

Egypt: President Mubarak dominates fake election campaign

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Egypt's presidential election, due to be held on September 7, marks the first time that President Hosni Mubarak has faced a multi-candidate ballot. In previous votes, the dictator employed a yes or no plebiscite to rubberstamp his 24-year rule. The official campaign has demonstrated, however, that the election is entirely fraudulent, and in no way represents a step toward genuine democracy, as the Bush administration maintains. Mubarak is universally expected to secure another six-year term, with the final margin and level of voter turnout the only unanswered questions.

The official campaign began August 17, with Mubarak facing nine rival candidates. Many Egyptian opposition groups are boycotting the vote in protest against the highly restricted ballot access. Electoral regulations effectively permitted only those close to the state apparatus to run for election. A number of the candidates are widely believed to be nothing more than Mubarak stooges, standing solely in order to boost the participation rate and manufacture the image of a competitive election. Only two of Mubarak's challengers have any real political support—Numan Gomaa of the Wafd Party, and Ayman Nour of the Ghad Party.

The campaign follows systematic repression against Mubarak's political opponents in recent months. Under the "Emergency Law" that has been in operation since 1981, the government enjoys sweeping powers, including arrest and detention without charge, banning of opposition organisations, and suppression of literature and media. State security forces and pro-government goons have repeatedly attacked demonstrations organised by the opposition *Kifaya* ("Enough") protest movement.

Mubarak only conceded a multi-candidate presidential vote earlier this year after pressure from the Bush administration. Washington was concerned that its rhetoric of promoting democracy in the Middle East would be too obviously exposed if one of its closest Arab allies staged another rigged plebiscite. Mubarak well understands, however, that the Bush administration has no interest in promoting genuine democratic reform, which would undermine the Cairo regime.

When Laura Bush visited Egypt in May she praised Mubarak's "bold step" in allowing rival candidates, and described as "naïve" the idea that the country could make a swift transition from dictatorship to democracy. Last month, the US State Department issued only a muted protest after Mubarak refused to allow any independent observers to monitor the vote.

During the presidential campaign, Mubarak has dominated the state-run media's coverage. One media-monitoring organisation found that Egypt's largest daily newspaper, *Al Ahram*, devoted more space to Mubarak than to all the other candidates combined. The Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights released a report on August 29 detailing the media's pro-government bias. "The ruling newspapers have been conscripted for daily propaganda for the candidate of the ruling National Democratic Party," it concluded.

The president has refused to participate in any debates with other candidates, has not held any press conferences, nor answered a single question in public. Guided by a group of Western-educated political advisors led by his businessman son, Gamal Mubarak, Mubarak has attempted to present himself as a "man of the people", and has toured the country speaking to carefully selected audiences.

The "Potemkin village" nature of the campaign was exposed, quite literally, after Mubarak posed for the media drinking tea in what was presented as the home of two farmers in the Nile Delta. According to Reuters, when independent newspaper *Al Masry Al Youm* later returned, the hut had been removed. Another paper, *Ad Dustour*, further alleged that in recent months Mubarak has inaugurated a series of power plants, hospitals, and other infrastructure projects that have either been running for years or are far from being completed.

The Egyptian president has released few concrete policy proposals during the campaign; instead he has issued vague promises to create millions more jobs, and build more schools, hospitals, and homes. None of the real problems facing Egypt's impoverished workers and farmers are being addressed in the campaign.

Mubarak has avoided any discussion of the deeply unpopular economic measures he has implemented in recent years. Free market measures have included large scale privatisations of state-run industries, reduction of subsidies on essential items such as diesel, and development of closer trading ties with the US and Israel. For the nation's wealthy, Egypt's deepened integration into the global economy has been accompanied by lucrative tax cuts and government subsidies. The Cairo stock market has reached record highs this year on the back of an annual gross domestic product growth rate of six percent.

This economic growth has done little to raise the living standards of ordinary Egyptians. Mubarak's reforms have led to cost-of-living increases, stagnant employment levels, and a rise in the level of social inequality. Unemployment officially stands at 10 percent, but is believed to be about twice that. The president is widely expected to enact further measures against the working class following the election. "The reforms coming are going to be tougher," one unnamed economist told Reuters. "The real tricky one is going to be the short-term job losses inevitably associated with privatisation and how the government deals with that."

The presidential contest has been greeted by general disaffection among Egypt's people, with the official campaign generating no popular enthusiasm. "The government wants us to vote to help perpetuate the fantasy that the presidential elections are real," Abdallah Hamed, a surgeon, told the *Al Ahram Weekly* website. "But it is hard to fool Egyptians."

Others surveyed by *Al Ahram Weekly* described how they were convinced that the government would again rig the vote, while others were fearful of risking arrest by expressing their opinion. "There are police officers in civilian clothing everywhere," one unnamed person said. "They take the people who say anything anti-Mubarak away."

Despite widespread discontent with the government, Egypt's opposition groups have failed to galvanise any mass support for their campaigns. The lack of popular response is not solely a consequence of state repression and absence of a free media, but more fundamentally reflects the opposition's right-wing economic and social program, and its narrow base within the liberal bourgeoisie and intelligentsia.

For this layer, fear of the potential consequences of mobilising the Egyptian masses greatly outweighs their desire to displace Mubarak. "All we want [the US] to do is to tie the hands of the dictator they support so that we won't get harmed," explained Hani Enan, a senior *Kifaya* leader. "But we don't even favour too rapid a change. Egypt is not ready and nor are we. The only ones who are prepared to take over the reins of power are the Islamists."

There is widespread scepticism regarding the credentials of the two main opposition candidates as democratic reformers. Numan Gomaa's Wafd Party has long collaborated with the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), while Ayman Nour (a former Wafd member of parliament) is widely seen as close to the US. Nour met with former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright the day before his arrest on forgery charges in January. His subsequent release came after pressure from the Bush administration, and editorial condemnations in major newspapers, including the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*.

Nour has tried to gain some support through the proscribed Muslim Brotherhood. The liberal politician held discussions last month with the Islamic fundamentalist organisation, seeking its backing for his campaign. On August 28, the Muslim Brotherhood instructed its supporters to vote against Mubarak, but refrained from supporting any of the other candidates. A number of senior Brotherhood leaders have been released from prison in the past two weeks; analysts in Egypt have speculated that the early releases were won in return for the Islamists not advocating a boycott of the election.

Neither Gomaa nor Nour have appealed to popular opposition to the government's economic policies. Both have focused their campaigns around political reform measures, such as calls for an end to the Emergency Laws and a limit on the possible number of presidential terms.

While issuing criticisms of various aspects of Mubarak's economic program, both opposition candidates agree with its basic direction. Neither opposes privatisation, and both have called for cuts to government spending in order to reduce Egypt's public debt, which stands at an estimated 120-130 percent of gross domestic product. Gomaa's Wafd Party has also expressed support for eliminating most public subsidies for bread, gasoline, and transportation.

Wafd's parliamentary spokesman, Mounir Fakhri Abdel-Nour, summed up the perspective of Egypt's liberal opposition. "Our [economic] target is similar to that of the NDP, but they have been in power for over 20 years and have not achieved anything," he declared. "It's about time they let somebody else try."



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