

Egypt's chance for change

Contributed by Editorial-The Washington Post
Monday, 15 March 2010
Last Updated Monday, 15 March 2010

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Mohamed ElBaradei has found a worthy political cause

AS DIRECTOR of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei often styled himself as a political leader rather than an international civil servant, especially after he and his agency were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

He launched broadsides against the Bush administration and tried to fashion his own solution for the Iranian nuclear program. We objected to Mr. ElBaradei's misuse of his position and are glad that his successor, Yukiya Amano, is embracing the nonpartisan professionalism that the IAEA role demands. Meanwhile, Mr. ElBaradei has found an outlet for his political ambitions that we find much more appropriate: tilting at the rotting autocracy of his native country, Egypt.

Mr. ElBaradei set off a frenzy in Cairo merely by hinting that he might be interested in running for president in a free and fair election. When he arrived for a visit last month, he was greeted at the airport by a crowd; a Facebook support group has enlisted more than 178,000 members.

The enthusiasm, especially among young Egyptians, might seem strange, given that the former U.N. bureaucrat is 67 years old and has lived outside the country for decades. But it was a demonstration of the desperation for political change in a country that has been dominated for the past 28 years by Hosni Mubarak, an old-school Arab strongman who aims to install his son as his successor.

Mr. ElBaradei got a lot done during a weeklong trip to the country. He united most of the opposition behind him, including both the banned Muslim Brotherhood and liberal democrat Ayman Nour, who was imprisoned for challenging Mr. Mubarak in the 2005 presidential election.

Mr. ElBaradei formed a movement called the National Front for Change, which will campaign for the constitutional amendments necessary for Egypt to hold truly free elections for parliament this year and for president in 2011. In a series of media interviews, he delivered a message that the 81-year-old Mr. Mubarak should have heeded long ago. "Change is inevitable," he said, "and the regime should be ready to accept it in order to avoid a confrontation with the people."

Middle East experts in and outside the Obama administration have tended to be dismissive of the ElBaradei boomlet; many are deeply invested in a status quo in which Mr. Mubarak supports U.S. objectives such as isolating Iran and its allies and collects billions of dollars annually in U.S. aid. The State Department delivered a carefully worded statement this month saying that it "would like to see the emergence of a more inclusive political process in Egypt," but that "these ultimately are decisions that have to be made by Egypt."

Less caution would be more sensible. Mr. ElBaradei's movement represents a rare opportunity to liberalize Egypt's political system. Mr. Mubarak changed the constitution in 2005 to allow a multicandidate presidential election, thanks mostly to pressure from the Bush administration. It is defeatist to suppose that he cannot be induced to accept the reasonable reforms that Mr. ElBaradei is proposing, and it is dangerous to go on assuming that in the absence of such reform, Egypt will remain unchanged.