

Conflicts intensify within Egyptian ruling elite

Johannes Stern
13 September 2010

Conflicts and divisions are intensifying within the Egyptian ruling elite just a few weeks before the parliamentary elections due in October, and one year before presidential elections. Hosni Mubarak, the acting Egyptian president, is considered to be seriously ill and has so far failed to clarify any procedure for his successor. He never appointed a vice-president and said a few years ago that he would serve Egypt up to his dying breath.

There has already been discussion for some time as to whether the 82-year-old dictator would stand again in 2011 as the presidential candidate of the governing National Democratic Party (NDP). The media has also speculated over a potential successor, with one name—Gamal Mubarak, the son of Hosni Mubarak—recurring time and time again.

A campaign began a few weeks ago aimed at boosting the chances of Gamal as a possible successor. Posters of Gamal appeared in neighbourhoods of Cairo and signatures on behalf of his candidacy are being collected via the Internet.

Gamal is the deputy general secretary of the NDP, but the party denies that it organized or supports the campaign for the president's son. One prominent NDP member, Aley el-Din Hilal, declared that the campaign was simply a result of “voluntary social activity” and “individual initiatives”.

This is very unlikely. Gamal is a former investment banker and a representative of the neo-liberal economic wing of the NDP. He is as hated by the Egyptian population as his father, who has governed the country since 1981 on the basis of emergency laws. It is much more likely that sections, or at least sympathizers, of the “new guard” in the NDP, initiated the campaign. This consists of a comparatively more youthful layer of the business elite, which got rich quick on the basis of privatizations and economic liberalization and is intent on pursuing this same course.

Following a series of economic “reforms”, the narrow business elite around Mubarak and the industrial magnates Ahmed Ezz, Mohamed Mansour and Ahmed el Maghrabi were able to amass huge fortunes. The same reforms have led to the increasing impoverishment of the Egyptian population.

In 1991, i.e., prior to the implementation of the structural adjustment programs demanded by International Monetary Fund, around 20 percent of the population lived on less than \$2 a day. Today this figure has risen to 44 percent. In the past 10 years, during which the growth rate of the Egyptian economy soared as a result of liberalization policies and the authoritarian

regime was courted by ruling elites all over the world, absolute poverty rose from 16.7 percent to nearly 20 percent.

Tensions within Egyptian society have again intensified since the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis in 2008. The growth of the Egyptian economy decreased in 2009 and the recent period has been marked by a series of protests and strikes against the government. These have been brutally suppressed. In July, police savagely beat a blogger critical of the government, Khaled Saeed from Alexandria, to death on a public street. His death led to a wave of protests. In addition, there have been many strikes and protests in the spring and summer of this year against cuts to subsidies and low wages against a background of rising prices.

In this tense situation layers of the ruling elite in Egypt are concerned about the prospect of power remaining in the hands of Mubarak's own family after the dictator's death. This would dispel the last veil of deception surrounding the propaganda of Egypt's slow path to democracy and could lead to a new outbreak of popular protest. There are also those inside the NDP who advocate a more cautious approach to the further liberalisation of the economy and privatizations in order to keep protests under control—in opposition to the course favoured by Gamal Mubarak.

This wing within the NDP, known as the “old guard”, was able to set its mark on the NDP congress held in 2009. In the years before the new guard around Gamal Mubarak and Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif were largely able to dictate terms in the party and cabinet. The old guard is led amongst others by one of the deputy general secretaries of the NDP, Zakaria Azmi, who has repeatedly criticized representatives of the new guard in parliament.

The current campaign for Gamal Mubarak means that the faction struggle inside the NDP is now being fought out in public. Just a few days after the first posters of Gamal appeared in Cairo, a second campaign commenced for Gen. Omar Suleiman. As minister and head of the Egyptian secret service since 1993 he has long been regarded as a potential successor to Mubarak. Suleiman is a close confederate of Mubarak and played a leading role in the implementation of the country's pro-Western and pro-Israeli foreign policy. In what is obviously a sideswipe at the campaign for Gamal Mubarak, posters featuring Suleiman's face declare that he is the “real alternative”.

