

Hosni Mubarak, Egyptian Leader Ousted in Arab Spring, Dies at 91

Mr. Mubarak, who had been likened to a modern-day pharaoh, was deposed in 2011 by the popular unrest in the Arab world that came to be called the Arab Spring.

By Michael Slackman

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Hosni Mubarak, the former autocratic president of Egypt, whose hold on power was broken and place in history upended by a public uprising against the poverty, corruption and repressive police tactics that came to define his 30 years in office, died on Tuesday in Cairo. He was 91.

State TV said he died at a hospital after undergoing surgery there but gave no other details.

Mr. Mubarak spent most of his final years at the Maadi Military Hospital in southern Cairo, under guard in a room overlooking the Nile as he defiantly battled courtroom charges of corruption and conspiracy to murder. He was released on March 24, 2017, having been convicted in a single, relatively minor case, and spirited across the city to his mansion in the affluent neighborhood of Heliopolis.

Mr. Mubarak made a rare public appearance last October, when, in a video posted on YouTube, he spoke of his memories of Egypt's 1973 war against Israel, in which he commanded Egypt's air force. It was the first time he had spoken before a camera since his ouster during the Arab Spring in 2011.

Mr. Mubarak once appeared invincible. He survived multiple assassination attempts, held power longer than anyone since Muhammad Ali Pasha, the founder of the modern Egyptian state, suppressed a wave of terrorism by Islamic fundamentalists, and seemed even to defy aging.

But his edifice of power turned out to be fragile and dated, built on strong-arm rule, cronyism and an alliance with the West. It was ultimately brought down by the shock wave of popular unrest in the Arab world — calls for democracy, the rule of law and an end to corruption — that came to be called the Arab Spring.

An anti-Mubarak protester issuing a rallying cry during a clash with pro-Mubarak demonstrators in Tahrir Square in Cairo in February 2011. Ed Ou for The New York Times

He was forced to resign on Feb. 11, 2011, after 18 days of protests, when the Egyptian public poured into the streets by the millions, stripping authority from a man who had been likened to a modern-day pharaoh.

At first, it appeared he would be able simply to withdraw from the scene and live quietly in his villa in Sharm el Sheikh, a Red Sea resort. But the crowds would not allow it. They demanded that he and his family be investigated for corruption, and that he be held accountable for the more than 800 people killed during the days of protest.

The public pressure worked. He was arrested on murder and corruption charges and remanded to a military hospital while he awaited trial. His sons, Alaa and Gamal — once treated as princes of the state — were jailed in the notorious Tora prison.

“Like many rulers who isolate themselves and concentrate power around them, he misread the Egyptian people and their commitment to collective life,” said Diane Singerman, a professor at American University and an expert on contemporary Egypt.

In August 2011, Egyptians were astonished to see Mr. Mubarak wheeled into a courtroom on a hospital gurney and placed in the defendants cage. It was a remarkable and humbling fall for the only ruler most Egyptians had ever known.

In the end, however, the trial did little to provide a sense of closure or reconciliation for a society struggling to come to terms with its past and future.

In June 2012, Mr. Mubarak was wheeled back into court, his arms crossed defiantly as he was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. But an appeals court overturned the verdict and ordered a retrial, and he was ultimately exonerated. He also skirted several corruption accusations.

The 2012 trial occurred against the backdrop of a tense presidential election. The two candidates heading for a runoff were polarizing figures, one a leader with the Muslim Brotherhood, a popular Islamist movement; the other, Mr. Mubarak’s last prime minister. And the guilty verdict drew thousands of people into the streets to denounce it as a sham, many believing that the judge had laid the groundwork for the former president to go free on appeal.

Mr. Mubarak never actually resigned publicly; in a speech on Feb. 10, 2011, he failed to choke out the words. The next day, against a tide of public anger, Omar Suleiman, the longtime chief of intelligence and the newly installed vice president, read a statement on television signaling the end of Mr. Mubarak’s reign.

But even then, Mr. Mubarak had trouble acknowledging that he was through. He held to the manufactured image of himself as a misunderstood father figure who had been fated to lead.

“I preferred to give up my post as a president, placing the interest of the nation and its people over any other interest,” he said in public remarks broadcast on a Saudi-owned satellite channel, “and I chose to keep away from the political life, wishing all best and

progress for Egypt and its people within the period ahead.”

