

Egypt's race against time:

A nation some see as the Arab world's 'barometer' points to storms ahead

7/21/02

By BILL TAMMEUS

CAIRO, Egypt - As chief of Egypt's State Information Service, Nabil Osman is in the business of promoting President Hosni Mubarak's view that this ancient country is a major force in the world.

"By status," says Osman, "Egypt is the barometer in this part of the world."

To make sure no one misses that point, he pauses and methodically looks at each of the 25 American and Canadian journalists seated at long tables in an State Information Service conference room here.

"We would like to maintain this status," he says with grand understatement.

The desire for that continued position of leadership is not, in fact, the wild fantasy of a tinhorn dictator in a papaya republic. Egypt - fabled land of those astonishing monuments to supersized ego, the pyramids - really does have some things going for it as it moves into the 21st century.

"It's a real nation state in the sense that some places in the Middle East are not," says a Western diplomat here with long experience in Islamic countries. "It gives Egyptians a sense of confidence about themselves."

Egypt, he says, also has size, both geographically and demographically, and "that gives it geostrategic weight in the Arab world."

Beyond all that, Mubarak, who assumed control of Egypt after Islamic extremists assassinated visionary President Anwar Sadat in 1981, is - except for Moammar Ghadafi in Libya - now the senior leader in the Arab world. As befits such a personality in an unstable world where there are no guarantees, his photo seems ubiquitous in Cairo.

But even with those advantages, Egypt is struggling to maintain its dominance in the Arab world. And the Arab world itself is in disarray, full of disappointment and choked by a lack of freedom and basic human rights. Indeed, a recent United Nations report paints a bleak picture of Arab life.

"We are all engaged in a sort of race against time," says Egypt's foreign minister, Ahmed Maher. "Time," he says, "does not seem to be playing our way."

Despite its pretensions to greatness, Egypt now seems to be only tenuously held together by a combination of respect for its long history, authoritarian but cautious government, widespread religious adherence and hope in a future that one Western diplomat here describes as "scary."

Egypt's population has exploded from about 48 million in 1986 to about 68 million today. And that's the good news. If it had not been for effective family-planning measures - paid for in large measure by American taxpayers - "we could easily be 77 million to 79 million," Osman says.

The population growth rate has fallen from 3-plus percent to about 2.1 percent now, but to get to a point at which population growth is stable and manageable, it needs to drop to about 1.6 or 1.8 percent.

Even more distressing is that authorities estimate that half the women in the country and 30 percent of the men are illiterate.

"It's hard to move a country into the modern world if you don't have basic literacy and numeracy skills," says a Western diplomat here whose work focuses on helping Egypt use foreign aid to improve life for its citizens.

Nonetheless, Foreign Minister Maher is clear about the country's ultimate goal: "We are trying to build a liberal democratic system." It is a goal the United States should - and does - applaud, however far from reality it remains.

"We have come a long way," Maher maintains, "but there is a lot to do."

One of the complex dynamics of life in Egypt is the role of religion, which touches nearly everything. At first, for instance, there was some religious resistance to efforts to reduce the population growth rate, but Osman says "the religious leadership changed its position."

Islam in Egypt is, in fact, different in tone from Islam in Saudi Arabia, where the religion began nearly 1,400 years ago. In Saudi Arabia, home of Islam's most sacred sites, women are veiled and the entire country follows a conservative, puritanical form of Islam called Wahhabism. All Saudis are expected to fall in line. There isn't a single Christian church, Jewish synagogue or other house of worship in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Minister of Education Mohammed Ahmed Rasheed says simply that there's no need to build anything but mosques in the country.

Egypt is predominantly (90 percent) a Muslim country, and many of its citizens have moved toward more strict religious observance in recent years. But it's also home to millions of Coptic Christians, who are relatively free (despite some informal restrictions) to follow their faith. The Coptic church, though independent, is most closely associated with Eastern Orthodoxy.

Muslim women in Egypt often are seen in public without veils. And some women here are outspoken in their encouragement of full participation by women in society.

"We believe women should participate in every way side by side with men," says Farkhonda Hassan, a professor of geology at the American University of Cairo. She is active in the National Council for Women.

Hassan is frankly opposed to Muslim women covering themselves completely, including their faces (a practice more common today in Egypt than 30 years ago).

"The women who hide their faces," she says, "it's not Islamic at all. It's completely wrong."

