A Changing Egypt

KUFM Commentary: April 16, 2012

By Owen Sirrs of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center

The Arab Republic of Egypt is on the threshold of a new era in its often turbulent history. For the past sixty years the Egyptian army has dominated the country, exercising a not-so-hidden hand over national politics, foreign relations and the economy. Yet this dominant position has been eroding, and another major sign of change is the presidential elections scheduled for later this month.

Of course, the galvanizing event that led Egypt to this point was the Arab Spring of 2011 when tens of thousands of Egyptians defied army threats and gathered in downtown Cairo to demand a fundamental overhaul of the system. The first to fall was the 83-year-old former Air Force general and president, Hosni Mubarak. Then parliamentary elections were held last fall in which the Muslim Brotherhood and an extremist Islamist party won more than seventy percent of the seats.

But parliaments historically have been weak in Egypt and it is clear to all concerned that the real prize is the constitutionally powerful presidency. Not for nothing has the Egyptian president been called a ‘modern pharaoh’. The weakened army is determined to maintain some control over the executive while the Muslim Brothers see the makings of a potential power grab. In other words, the battle lines have been drawn and a show down seems imminent.

It should not be forgotten that, at bottom, Egypt is still run by the Army, albeit in the form of a de facto interim government called the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. At the head of this august body is Mubarak’s defense minister and crony, Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi. In early April, the Council tried to check rising Muslim Brotherhood power by disqualifying ten presidential candidates,
including Khairat al-Shater of the Brotherhood who was one of the clear front runners. For critics of the army, this is classic military meddling in the democratic process and a taste of what lies ahead. On the other hand, as far as the army was concerned, the Brotherhood had already broken its promise not to run a candidate in the presidential race and therefore everything was fair game.

So who are the current frontrunners in what is now a gerrymandered race? The front man for the military (although he fervently denies it), is the Mubarak-era foreign minister and Arab nationalist firebrand, Amr Musa. Musa has no military background. Representing the Brotherhood’s now reduced chances of election victory is the head of the organization’s political wing, Mohamed Mursi. The third, and most intriguing, option is Abdel Monein Abu al-Fatuh, a former Muslim Brotherhood reformist who was ousted from the organization last year when he decided to run for the presidency.

Regardless of the outcome of the presidential elections, there are clear signs that more change is on the horizon:

First, the army’s power and influence is steadily waning. While it retains enough authority to weigh in on the political process, its ability to browbeat the Brotherhood and other dissident activists is increasingly questionable. The Brothers have even been emboldened to challenge the army’s traditional dominance of Egyptian industry and commerce where many former generals found rich sinecures.

Second, a Brotherhood-dominated panel is currently drafting a new constitution that will have a major influence on Egypt’s future. For example, it will dictate the extent to which Islamic Law – Shari’a – shapes the country’s legal system and what kind of Shari’a will be chosen. This choice, in turn, will dictate the future of gender politics, the rights of religious minorities, and a host of other potentially explosive issues.
Third, and finally, Egyptians have embarked on a new course in their history that must navigate delicately between the rocks of an authoritarian tradition that has plagued the country throughout its history, the whirlpools of civil strife and sectarian violence, and the shoals of poverty, illiteracy, environmental change, and a growing population. Let us hope the Arab Spring does not become the Arab Winter.

In any event, regardless of actions taken and consequences suffered, Egypt will not be the ossified, stagnant place that it was under the three decade rule of Hosni Mubarak.

This is Owen Sirrs from the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at The University of Montana. Thank you for listening.