After his conviction, he was flown by helicopter not back to the relative comfort of the military hospital, but to a prison hospital. Shocked, Mr. Mubarak refused to leave the helicopter, the state news media reported. Hours went by before he could be coaxed out, and his health soon went into a rapid decline.

Assassination and Succession

Mr. Mubarak never intended to be president. His rise was described as an accident of history, set in motion when Islamist radicals in the military shot and killed his predecessor, Anwar el-Sadat, as he sat reviewing a military parade, his vice president, Mr. Mubarak, beside him.

The guiding principles of the Mubarak regime were security and stability, and the pillars of his state were the police, the intelligence services and himself. He presented his nation, and the West, with an either-or scenario: either he stayed in power, or chaos would reign. He won the West's support largely by remaining committed to the peace treaty with Israel that had been signed by Sadat, and by pressing for a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

But to preserve stability and security, he relied on an emergency law that had been imposed after Sadat was killed and remained in place throughout his tenure. It put broad restrictions on civil liberties, curbing the right to assembly and allowing for arrest and detention without charges. But it proved to be another dated formula, and it ultimately failed his nation and him.

“He believed that stability was more important than any progress or step forward,” said Salama Ahmed Salama, chief of the editorial board of the independent daily newspaper Shorouk.

When he entered office, Mr. Mubarak, taciturn and cautious, was admired for his understated style. He condemned corruption and nepotism and offered calm to a nation scarred by war, assassination and economic hardship. But his caution led to half steps.

Economic reform was restricted to only partial privatization. Citizens could criticize the government but not organize. Democracy in Egypt was only a veneer. He was soon castigated at home and abroad for governing without a vision, jumping from crisis to crisis without a plan.

His focus on security came to mean regime security. He kept in place a ban on the Muslim Brotherhood and silenced secular political movements that might have challenged his monopoly on power. Leaving little space other than the mosque for organizing and

expression, he helped move Egyptian society to become far more religious. Then, to ally himself with the Islamic trend but also to challenge the Brotherhood, he gave room to religious radicals known as Salafis and portrayed the government as the guardian of Islamic values.

It was hard to know what Mr. Mubarak stood for, apart from retaining power. In 1986, five years after he took office, the well-known Egyptian journalist Mohammed Hassanein Heikal expressed the prevailing uncertainty when he said, “We are waiting for the unknown.”

The criticism was heard to the end.

“Mubarak had no particular vision and no noted achievement,” said Mr. Salama, of the newspaper Shorouk. “Everything he did was to maintain the status quo, even without trying to improve it to any degree. His contribution toward the endemic problems that Egypt suffers from, like illiteracy, poverty and disease, was minimal.”

Over time, the self-effacing and unpretentious Mr. Mubarak was eclipsed by one with an almost imperial sense of entitlement. In an interview in 1993, he said that Egyptians could not handle democracy. “We have to give a gradual dose so people can swallow it and understand it,” he said. “The Egyptians are not Americans.”

He also stuck to a strongman’s script, distancing himself from matters of state while presenting himself as a father figure.

“I am addressing you today with a speech from my heart,” he said in his final remarks as president, when he was expected to resign but simply could not. “A speech of a father to his sons and daughters.”

But that narrative, too, proved empty when an emboldened public rejected it and blamed him directly for what ailed the nation. In Cairo’s Tahrir Square, the symbolic heart of the nation, the throng of protesters chanted, “The people want the fall of the regime!”

Trained as a Fighter Pilot

Mohammed Hosni Mubarak was born on May 4, 1928, in the village of Kafr el-Museiliha in the Nile Delta governate of Minufiya, a fertile agricultural area that was also the birthplace of Sadat. Mr. Mubarak’s father was an official in the Ministry of Justice, and the son was admitted to the military academy. Mr. Mubarak received fighter-pilot training in the Soviet Union and in 1972 became deputy war minister as well as air force commander in chief.

In Egypt’s surprise attack on Israeli forces in 1973, the air force under General Mubarak mounted strikes against targets in support of Egyptian ground forces crossing the Suez Canal to the Sinai Peninsula. But as the war went on, the tide turned. The Egyptian air force

suffered heavy losses, and the Israeli Army advanced westward, gaining temporary control of more than 400 square miles of Egyptian territory west of the canal.

