gender perspective in public policies?

- Reform movement with some kind of restrained freedom of associations. The notorious law of NGOs (number 32 of 1964) was amended in 1999, then declared unconstitutional, and finally the government passed it again in 2002. It is seen to further restrain voluntary associations and deprive them of their major source of funding (external donations) which requires government screening under the law. A very fine line has been drawn in the new law between political and non-political activities, thus deterring activists’ involvement in “political” activities, lest they are apprehended.

⁴ The constitutional amendments of 2007 which allowed a quota of women in the Peoples Assembly, then a law was passed adding 32 constituencies, i.e. 64 seats, reserved for women candidates, thus increasing the total number of MPs to 518.

- Youth participation is also a matter of interest nationally and locally. In late 2000, the President announced a new policy to encourage youth participation in public life. He also started a trend of appointing young (under 40 years) deputy ministers, which has encouraged calls for youth engagement in public positions.

The Problematic Decline of Egypt's Regional Role

At the regional level, Egypt has been heavily criticized over the last decade for its waning regional role. Many observers have even started to refer to the gradual decline in Egypt's regional role from the historic leadership status which the country long enjoyed, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, to its current no role status. The Egyptian government's timid reaction (compared to the reinvigorated roles of other rising Arab and non-Arab regional actors) to the major events that set the stage for the Middle East scene in the post September 11 era, has greatly contributed to undermining Egypt's regional image as a leading country in the Middle East.

The changing international context of the post September 11 era, which has been mainly characterized by the United States' declared war on terrorism and, as a repercussion, the many cases of US intervention in the do-

mestic affairs of the Arab world, has marked a real nascent of what has become largely perceived in the Arab world as confrontation between the West and Islam under the apparently unchallengeable and unilateral hegemonic power of the United States. In this context, the low profile that has characterized Egypt's regional role in the many events dominating the Middle East scene in this period – the most important of which were the war with Iraq, the war between Hezbollah and Israel, and the Israeli war on Gaza – has been widely perceived, domestically and regionally, as a failure to act due to the Egyptian regime's irreversible close embrace of the United States and special bond with Israel. Indeed, Egypt's continuous maintenance of a foreign policy that seeks conformity with the new settings of the system has paved the way for those regional voices that have adopted more resisting and self-asserting political agendas to echo and dominate the hearts and minds of mainstream Arab streets. In this regard, the roles played by rising regional powers – whether of non-Arab countries such as Iran and Turkey, or of Arab countries such as Syria and Qatar, or even of regional non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas – appeal to Arab peoples seeking a regional hero that could defend their cause. Consistent with this analysis, and unsurprisingly

therefore, the Al-Qaeda Organization itself, as an international terrorist organization with a resistant political agenda, enjoys considerable allure in Arab streets.

However, it should be remembered that this assessment of Egypt's role as steadily declining, compared with other rising roles in the region, has been formulated from a mere analysis of the situation from a role expectations and requirements prism, which certainly explains the decline in Egypt's image at the regional level. Yet it is equally important to bring into focus the country's national interests and national security considerations as a superior determinant of Egypt's role in the many events that the Middle East scene has witnessed in the last decade. Those national interests and national security considerations are an inseparable part of the assessment of the whole picture of Egypt's regional role, despite the centralization of the foreign policy decision-making process in a less democratic political setup.

The Dilemma of Seeking Reconciliation between Regional Status and National Interests

Ever since the 1970s, the Egyptian government has clearly adopted a re-prioritization of goals in a manner that placed national interests and national security consideration above regional prestige and image

goals. Under the Mubarak regime, mainly during the 1980s and 1990s, Egypt gradually succeeded in achieving this difficult reconciliation between an active regional role on the one hand and its close relationship with the United States and Israel on the other. However, what helped Egypt succeed in managing this reconciliation was the convergence in role requirements and the country's perceived considerations of national security and interests. Conversely, with the advent of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a major divergence between role requirements and those considerations has appeared eminent. The Israeli war on the Gaza Strip in late 2008 was perhaps the most important event on the Middle East stage to embody this divergence and generate strong widespread criticism of Egypt's regional role. While blaming fingers have pointed at Egypt not only for being reluctant to play a vigorous role in helping out the stranded Palestinians in Gaza but also as being complicit with the Israelis in this sinful war by deciding to close the Rafah Border Crossing, the Egyptian government had a clear national security concern in: 1) protecting its Sinai peninsula from a Palestinian flood, whose envisaged repercussions could be more serious than that of January 2008 when 200,000 Palestinians

