

Ageing Mubarak keeps Egypt guessing

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Public appearances by President Hosni Mubarak have become increasingly rare

In the time of the Pharaohs, absolute rule that went with being king traditionally passed from father to son - though not always without a fight. Modern-day Egyptians can be forgiven for wondering whether history is set to repeat itself.

Their president, Hosni Mubarak, has been in power for 28 years and has no designated successor. But at the age of 81, Mr Mubarak is widely believed to be grooming his son, Gamal, a banker by training, to inherit the "Throne of Egypt".

Opposition politicians are united in anger over the rise of Gamal, a moderniser who in the past decade has become increasingly influential in the ruling party where he now heads the powerful policy committee.

The banned Muslim Brotherhood, which took a fifth of the Parliamentary seats in 2005 presidential elections despite having to stand as independent candidates, believe he lacks popular support as well as political experience.

"Gamal Mubarak is not acceptable to the people, not approved by the people," says the Brotherhood's spokesman, Dr Essam al-Erian. "He has no popularity at all, and I don't think he has the ability to control such a big country."

Earlier this month a former presidential candidate, Ayman Nour, launched an anti-Gamal protest campaign called "He shall not rule". The logo features a gilded crown struck through by a red line.

Gamal Mubarak is head of the ruling party's policy committee

Mr Nour came a distant second to President Mubarak in the 2005 elections. His campaigns, while enthusiastic, crucially lack organisation - but they do echo the feelings of many poor Egyptians who have yet to feel the benefits of the government's economic reforms that Gamal has helped push through.

"This is a campaign to confront this irregular, illogical state," said Mr Nour, who was jailed after the election on what many believe were trumped-up charges of fraud. "A president-in-waiting is practising all the duties of the president already."

Assassination attempt

It is true that the older Mubarak is increasingly invisible these days - unless you count the many billboards bearing his strangely youthful image which dominate downtown Cairo.

The slogan on one such poster is optimistic in tone, crying out "Leadership... and transition and the future". For nervous Egyptians, however, the statement could well be followed by a question mark. Just who will be their next leader; how will the transition of power be managed; and what does the future hold?

Some political watchers believe that Gamal's chances have been reversed by strikes and sometimes violent demonstrations against the government's policies in recent years - including protests about the price of bread and the poor delivery of water.

The other man often tipped for the top job is Egypt's powerful intelligence director, Omar Suleiman.

Legend has it that Gen Suleiman, 72, won his place in Mubarak's affections when he insisted that the president travel in an armoured car on a trip to Ethiopia in 1995 - probably saving his life in a serious assassination attempt.

The general is rarely photographed, but is known to the Americans, Israelis and Palestinians as the well-regarded point man in all Egyptian-led peace negotiations.

The Muslim Brotherhood is the largest opposition group but is officially banned

Yet owing to his close relationship with the president, Gen Suleiman's influence runs far deeper. What's more, as a military man his status is automatically elevated in a country whose armed forces have historically been king-makers.

"He's not only of the military, but is also a key figure in domestic intelligence and foreign policy," says Robert Springborg, director of the London Middle East Institute. "He has his fingers in the key pies of the country."

According to one fellow ex-military man, however, Gen Suleiman does not want the job.

"He is a fair man, he's well-raised, he has his principles and is doing everything in accordance with those principles," says Gen Ahmed Abdel Halim.

"But he's quite old and he's not looking for [the presidency]. Maybe the Americans are talking about it but he himself is not talking about it."

Gen Halim has worked alongside Gamal Mubarak for seven years, however, and feels he is a worthy successor. He may not be a military man, but President Mubarak has always looked after the officer corps and many believe they will remain loyal to his family.

"Gamal is sometimes attacked because he's the son of the president," says Gen Halim. "That is his only fault. I have seen him developing all the time and dealing with all issues - economic, trade, security. He is leading the reform within the party, the government and Egypt.

"He is not well understood by the people so far and it takes time. But he understands Egypt. I wish that I will live to see him as the president - after his father."

Regional implications

Business investors are increasingly worried by the lack of a clear succession plan, and the political vacuum that this threatens.

Even the very subject is taboo: in the past, newspaper editors have been jailed after speculating on the ill health and possible death of President Mubarak, for publishing "false reports insulting the president and harming the symbols of the ruling party".

Angus Blair is head of research for the investment bank Beltone, which specialises in the Middle East and North Africa.

"Clearly political risk is a major factor whenever you decide to invest. In Egypt, it's as relevant as it is elsewhere, and in some ways more so given the age of the president."

Some suggest that Gamal has a much better chance of becoming president the longer his father is still alive. Hosni Mubarak has still not declared whether he will run again in 2011.

But certainly if he died before Gamal was in position, the loyalty of his subjects might die with him and other contenders would most likely enter the fray.

Which is why - despite the efforts of the party to push it to one side - succession is always one of the big debates in the country.

It is so important in determining Egypt's long-term future, and of course it holds wider implications for the stability of the whole region: within the Middle East, Egypt is a crucial ally to the US and the only Arab country, apart from Jordan, that talks to Israel.

Yet the bigger question for most Egyptians is not who will be the next president, but whether "Crown Prince" Gamal, Omar Suleiman, or any other candidate, will deliver the change that allows them, in the future, to elect a leader that they want.

The truth is that most Egyptians will have no influence over this succession debate. Their only hope is that it offers an alternative way forward.