

## Qantara.de – Dialogue with the Islamic World

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Hosni Mubarak's Reign in Egypt

### The Pharaoh's Legacy

**Hosni Mubarak has enjoyed unlimited power in Egypt for the past 28 years. Today, however, there is increasing resistance against his autocratic reign. Many Egyptians are wondering what the future of the Nile republic might look like after Mubarak's death. Amira El Ahl reports from Cairo**

Anyone trying to enter the Western Delta will have their patience seriously tested a few kilometres outside Cairo. There is only one road across the river here: the old river weir in Qanater, which was built at a time when only a few donkey carts wanted to get to the other side of the Nile each day. There was one lane in each direction.

Today, thousands of cars, trucks, mopeds and even still a few donkey carts try to push through this bottleneck, creating an unholy chaos that the wildly gesticulating traffic cop is hard put to master.

This is the road that leads to Quesa, Kafr al-Musalha and Shibin al-Kom, straight into Hosni Mubarak's past. Here, in the still-verdant, fertile delta some 60 kilometres northwest of the capital, is where Mubarak grew up.

He was born in Quesa, which has in the meantime grown into a small town. The house, painted yellow, is today almost a complete ruin. Only the large solid wood door stands witness to the fact that people once lived here who, unlike most of the farmers in this region, did not have to live from hand to mouth. Mubarak's father was a judicial officer and the family belonged to the lower middle class.

#### A good family background

"He came from a good family", says Mahmoud Omar. The 79-year-old still remembers the young Mubarak well. They were neighbours back then, in Kafr al-Musalha, where Mubarak grew up. Omar sits on an old wooden chair on the dusty street before his house.

Right next door is the small villa where the Mubarak family used to live. Here as well, time is wearing down the walls, but wind and weather have also left their traces. The villagers are proud of their town's famous son, but there is no panel or museum here to commemorate him.

"He hasn't paid a visit to the village since he was vice president", says Omar, sounding a bit hurt. The mosque and the school were named after another famous village resident, not head of state Hosni Mubarak. His name adorns only a bridge and the sport club.

He was a sportsman, is what everyone recalls when asked about Mubarak. "He played hockey at school and at the sport club", Omar remarks, "and he was a very good pupil." Both areas would play a vital role in his later career.

"He dreamt of becoming a pilot", Makram Ahmed remembers. The journalist and editor-in-chief of the weekly paper "al-Musaur" is a close confidant of the president. This fine gentleman with snow-white hair and thick horn-rimmed glasses has been part of the regime's inner circle for decades.

#### From pilot to president

Mubarak had everything it takes to become a pilot: a good education, intelligence, ambition, discipline and a high level of physical fitness

For Hosni Mubarak, a career as pilot opened the door to a new life, to a part of society that had up until then remained barred to him. "It enabled him to marry into 'High Society'", says Makram Ahmed. Mubarak's rise was meteoric. His discipline and determination to get ahead soon paid off.

After his military career as fighter pilot and pilot trainer, former head of state Gamal Abdel Nasser appointed Hosni Mubarak chief of staff in 1969 and later made him commander-in-chief of the Air Force. Mubarak fought in the 1973 October War as lieutenant general, and in April 1975 Anwar al-Sadat named him vice president.

When Sadat was assassinated by Islamists at a military parade, Hosni Mubarak was standing right next to him. He was uninjured and became state president and minister president of Egypt on 14 October 1981. Ever since then, he has ruled Egypt in accordance with the rules applicable in a state of emergency – a state he has continually reconfirmed and extended. In January 1982 he gave up the office of minister president.

Today, Egypt is characterised by explosive population growth, as a result of which resources are becoming scarce, a weak economy, unemployment and a growing gulf between the rich and the poor.

### **Economic collapse**

"The economic decline is serious", says Abdelhalim Qandil, a journalist who is editor-in-chief of the opposition newspaper "Saut al-Umma", a Nasserist and speaker for the opposition movement "Kifaya".

Qandil doesn't mince words when it comes to his rejection of Mubarak. "In 1973 the Egyptian economy was still on a par with South Korea. Today South Korea is in tenth place, and we are number 122." In Qandil's opinion, Egypt has slipped downward to the level of a nation like Burkina Faso since Mubarak took the helm.

One reason for this decline, according to the journalist, is the one-party system. The "Mafiocracy", as Qandil calls it, has driven Egypt to ruin. "We have not only been ruled by a single party, but also by a single family for the past 28 years."

Father Mubarak, Mother Suzanne and their youngest son, Gamal, are guiding the fortunes of the country, says Qandil. The first-born, Alaa Mubarak, is not politically active, but he is influential as a businessman in the Nile republic.

Abdelhalim Qandil describes the current state of affairs as "the worst era in Egypt's history". All political opposition is repressed; never in Egypt's history have there been so many political prisoners, and so many others who have disappeared, he says.

Mubarak is isolated, Qandil says, and only the upper class, which has profited from his reign, is on his side – along with the gigantic security apparatus Mubarak has created. "We have almost two million security officers but only 460,000 soldiers", says Qandil. "Today the Egyptians are under battle by Egypt."

### **In the clutches of the security apparatus**

Mubarak needs these security forces to safeguard his power and to repress the dissatisfaction of the populace. 80 percent of Egyptians live on less than two dollars a day, and everyone's big dream is to get out of the country. No matter how.