It is not clear who exactly is behind the campaign for Suleiman, but one of his supporters published a statement declaring that general Suleiman was someone respected by both the ruling party and the opposition. He was the only one who could prevent the plans to install Mubarak's son as the new president, it argued.

So far Hosni Mubarak and other prominent members of the NDP have declined from officially siding with either Gamal or Suleiman. In any event, the posters featuring Suleiman were removed after just a few hours and Egyptian newspapers were banned from reporting on the posters. According to a report from BBC news, thousands of copies of the independent daily papers Al Masry Al Youm and Al Dustoor were destroyed. The BBC Middle East expert, Madgi Abdelhadi, reported that this measure was aimed at suppressing information about the campaign for Suleiman, which in turn reveals the extent of the differences within the various wings of the political elite. The struggle for power, however, is already in full swing and demonstrates the instability predominating in the country as a whole.

The campaign for Gen. Suleiman could also be an indication of the preferences of the military, whose leadership has so far refrained from lining up with either the old or new guard. There are numerous personal links between leading military figures and the old guard within the NDP, many of whom began their own careers in the army. The military leadership is fearful that its own grip on power and influence could suffer should the new guard prevail within the NDP.

Sections of the opposition had already gone on the offensive some months ago. In February, Mohamed El Baradei, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, founded a new independent political platform named the "National Alliance for Change". El Baradei announced his desire to stand as a possible independent presidential candidate should reforms be introduced which guaranteed a fair election.

El Baradei speaks for a layer of the elite that is of the opinion that growing public anger with Mubarak's pro-Western course and increasing social inequality can only be headed off in future by a movement operating independently of the NDP. In interviews he has repeatedly warned the Western elite of the dangerous character of their policies, which he said threaten to drive the Arab masses into the hands of extremists such as Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the leader of the Lebanese Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah.

El Baradei has intensified his campaign recently, meeting with the leader of the parliamentary block of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Saad el-Katatny, and prominent alleged "leftist" activists such as Emad Atiyya. At one such meeting with "leftist" supporters he stressed that he could not achieve the necessary political change on his own. This was a task to be taken up by all Egyptians. Two weeks ago he featured in a video on his Facebook page in which he called upon all Egyptians to join his newly created political platform.

The Mubarak regime has reacted to El Baradei's campaign with increasing nervousness. The Arab network for human rights reported that the publishers of a book that supported El Baradei were arrested and their computers confiscated by police a week ago. Supporters of El Baradei have already suffered mistreatment at the hands of the police. A government newspaper stated recently that accusations would be made against El Baradei that he was an atheist and his daughter was not married to a Muslim. El Baradei termed the reports a slanderous campaign unleashed by a regime intent on combating "change".

In response, El Baradei called for a boycott of the parliamentary elections due in November. Any participation in the election was directed against the "national will" to transform Egypt into a democracy, he said. At the same time he stressed that the next months and years would be critical regarding a change of power in the country and declared that the ruling NDP had failed.

"When I look at the temple they built, I see a decaying temple, nearly collapsing. It will fall sooner rather than later," he added. "I will never enter this temple. What we call for is to bring down this temple in a peaceful civilised manner." He noted that the patience of Egyptians was running out. El Baradei then told reporters, "If the whole population boycotts the elections totally, it will be in my view the end of the regime."

According to media reports the opposition is split over the demand for an election boycott. The banned Muslim Brotherhood backs El Baradei, but has announced its intention to take part in the elections.

The immediate role of Hosni Mubarak remains unclear. NDP minister Mufid Shehab announced that the candidates for the presidential election would only be announced in the summer of 2011. One thing is already certain, however—none of the ruling factions or the opposition represent the social and political interests of the Egyptian toiling masses.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact