

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

## **Seeking a constructive role** <sup>[1]</sup>

Amman, Jordan

This is an important moment in the Middle East. Events have been moving quickly in several countries around the region. The questions now are whether the momentum for reform can be sustained, and whether the United States, despite its poor reputation throughout the Arab World, can play a constructive role.

The year began with elections that went better than expected in both Iraq and the Palestinian territories, followed by voting for municipal councils in Saudi Arabia – a country whose king said a decade ago that elections were culturally inappropriate for Arabs.

What is happening now in Egypt and Lebanon, however, is potentially even more significant.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's surprise announcement that he will allow candidates other than himself to stand in September's presidential election was unexpected, but it has been greeted warily both at home and abroad. Everyone agrees a ballot with several candidates is fundamentally better than a ballot with only one. Exactly how much is really going to change in Egypt is, however, another question.

Symptomatic of this was a conversation I had with a prominent Egyptian over the weekend. He's the sort of person who would surely like to see the country open up and have a freer political system. But the fact that I can't name him, and that he was clearly reluctant to speak on the phone is a reminder of how far Egypt still has to go before it can be considered even a partially open society.

He was markedly less than enthusiastic about Mubarak's announcement, noting that the constitutional changes making their way through Egypt's parliament will require all presidential candidates to be approved by parliament itself, a rubber stamp body controlled by Mubarak's National Democratic Party. Talking to Egyptians it is difficult to miss the sense that they believe they are trading one sort of stage-managed election for another. "What we really need is some kind of independent body to oversee the election," my friend said.

For the moment the administration is saying the right things. "Egypt has now the prospect of competitive, multi-party elections," President Bush said during a speech earlier today at the National Defense University. "Like all free elections, these require freedom of assembly, multiple candidates, free access by those candidates to the media and the right to form political parties."

All of those are going to be key indicators of how free this election really is. It is right and appropriate that the President make it clear now, early on, that the United States will be watching.

Conventional wisdom has it that Condoleezza Rice's cancellation of her visit to Cairo helped prompt Mubarak's decision. "There's a feeling that Mubarak got the Americans off his back for the moment," offered a Cairo-based Western observer. He added that the real question is not what happens in this election, but what happens in the next one. No one questions that Mubarak will win again. The things to watch are how much openness his regime allows during this fall's campaign and who it lets onto the ballot. This could be the thin end of the proverbial wedge.

That is where pressure, such as Bush's remarks, can be useful. The trick is not to provoke a reaction. Beirut today saw a huge pro-Syria demonstration, organized mainly by Shiite Muslims, who make up Lebanon's largest single confessional group. The gist of their argument was that foreign governments (by which they mainly meant the United States and France) should not interfere in Lebanese affairs.

As Ghassan Salame, a former Lebanese cabinet minister, told the New York Times last week, "You need democrats to produce democracy. You can't produce it through institutions. You need people to fight for it to make it real. Neither American tanks nor domestic institutions can do it."

"Each country in the Middle East will take a different path of reform and every nation that starts on that journey can know that America will walk at its side," Bush said today. The trick is doing that in a way that helps without alienating.

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