"Do you know of any other country in the world where all the citizens want to leave?", asks Abdelhalim Qandil. Many Egyptians used to go to Iraq, Libya or Europe to work. But now they have been forced to flee from Iraq, and Europe hardly lets anyone in legally anymore.

"That's why people's resentment is growing louder; they are becoming politically active and the number of demonstrations is increasing", comments Qandil. One thing is for sure: the economic crisis poses a threat to Mubarak's regime. Income from tourism and the Suez Canal is dwindling, and there are fewer people working abroad and sending money home.

What's in store for the country? Even in his 28th year of rule, the Pharaoh, as many call him, still shows no signs of being weary of his high office. Many enemies doubt that Mubarak will ever step down, despite his advanced age.

But why has he still not appointed a vice president who could take over as head of state in an emergency? Rumour has it that a Sudanese fortune-teller told Mubarak even before he became vice president that he would one day be president of Egypt.

However, the soothsayer continued, he would die the moment he named a vice president. This is why the "Pharaoh" doesn't dare to anoint a successor, claim superstitious Egyptians.

### **Everything stays the same?**

Realists see things differently. "Mubarak does not want to be the one to select the next president of Egypt; it should be up to the people to choose", says Makram Ahmed. But in the process his failure to decide is plunging Egypt into a state of great uncertainty.

No one knows what will happen to the country when Mubarak is no longer there. Anarchy, free elections, an Islamic republic based on the Iranian model, or merely a handing on of the business of government to the younger Mubarak, so that everything stays the same?

"The parties are weak, so it will be the military that has the last word on this issue", predicts Ahmed. The head of the Secret Service, Omar Suleiman, might make a fitting candidate for successor. He is a wise man, the journalist says, who has Mubarak's trust.

This is one point on which the government-supporting Ahmed and the regime critic Qandil can agree. "When Mubarak dies, the army will be out in the streets keeping the peace", Abdelhalim Qandil is sure.

### **Egypt as powder keg**

Unlike Makram Ahmed, however, Qandil can also foresee an utterly different scenario: "When Mubarak dies, all of Egypt takes to the streets and celebrates." For the author, who caused a sensation with two books critical of Mubarak, Egypt has become a powder keg. "Just a single match could ignite the whole country."

Opposition to the Mubarak regime has grown much louder and stronger in the past two years. The government is today no longer battling against only the rebellious Muslim Brotherhood, which is represented in parliament by 88 candidates, or against journalists like Abdelhalim Qandil, who stir up sentiment against Mubarak and his retinue in their oppositional newspapers.

The State must increasingly also deal with demonstrators and with primarily young critics who make skilful use of the new media. Spearheaded by numerous bloggers who attack the regime on their websites, 'Facebook' and 'YouTube' have also become platforms for the resistance.

An appeal for a general strike was posted on 'Facebook', for example, and a video shown on 'YouTube' compared Mubarak with a donkey and portrayed him alternately as monarch, pharaoh or Hitler.

"Our society is on the brink of an explosion, a national uprising", warns Abdelhalim Qandil. The economic crisis will only amplify this trend, and the journalist predicts that the coming two years could prove to be the most dangerous in Egypt's history. "In 2010 everything will be over."

Qandil can also imagine a development similar to what took place in Turkey: a changeover to a democratic system backed by the army.

### **Will Gamal Mubarak be crowned?**

Although the government has made all the necessary preparations to pave Gamal Mubarak's way to the top post – through amendments to the constitution, among other things – most don't believe that the junior Mubarak will take over.

"He has only one chance: if his father puts him in office before he dies", says Qandil. The problem is that the army is evidently against Mubarak's youngest son. Only Israel and the USA would have an interest in a government led by Gamal Mubarak.

If Mubarak senior should die before making his son president, Gamal would have no future in Egypt. "Then Suzanne and Gamal Mubarak will be the first to board a plane heading west", Qandil thinks. But perhaps it won't come to that.

"I'm afraid that Gamal could die before his father", says Qandil, and quickly follows up with a joke: Mubarak gets a turtle as gift from a friend. "These animals can live as long as 200 years", says the friend. Mubarak replies: "We'll see about that." Mubarak's mother supposedly lived to 104. And she died in a car accident.

*Amira El Ahl*

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State of Emergency Extended in Egypt

### [Autocrat in Dire Straits](#)

During his election campaign, President Mubarak had pledged to revoke the state of emergency and replace it with anti-terrorism legislation. Instead, it has now been extended for the second time.

Information from Jürgen Stryjak in Cairo

Interview Ahmad Saif al-Islam Hamad

### ["No to Another Term of Mubarak in Office"](#)

Egyptians will be voting in September on whether to extend the term of Hosni Mubarak as president once more. Opposition to the move is growing, and Ahmad Hamad, executive director of the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre, told Mona Naggar about the background to the movement

Interview with Youssef Chahine

### ["Tenderness Has Dissapeared"](#)

Youssef Chahine is the grand old man and the enfant terrible of Arabian cinema. Moritz Behrendt and Christian Meier met the 80-year-old director in Cairo, who on the occasion certified his reputation as one of the most vociferous critics of Egyptian politics

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