broke into Sinai⁵. This pre-occupation is further highlighted bearing in mind the alleged Israeli plan to seek an "Alternative Homeland" for the Palestinians in Egypt and Jordan; and 2) in punishing Hamas, which with its radical Islamic posture, connections with Iran, and perceived secret cooperation with domestic Islamic opposition, added to its taking over of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, has been perceived by the Egyptian government as an ominous threat to its national security, located right on its northeastern boundaries. The consequent Egyptian handling of the Gaza crisis, whether in actually provided humanitarian aid or in exerted diplomatic efforts backed by US and European support, proves that Egypt's role is irreplaceable by any other rising regional power.

Consequently, Egypt's transforming regional role appears to be a rational combination of role expectations and requirements on the one hand, and national interests and security considerations on the other, even if this rationality is best perceived in terms of bounded rather than absolute rationality.

Therefore, it appears that despite the noticeable de-

cline in its regional image, Egypt has continued to exert remarkable political and strategic influence on the major events in the region. In the post September 11 era, Egypt has taken the lead in offering a parallel vision to that of the United States in dealing with terrorism by calling upon the international community to carefully distinguish between terrorist groups and groups seeking the right of self-determination. Although this vision has not received widespread international support, it has been strongly endorsed by the Arab world, which has perceived it as a legitimate guarantee to the Palestinian struggle in the occupied lands. In Iraq, in the post war era, the Egyptian government has actively participated in the organization of diplomatic forums, such as the Sharm el-Sheikh summit of November 2004, to discuss the necessary political arrangements at that stage as well as for the reconstruction of Iraq. Also, it is crucial to mention that Egypt has been taking the lead ever since the mid 1990s – on the renewal of the Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – in criticizing Israel's possession of nuclear weapons, and has embarked on the initiative of a Middle East free of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

In this respect, the role played by Egypt appears to be essential and irreplaceable by other rising regional powers, whether of Arab or non-Arab countries. These

⁵ J.M. SHARP, *The Egypt Gaza Border and its Effect on Israeli-Egyptian Relations*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress, RL34346, February 1, 2008, p. 9. Accessible online at: <http://www.fas.org/sqp/crs/mideast/RL34346.pdf> (last accessed: March 2010).

rising roles appear to be no match for Egypt's assets of history, location, culture, and strong Arab identity, added to its wide-ranging diplomatic connections, international political and strategic clout, and major international and Arab countries' expectations regarding Egypt's role in the region. These combined elements are not at the behest of any other regional actor.

This does not mean that the decline in Egypt's image, regional status or prestige is not in itself a major concern that the governing elite can ignore. Reflecting on the paradox – that while enjoying this wide variety of assets and favourable conditions for exerting a leadership role, the country's regional image has been in steady decline over the past decade – one could suggest that there has been an apparent failure in managing its role and in achieving a satisfying reconciliation in role requirements and expectations on the one hand and national interests and security considerations on the other.

Conclusion: Implications for Egyptian Domestic and Regional Policies

In final analysis therefore, it appears essential that the Egyptian regime adopt a number of reform measures on the domestic level and that it also re-consider the reinvigoration of its regional

posture.

Perhaps one of the major reform policies that Mubarak's government is currently capitalizing on is the implementation of decentralization as a model of governance that will allow democratic practice to be enhanced, and the provision of public services to be improved at the local level. However, the multifaceted problems of representation, socio-political inclusion, and particularly poverty and various economic hardships will necessitate more governmental attention in the coming months.

At the regional level, mounting criticism of Egypt's low profile – whether emanating from various domestic political currents or from a number of Arab and non-Arab governments and media – has significantly and increasingly eroded government legitimacy at home and put the country in an ever more embarrassing position in the region. Indeed, saving face and improving the country's shackled regional image remains a major challenge for the Egyptian regime to cope with in the years to come.

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