

## Hosni Mubarak prepares to hand over - but to whom?

Contributed by James Hider  
Thursday, 05 November 2009  
Last Updated Thursday, 05 November 2009

The Times, London  
5 November 2009

### Fears persist about Mr Mubarak's failing health

His picture is plastered all over Egypt, looking strong and healthy and ready to lead the country for years to come. But Hosni Mubarak, who has ruled the Arab world's most populous country for almost three decades, has yet to say whether he will run again for president in 2011.

Mr Mubarak, 81, who is rarely seen in public these days, came to power after his predecessor, Anwar Sadat, was gunned down by Islamic extremists. He himself has survived two assassination attempts.

He has used a repressive police force against his foes, creating a de facto one-party state where his rule is unquestioned.

But fears about his health – he collapsed in parliament in 2003 and a newspaper editor was jailed for even suggesting the President might be ill – have persisted in recent years and his failure to announce his candidature has raised questions about Egypt's political future.

In the view of many Egyptian political analysts, the choice is likely to be narrow, between Mr Mubarak's 45-year-old son Gamal, who already heads the policy secretariat of the ruling National Democratic Party, and Omar Suleiman, an ageing general who heads the intelligence services.

Mr Mubarak – like all officials in the Government – has stayed silent about any possible succession but some analysts believe the best way for him to secure his son's tenure would be to name him as his successor and step down. Otherwise, analysts say, the politically untested Gamal – a former investment banker with no military experience – could be brushed aside by the army, who would favour one of their own at the helm.

Last weekend the younger Mubarak made a speech in which he tried to cast himself as a defender of the "poor, orphans, widows and women", a statement that some interpreted as an opening shot for an election bid. He declined to say whether he would run, but the Prime Minister, Ahmed Nazif, confirmed that he was a potential candidate for the party.

Gamal is a powerful force within the centralised NDP and is seen widely as a reformist. His father has said in the past that he will die in office and may run again in 2011 to give his son more time to forge stronger ties with the military.

Since Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew the British-backed monarchy in 1952, every Egyptian leader has come from the ranks of the army. Mr Suleiman, director of the General Intelligence Service, has been the President's right-hand man in combating radical Islamists who launched bloody attacks on tourists in the 1990s, as well as handling delicate negotiations between rival Palestinian factions in Gaza and the West Bank.

He would be likely to maintain Egypt's less-than-warm friendship with Israel and its relationship with the United States, a major financial and political backer. However, the general is 73 and, while well known to Egyptians, keeps a low profile.

It is unlikely that any of the opposition parties will have a chance to make a serious run for office. Ayman Nour, the leader of the main opposition party Ghad trailed far behind Mr Mubarak in the last round of elections and was afterwards jailed on charges of forgery – charges he said were trumped up. In any case, the authorities carefully vet which parties are allowed to run, all but ensuring the NDP victory.

Other potential candidates may include such respected politicians as Amr Moussa, a former foreign minister who now heads the Arab League and has refused to rule out running for office.

The Muslim Brotherhood, which believes in an Islamist state but says it supports the principles of democracy, is the most powerful opposition party and is often used as an excuse by the regime to repress more open voting. The Government argues that if the Brotherhood, which has spawned similar Islamic movements across the region, including Hamas, won

a single victory it would prevent future elections.

Officially banned and with many of its members jailed, it has fielded candidates in the past as independents, though senior members such as Mohammed Habib say the group is concentrating on building up civic support through educational and charitable projects rather than on politics.