MIDEAST MONITOR: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

Egypt: Edging Closer to Succession

A MOMENTARY SHUDDER rippled through the Egyptian stock market last week: President Hosni Mubarak had undergone very lengthy surgery on March 6 in Germany and a week passed before he was shown on television, sitting in a chair speaking animatedly with his doctors.

AVI KATZ

Mubarak, who turns 82 in May, is already the longest-serving Egyptian ruler since Muhammad Ali, the founder of modern Egypt more than 200 years ago. Vice president under Anwar Sadat, he ascended to power constitutionally, following Sadat's assassination in 1981. He has steered the country through turbulent times, domestically and regionally, while maintaining overall political stability and registering considerable macro-economic gains. Throughout, he has refrained from appointing a vice president, leaving the succession open. However, ignoring succession may no longer be possible.

To be sure, the country's ruling elites appear firmly ensconced, the Muslim Brotherhood opposition movement is being kept under close wraps, and the *Kifaya* (Enough) protest movement which earlier in the decade demonstrated considerable mobilization capabilities and courage, has faded to insignificance.

Political uncertainty regarding Mubarak's successor centers on personalities, rather than on possible shifts in policies or fundamental orientations. Still, the very fact that Mubarak has been grooming his 46-year-old son Gamal to succeed him, even while denying it, has long been a controversial subject among Egypt's political classes and will surely be a prime topic of contention in the coming months. The most commonly mentioned alternative to Mubarak is the 74-year-old head of Egypt's intelligence services, Gen. Omar Suleiman, a man who has largely worked in the shadows and is little known to the public at large.

Given the extended political stasis and public cynicism towards politics, which has gripped Egypt in recent years, it was understandable that the decision by the recently retired Internation Atomic Energy Agency chief, Nobel laureate Mohamed ElBaradei, to return to Egypt to test the waters regarding a possible presidential candidacy for the 2011 elections, elicited much excitement. Greeted by more than a thousand supporters at Cairo Airport on February 19, and bolstered by a Facebook support group of more than 60,000 members, ElBaradei met with a wide range of opposition figures and civil society activists as well as Arab League head Amr Moussa, and gave a series of extensive interviews on television and in the print media.

The result was a manifesto announcing the establishment of a new organization dedicated to establishing a political system based on real democracy and social justice. Initially, it focused on insuring that upcoming parliamentary elections and next year's presidential vote would be conducted fairly and competitively, with judicial oversight, and international and domestic monitoring. In order to achieve these objectives, clauses in the Egyptian constitution, which severely limit the ability of anyone not associated with the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) to run for the office of president, would have to be altered. In addition, future presidents would be limited to two turns in office.

Predictably, leaders of other opposition parties were reluctant to line up in support of ElBaradei, even as they, too, campaigned for constitutional reform. Predictably, too, NDP leaders and supporters in the media attacked ElBaradei for adopting a confrontational style and for destabilizing the country. Strangely for someone launching such a profound initiative, ElBaradei departed the country after just over a week to attend various engagements.

Would the ElBaradei flame be easily rekindled on his return? Given his lack of any political base, how could he possibly tender his candidacy for the presidency in lieu of a major constitutional overhaul? And was he prepared to make a commitment to leading a reform movement? In any case, the next president will have to have the blessing of the Egyptian military establishment.

As pointed out in a recent article in Al-Ahram Weekly by Dr. Abdel Moneim Said Aly, head of the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, the issues facing Egypt go far beyond constitutional matters. Did Egypt want to be part of the 21st century, he asked? Was it willing to pay the price required to do so, namely, make collective sacrifices in the service of a better future? Or did it want a slightly improved version of what Egypt has been for the past six decades?

The recent controversial decision to prohibit women from serving as judges in State Council administrative courts did not bode well for a more global-minded Egypt. To be sure, the move provoked fierce criticism from women's groups, led by Suzanne Mubarak, the president's wife, and was subsequently overturned by the country's Constitutional Court. Still, the episode served as a warning of the fragility of liberal values. Indeed, when Egyptians were polled regarding which country they thought Egypt should emulate, Saudi Arabia topped the list (38 percent).

Not surprisingly, this same survey showed that the real concerns of the Egyptian public, which numbers 80 million, are unemployment, poverty, corruption, educational development and health care, not political reform, per se. ElBaradei's prescriptions are perhaps unattainable, but stagnation is not a very attractive option either.

The author is the Marcia Israel Senior Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University.