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# Egypt set to follow in Tunisia's footsteps

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In the State of the Union Address, delivered at the beginning of his second term, US president George W. Bush lectured the Arabs on the merits of democracy.

He praised some for undertaking incremental reform, admonished others for holding back, and made this comment on Egypt: "The great and proud nation of Egypt, which showed the way toward peace in the Middle East, can now show the way toward democracy".

President Hosni Mubarak responded quickly and swiftly.

Last week, he took many off guard by instructing the Egyptian parliament to amend the constitution to allow for direct, multiparty presidential elections for the first time in Egypt's history.

Arab and international observers were divided on how to evaluate Mubarak's proposal and also over the degree to which American pressure played a role in introducing the change.

Sceptics doubted that the eventual constitutional amendment would create the conditions for a genuine democracy. The Egyptian Government, on the other hand, hailed Mubarak's announcement as heralding a new political era for Egypt.

It also tried to give the impression that Mubarak's proposed reform was a response to domestic

some cosmetic changes.

Having said that, we have every reason to believe that Egypt's upcoming presidential elections will take the same route of the Tunisian scenario.

Last year, Tunisian President Zain Al Abideen Bin Ali introduced some changes to the electoral process in order to give the impression that his elections were fairer than the single-candidate referendum, which is held in some Arab countries.

Hence, unlike the previous elections of 1989 and 1994, in which he stood as the sole candidate, Bin Ali allowed multi-candidate elections, accepting the challenge of three lightweight rivals.

Yet, by monopolising the media and in the absence of an independent judiciary, he made certain that any possible challenger would not get more than 5 per cent of the popular vote.

The outcome, thus, was not very much different from the previous elections, where he received more than 94 per cent of the popular vote.

It is not only that Bin Ali selected rivals from tiny legal parties, whose performance was very much in doubt; he also denied opposition challengers the right to compete in a free and fair environment.

Opposition candidates did

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demands. This proposal came from "my full conviction of the need to consolidate efforts for more freedom and democracy", Mubarak said.

Other Egyptian officials claimed that Mubarak has discussed this reform in private in 2002, hinting that it preceded Bush's call for more democracy in the Arab world.

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More doubtful, perhaps, is the claim that the tiny opposition movement, which has held a number of street demonstrations against Mubarak in recent days shouting "Enough!", was the latent force behind the reform.

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not have, for example, the opportunity to go on television or on radio even for one minute; whereas Bin Ali's portrait was on display in almost every shop and public building in Tunis with his picture on the front pages of all the daily newspapers.

Hence, few Tunisians knew who was running for president apart from Bin Ali.

The introduction of a complicated electoral system, designed to block any attempt to threaten the dominance of the ruling party, made it almost impossible for any challenger to perform well in the election.

What makes things worse in Egypt is that the promised elections will take place while the emergency law is still in force. This will create an aura of democracy while preventing any real change.

Arab leaders are learning fast enough to circumscribe any democratic attempt. They are unintentionally, however, creating the right conditions for a more violent change.

*The views expressed in the articles and letters are those of writers and contributors and it is not necessary for the Editor to agree with the contents.*

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