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AN UPDATE ON POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN EGYPT: THE GLASS HALF FULL

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In terms of concrete results, the September 7 presidential elections did not produce much change in Egypt's political system. At the age of 77, Husni Mubarak, Egypt's ruler for 24 years, was elected to a fifth six-year term with an overwhelming majority of 86.6%. True, that was slightly below his 90+% approval ratings in previous elections, but this time Mubarak had competition. In fact, the poor showing of the other candidates only serves to emphasize the magnitude of Mubarak's achievement. Ayman Nour, head of the "*al-Ghad*" (Tomorrow) Party won 7.3%; Nu'man Guma'a, the Wafd Party candidate, got 2.8%; and the other seven contenders together gained less than 1.5% of the votes.

However, these elections actually constitute an important mile-stone in Egyptian political development. For the first time in more than half a century, opposition parties were allowed to challenge the monopoly of power in the hands of the ruling party and to field a presidential candidate of their own. Since the revolution of 1952, the regime, largely through the ruling party, has controlled state institutions and media, blocked the development of other parties, and used the Emergency Laws to silence opposition to its policies. Until now, presidential "elections" have actually meant a referendum on a single candidate nominated by a Parliament controlled by the ruling party.

For years, the National Democratic Party resisted opposition demands for truly competitive elections. But in February 2005, Mubarak proposed a constitutional amendment that would allow multiple candidates to run in direct, secret presidential elections, subject to certain restrictions, and the reform was approved in a national referendum. Mubarak's "liberalization" was an attempt to accommodate growing public demands for more openness in the political system and American pressure for democratization in the Arab world by means of a limited measure that would not jeopardize his rule. For example, in addition to candidates of officially recognized parties, only independents supported by at least 250 members of the government-controlled Parliament or local councils were allowed to run. Such limitations in the new law prompted harsh criticism by regime opponents, who described it as a cosmetic move that did not ensure free and fair elections. Besides, the ruling party was still able to organize public-sector workers to vote for their

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candidate. Nor were independent Egyptian and international observers allowed to monitor the voting.

But while Mubarak's overwhelming victory was guaranteed in advance, the Egyptian political system will nevertheless be unable to return to the patterns that have prevailed for the past 24 years, because the principle that only the ruling party nominates presidential candidates has been abandoned. This change, if it is not reversed, will continue to serve opposition elements, which have been energized by the greater freedom of political mobility and maneuver afforded by the election. One expression of that freedom was the formation of the Tomorrow Party (*al-Ghad*) which, in turn, roused more established opposition parties – leftist and Nasserist – from their torpor. Moreover, civil society also asserted itself in late 2004 in the form of the Egyptian Movement for Change, which was created by students and intellectuals and mobilized supporters with the slogan *kifaya* (enough).

Consequently, the pre-election period witnessed wide-ranging political activity, a relatively open and unprecedented public debate about regime performance and opposition platforms, and a particularly noteworthy outburst of strident press criticism of the regime and its leader of the sort that hasn't been written in many years. The election campaign itself focused on domestic issues, especially the poor state of the economy and high unemployment; foreign policy received far less attention. And despite limited access to state-controlled media and the relatively short campaign, opposition spokesmen, for the first time, were able to reach large sectors of the public, primarily by means of the large public rallies that would have been unimaginable only a few months before.

The presidential election in Egypt is a major step on the road to democracy, but the road itself remains long and strewn with obstacles. For a real breakthrough to take place, the Emergency Laws would have to be annulled. These laws enable the regime to ban journalists, censor and close newspapers, and enact press and party laws (of the type that proscribe religiously-based parties and therefore prevent the Muslim Brotherhood – the main opposition to the regime – from contesting elections). Truly independent supervision of elections would also be necessary. In any case, the ruling party has a built-in advantage because of the resources it controls. Parliament has no real authority independent of the executive and can be dismissed by the President at any time. Nor has the change in election procedures been accompanied by a change in the state of human rights or the status of women. The Egyptian public generally remains skeptical that its voice carries any weight or that the ruling party will voluntarily transfer power to other parties – and that attitude is surely reflected in the very low (23%) turnout rate in the election.

Nevertheless, the very fact of a competitive election signals the beginning of change, and in his next (last?) term, Mubarak will probably continue to advance political reform. Indeed, he has already promised that he will reconsider the ongoing need for emergency laws. Haunted by the threat of instability, Mubarak will almost certainly move slowly and cautiously. But his next challenge will come soon, in the form of the parliamentary elections scheduled for October-November. And beyond that, he needs to address the longer-term issue of succession. Whatever role he may have in mind for his son, Gamal, the evolving character of the political system will determine how realistic those plans will be.

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