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EGYPT'S RISE: SERVING SECURITY THROUGH DEVELOPMENT

By Yvonne Siu '03

Want a true barometer of stability in the Middle East? Consider a country's government—and then walk through the streets.

I say this having just returned from Egypt, one of America's strongest allies in the Middle East, where I attended the ninth General Conference of the National Democratic Party (NDP). Waiting patiently in a Soviet-era stadium full of Egyptians for the opening of the conference, I sat in an enclosed section for international delegates, straining to hear the English translation of the proceedings above the deafening chatter. I was in Cairo as a delegate to the party's conference where the party would review progress on political, economic, and social reforms.

In an age where terrorism and nuclear nonproliferation dominate the international agenda, where America's national security depends increasingly on events in faraway places, I was keen to learn more. What did the poverty, the burgeoning overpopulation of Cairo, and inequality mean for the safety of everyday Americans? How could the squalor and dysfunction of Egypt mean so much to America's security?

Of particular interest were the comments of Gamal Mubarak, the president's son, who eloquently outlined the real economic successes in Egypt in the past few years: a GDP growth rate of 6.9 percent and foreign investment that has surged to \$6.1 billion in 2005-06 compared to only \$2 billion in 2004. Egypt now attracts much investment and business from the Arab world, following economic reforms and liberalizations since the elections in 2005. Today Egypt also enjoys a favorable trading position on the Mediterranean rim, which has created needed jobs and income.

But Mubarak, in articulate and perfect English, also admitted that, along with such positive growth, Egypt is straining under a multitude of development challenges—poverty and unemployment, rising inequality, a rapidly growing population, water and air pollution, water scarcity, and rising energy and housing costs. These issues pose considerable challenges to the government—and the international community—to ensure that the country's rise is not met with social discontent, alienation, and unaddressed poverty, which could fuel the fires of extremism.

Walking through the stalls of the Khan al-Khalili bazaar during breaks from the conference, or strolling through central Cairo, it was easy to believe that 23 percent of the



PHOTO BY YVONNE SIU '03

Food vendors in a market in central Cairo.

country lives in absolute poverty. Dust and the smell of diesel exhaust mix with roasting beef and kabobs on every corner to form an intriguing but unsettling aroma. Bathed in glaring neon lights from lines of new clothing stores, traditional open-air fruit and vegetable stalls sit along dirt roads in downtown Cairo lending a modern mystique to the Orient. The constant jostling and movement in the streets is a living reminder of the real and strong undercurrent of public support needed to shore up the legitimacy and success of the NDP—and stability in the Middle East more broadly.

Considering the growing anti-secular, anti-Western forces in Egypt, a question became apparent during the conference: What role should the United States play in strengthening Egyptian governance to help the country meet the development needs of its people? By governance, I do not mean supporting a certain political system, but rather the effectiveness of that system to meet basic human needs and to respond to growing discontent. A government without this risks a legitimacy gap and leaves itself open to criticism from other groups that may rally the poor and the alienated to an extremist cause.

The United States has had a strong strategic relationship with Egypt since the 1970s, given Egypt's central role in acting as a facilitator of dialog among the United States, Israel, and the Palestinians. But relations have been strained recently because of America's current policy of pushing democracy issues on the country.

At a time when pressing development challenges in Egypt could quickly spill over into social discontent, the United States would do well to encourage efforts to address the development ills in the country. By focusing on these practical efforts, America would add to the legitimacy of the NDP domestically and internationally, help meet the needs of Egypt's poor, and ensure that the country follows the road of growth that meets the needs of all its people. Perhaps more importantly, doing so would give groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, a powerful force in Egypt, less chance to argue against the effectiveness of the government. Economic growth would erode the moral authority these groups might use to win over the Egyptian people and the Arab world.

I became increasingly convinced during my stay that, in maintaining Egypt as one of America's closest allies in the Middle East, the United States should consider the country's economic and social development challenges as not only a matter of international aid, but also one of international security. No matter what democratic principles it adopts, if the government of Egypt cannot provide for the basic human needs of its people, then extremists will fill the vacuum and the world will have suffered a serious loss in the fight against terrorism.

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