

Egypt activists rebuke constitution



Controversy over article 76 of the Egyptian constitution has now resurfaced after Amr Mousa, the general secretary of the Arab League and a former Egyptian foreign minister, said it is an obstacle preventing him from running for the presidency.

Speaking to the Egyptian al-Masry alyoum newspaper, Mousa said on Tuesday: "It is very restricting for those who want to run for presidency. It is true there should be some defined rules for that, but those rules should not act as restrictions."

The country's parliamentary and presidential elections are expected in 2010 and 2011 respectively.

The Egyptian Movement for Change, an opposition movement popularly known as Kefaya (Enough!), held massive anti-government demonstrations last week and Abd al-Hamid Qindeel, its general coordinator, has called for a complete boycott of both the parliamentary and presidential elections.

"I am not sure if elections is the right word here, what is happening is more of a circus," he said.

"We urge Egyptians to boycott any voting process until the constitution and the real Egyptian democratic standards are back in place."

Primed for the job?

Opposition parties say the country's current electoral law is heavily skewed in favour of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) and is designed to prevent serious competition.

They also charge that Mubarak has been preparing his son, Gamal Mubarak, and boosting his status within party ranks, to succeed him as president in 2011.

Although nothing has been officially said about Gamal's nomination, the NDP projects him as a rising star among the party's younger cadre.

Egyptian political commentators say there are many indications that he is being singled out for the top job.

In 2000, Mubarak appointed his son to the NDP's general secretariat and in 2002, the party chose Gamal as the secretary-general of its policy committee.

These appointments triggered deep concerns among Egypt's political establishment that he had been placed at the centre of decision-making inside the ruling party.

However, Mustafa al-Tawil, a senior member of the al-Wafd opposition party, downplays fears that Gamal could become the NDP's candidate for the 2011 presidential elections.

"I think the president himself will run for the coming presidential elections," he said.

"It is still early to talk about 2011, who knows if Mubarak, Gamal or anyone of us will be still alive in 2011 ... We will cross that bridge when we come to it."

Controversial candidates

The sixth annual conference of NDP members convened in early November without naming a candidate for the 2011 elections.

Addressing party members, Mubarak said it was too early to talk about the party's nominee.

This, however, did little to end speculation and rumours.

Observers inside and outside Egypt were puzzled further when media reports suggested that Amr Mousa, Mohamed el Baradei, the former director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and Ahmed Zuweil, an Egyptian scientist who won the Nobel prize in chemistry, were all potential candidates.

These candidates may not be able to participate in the presidential elections, however, because of difficulties in meeting the requirements of Egyptian electoral law.

Constitutional amendment

In 2007, the Egyptian government amended the constitution.

The amendment of article 76 of the constitution stipulated that the head of state must be elected by general, direct ballot.

Political parties' candidates should secure the approval of at least 250 members of the elected councils, the People's

Assembly, the Shoura Council, and local People's Councils across the country.

Mubarak, right, has been accused of priming his son, Gamal, left, for the presidency [EPA]
The break down is as follows: at least 65 members of the People's Council, at least 25 members of the Shoura Council, and at least 25 members of local People's Councils in 14 out of 29 governorates.

The Egyptian opposition accuses Mubarak's ruling party of amending the constitution in favour of its candidates.

Mustafa al-Tawil says: "We have something called the Parties Committee. Actually, it should be named the Parties Banning Committee. This committee has acted like a buffer zone to protect the ruling party by denying opposition figures licenses to form political parties.

"To throw sand in the eyes, they allow from time to time parties formed by people backed by the authority and the ruling party. I will give you an example of what kind of competitors the regime allows; Ahmed al-Sabahi, a presidential candidate in the 2005 presidential elections, said back then that he gave his vote to his competitor, the current president Hosni Mubarak."

Poor nominations

However, Majid Putros, a member of the NDP's policy committee, rebuts this.

"Egypt is like any other country in the world, it cannot open the door for unqualified, inappropriate presidential candidates," he says.

"We have put a condition that an eligible candidate must get the approvals of 5 per cent of elected councils like parliament, Shoura Council etc. We think it is logical, if a person cannot secure 5 per cent of people's support, how can he run the country?"

But, al-Tawil calls for a fundamental change to the whole set up.

"Our prime demand is to change the ruling system from a presidential system to a parliamentary one," he explains.

He would also like to restore juridical supervision of the voting process.

"About the electoral system, we echo other opposition parties' demands, however, I would like to stress on restoring judicial control over the voting process. It is vital to win the trust of the opposition and voters in the whole process."

President Mubarak's speech at the 6th annual NDP conference completely ignored the row over his succession, leaving many questions by both the opposition and the public unanswered.

A few days before the conference, Ahmed Nazif, the Egyptian prime minister, stated that Gamal was a potential candidate if Mubarak decided not to run, further enforcing speculation that Mubarak is preparing his son to

succeed him.

"Gamal was elected as head of our committee in 2000. It means the appointment was made 11 years before the 2011 elections. He was elected for the post only to make use of his experience in politics and economy," says Putros.

Political families

While the issue of Gamal succeeding his father has created waves among opposition parties and their supporters, political dynasties can be found around the region and beyond.

In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father, Hafez al-Assad. Saad al-Hariri, the current Lebanese prime minister, is the son of Rafiq al-Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister.

And, as Putros points out, political families, like the Kennedy and Bush families, have been active in US politics for decades.

"During my visit to the US, members of the congress raised Gamal's issue with me. I told them who is George Bush junior?"

"What I want to say is, if Gamal runs for presidency that is his right as an Egyptian citizen, just like any other Egyptian," he says.

Opposition parties, however, have a different take on the issue.

Jihan al-Hilfawi, a member of the opposition Muslim Brotherhood group, says the constitution is an obstacle to her party's participation in the presidential elections.

"Obviously we are a banned group, and the government is not showing any signs that this ban is going to end anytime soon. Therefore, we cannot nominate a candidate for the presidential elections, because article 76 stipulates that the candidate must be a member of an official political party," she says.

"We feel like most of the opposition parties about the possibility of Gamal taking over the presidency. If he runs for presidency in a fair atmosphere where he is not privileged as the son of the president, then we do not have a problem with that."

Abd al-Jalil Mustafa, a senior member of Kefaya, says that "passing the rule of a country to a member of the family of the current [president] is definitely against what democracy stands for".

"It is not a taboo if a person tries to secure his son in his position even as a president, but the taboo is to ban competition and to use the father's authority to produce a tailor-made system to suit his son, and to deny others their right in engaging in a legitimate competition."

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