The setbacks did not rub off on Mr. Mubarak, however. Sadat, in his 1978 book “In Search of Identity: An Autobiography,” ignored the reversal of fortunes and instead commended General Mubarak for what he called “the complete and stunning success” of the opening airstrikes.

Sadat named Mr. Mubarak his vice president in 1975, pleasing the military. And when this stolid former general became president after Sadat’s assassination, he was regarded as a welcome contrast to his two predecessors, charismatic leaders who had marked their place in history with bold if not always successful ideas. President Gamal Abdel Nasser had promoted pan-Arabism, and Sadat had made peace with Israel — a peace that was never fully accepted; Egypt was still ostracized by its Arab neighbors because of it.

Mr. Mubarak publicly rejected nepotism, though in later years his effort to hand the presidency to his son Gamal only fueled public anger. He publicly shunned corruption, though Egyptians became convinced that the powerful enriched themselves at the public’s expense.

His early successes were substantial, especially in foreign policy. He helped to bring Egypt back into the Arab fold while also calling for peace between Arab nations and Israel. In the mid-1990s, he helped forge agreements with Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, hoping to foster a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.

When he took office Egypt’s external debt was about \$50 billion, compared with a gross domestic product of just \$20 billion. Mr. Mubarak set about improving Egypt’s infrastructure and helped, initially, to reschedule debt and stabilize the economy. He was also a friend of Washington, which gave Egypt as much as \$2 billion a year in military and economic aid. In 1991, he helped organize the coalition of Arab armies that had agreed to join the United States in the Persian Gulf war to push Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait.

Even during the years when he was unhappy with President George W. Bush for talking about human rights and democracy in Egypt, Mr. Mubarak was seen as an ally willing to help the United States on many issues, including the efforts to thwart Iran’s growing regional influence and to contain the militant group Hamas, which had seized control of the Gaza Strip. When the United States began carrying out the widely criticized policy of rendition, in which terrorism suspects were flown to third countries for questioning and even torture, Egypt became a partner.

Stoking Public Anger

Mr. Mubarak's governance hardly changed with the times. Life grew harder for most Egyptians during his years in power as the population doubled, to 80 million, and the social contract frayed. He came to be viewed as an isolated autocrat who promoted, or at least allowed, corruption and cronyism. His son Gamal became a leading member of the president's ruling National Democratic Party and a source of public ire.

"He did something neither Nasser nor Sadat did," Abdel Moneim Said, a member of Mr. Mubarak's ruling party, said in an interview before the resignation. "They used to have advisers on different issues, like a kitchen cabinet, but Mubarak didn't do that. He had a very small secretariat. He did not do that because he was afraid people in the president's office will get more power."

Mr. Mubarak's continued reliance on emergency law and a military court stoked the public anger that led to a revolution, but neither he nor his circle saw it.

"I can't think of anybody that I know that has any concern about the stability of the regime," Mr. Said said shortly before Mr. Mubarak was toppled.

That level of detachment ran through the leadership, all the way to the president himself.

"I never wanted power or prestige, and people know the difficult circumstances in which I shouldered the responsibility and what I have given to the homeland during war and during peace," Mr. Mubarak said in a speech as the protests gathered force. "I am also a man of the army, and it is not in my nature to give up responsibility. My first responsibility now is to restore the security and stability of the homeland."

In his later years in power, Mr. Mubarak, like other Arab leaders, recognized that a stunted economy was a threat to social stability — and to his own power — so he began to move toward privatizing state-owned industries and opening the economy. He appointed a new government. For a time, Egypt's economic indicators showed significant growth.

But the boom did little to improve the circumstances of the poor, a majority of the nation, and many of the ministers considered reformers were later investigated for corruption.

Life in Mr. Mubarak's Egypt deteriorated. The World Economic Forum ranked Egypt 124th of 133 countries for the quality of its primary education system. The United Nations Children's Fund said in a 2010 report that the number of poor Egyptian households with children had exceeded 1996 levels, and that 23 percent of children under the age of 15 in that country were living in poverty. In Upper Egypt, the report said, 45.3 percent of the children lived in poverty.