Islamic extremism has roots in Egypt and still attracts followers despite the government's efforts to crush it. But even if radicals can find some sympathizers in Egypt, David Lamb correctly notes in his book *The Arabs* that Islam's "intellectual heart is in Cairo." Indeed, that heart is located at al-Azhar, the oldest continuously operating university in the world (founded more than 1,000 years ago), where we met with the grand imam, Mouhamed Said Tantawy.

"The world," says Tantawy, "now has become one country or even one village. So there is a great need for cooperation and knowing one another." But an Egyptian diplomat here correctly notes this about relations with Americans: "We know you more than you know us, and it's important that you know us."

Across town at the Ministry of the Interior, however, the focus is much less on lovely ideas about cooperation and much more on making sure that extremist forces don't disrupt society.

Gen. Habib Al Adly runs the ministry and describes his job as making sure there is stability and security for Egypt. (Despite the ministry's name, its work is nothing like that of the U.S. Interior Department.)

The extremists who assassinated Sadat, says Al Adly, operated "under the curtain of religion" and were "very far away from the real Islam." Those militants took the concept of jihad and

distorted it. As Grand Imam Tantawy says, "The difference between terrorism and jihad is like the difference between land and sky."

Al Adly doesn't intend for extremists to cause trouble in Egypt again.

"Egypt harbors a lot of terrorists," says a Western diplomat here. "They're all harbored in Egyptian jails."

As the American response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks got organized, Al Adly says, "we fully supported the United States in its campaign against terrorism."

In Saudi Arabia, there simply is no separation between church and state. Islam's holy book, the Qur'an, is, in fact, the Saudi constitution.

Matters in Egypt are different, though the Mubarak regime relies on the religious establishment for support and legitimacy. This means that the country's laws are brought to al-Azhar for a stamp of approval. Indeed, al-Azhar's sheiks (Islamic leaders) generally interpret the Qur'an not only for Egyptian Muslims but for all of Islam.

It gives great intellectual and theological power to Tantawy and others at al-Azhar, but it also provides some assurance that most Muslims in the world will not be led into the kind of violent misuse of religion committed by Osama bin Laden and his thugs.

"The study at al-Azhar is built on moderation," says Tantawy.

Violent forms of traditional religions grow for varied and complex reasons. But many scholars and religious experts agree that people who are uneducated, poor and without much hope are easier targets for recruitment - even if the leaders and top lieutenants of extremists groups are well educated and well off, like bin Laden and many of the Sept. 11 hijackers.

Egypt's rapid population growth and a slow economy - especially since Sept. 11 - help to create a pool of potential recruits to extremism.

A diplomatic source in Cairo who studies the country's economy estimates that Egypt needs to provide 700,000 to 800,000 new jobs a year for people entering the work force. To reach such a goal would require a 7 percent to 8 percent growth in gross domestic product. But in recent years that growth has been only about 2 percent, and it has fallen since Sept. 11.

At least 25 percent of Egypt's workers now are on the public payroll, which leads to bloated bureaucracy and inefficiencies. Even in the private sector, it's sometimes not clear there's much real work for employees.

For instance, our group of journalists stayed at the Nile Hilton, a fashionable hotel directly across the river from the famous Cairo Tower. The hotel elevators were, naturally, automatic. But most of the time, teen-age boys dressed in Egyptian costumes ran those elevators, hoping for tips. It was useless work, though the young men were pleasant and trained to say all the right things.

So one of Egypt's problems - and, in turn, a problem for America and the West - is how to reform the economy without forcing people out of work, making them desperate and open to violent, extremist religion as an answer.

Indeed, however far away Egypt may be from the daily thoughts of Americans, we have a vital interest in the country's stability and in keeping Islamic extremists from gaining more of a foothold here.

Egypt under Sadat showed it's possible for an Arab country to make peace with Israel, and though it's now what Arab League General Secretary Amr Moussa calls a "cold peace," it's better than none. Mubarak, however harsh his rule, has maintained good relations with Washington, and Egyptians are pinning their hopes on America's peace-making abilities in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

"The involvement of the United States is very important," says Foreign Minister Maher. "It's the only party that can bring this (peace) together."

Deep public disenchantment with American policy in the Middle East adds to the danger here, although as an experienced Western diplomat says, "Egypt is not going to war with Israel. They don't want to do this again."

Still, extremism has more fertile opportunity for recruitment where there is antipathy to U.S. policy. And a diplomat says that "the public attitudes here about Israel are poisonous. The attitude toward American policy is close to that."

If, as Nabil Osman maintains, Egypt is the barometer in this part of the world, it is indicating storms ahead. Understanding Egypt's religious context and helping Egyptians create the kind of civil society the foreign minister says is the goal are essential to sweeping away some of the clouds on the horizon.